

1

Writerly Aspirations and Doctoral Education: Beyond Neoliberal Orthodoxies

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Abstract: This chapter engages with the imaginings that students bring to the practice of doctoral writing and explores the ways in which neoliberal discourse configures student understandings about the purposes of and possibilities associated with doctoral education. Many scholars identify the dominance of neoliberalism in shaping contemporary higher education practices including within doctoral education. With this in mind, analysis of the data gathered for an empirical study of 15 first-generation students in doctoral education was undertaken to identify how neoliberal conceptions did, or did not, shape their university imaginings and their aspirations for higher degree studies. Within a constellation of hopes, the place of doctoral writing and the figure of the writer itself is identified as being deeply implicated in the formation of doctoral aspirations. It is also suggested that the influence of writers, storytellers, and writerly works informs particular university imaginaries that circulate in discourse and evince different ways of understanding the university beyond neoliberal orthodoxies. As such, this discussion draws attention to the ways in which neither the discursive and imaginative space of doctoral education nor the university itself has been completely captured by neoliberalism. In sum, the findings of this study show that the university and doctoral education is imagined in rich ways and that, in spite of the impacts of neoliberalism, the identity of the scholar remains, for many, bound up with writing and with what it is to be a writer.

This chapter engages with the imaginings that students bring to the practice of doctoral writing and explores the ways in which neoliberal discourse configures student understandings about the purposes of and possibilities associated with doctoral education. Many scholars have identified the dominance of neoliberalism in shaping contemporary higher education practices (Olsen & Peters, 2005; Roberts, 2007; Sims, 2019) including within doctoral educa-

tion (Bansel, 2011; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006). In this piece, I analyze interview and focus group data gathered for an empirical study of 15 first-generation students in doctoral education to identify how neoliberal conceptions did or did not shape their university imaginings and their aspirations for higher degree studies. Within a constellation of hopes, I identify the place of doctoral writing and the figure of the writer itself as being deeply implicated in the formation of doctoral aspirations.

As part of this discussion, I examine who the authorial figure is in the students' imaginings and contemplate how such imaginings may work to shape student aspirations to become doctoral writers. I also suggest that the influence of writers, storytellers, and writerly works informs particular university imaginaries that circulate in discourse and evince different ways of understanding the university beyond neoliberal orthodoxies. From such an understanding, we may find the conceptual resources to think otherwise about the contemporary university and recognise that it has not always been neoliberal nor is neoliberalism the only paradigm presently available to us to understand how social life and social institutions like the university can be formed, experienced, and imagined (Tronto, 2017). In other words, such work is valuable because it makes clear that the university has not been completely overtaken by neoliberalism, showing us that there is room for imaginings that disrupt, challenge, and unsettle dominant discourses. As a foundation for the argument that extends across the arc of this chapter, I begin by identifying a key premise on which my writing relies, and I introduce the interrelated concepts of imaginings and a social imaginary with reference to the university.

The Importance of University and Doctoral Imaginings

My argument for the importance of university and doctoral imaginings relies on the following premise: How individuals experience, think about, and imagine different aspects of their lives, including in this case higher education and doctoral study, is meaningful. The ways individuals understand what education offers, the university pathways available to them, and the kind of person one can become through study are notions that are necessarily formed and exist within an individual's imagination. Therefore, exploring students' imaginings is relevant to any exploration of student engagements with higher education and its practices. Ronald Barnett (2013) explained that focusing on how we imagine the university is valid because

a university is both an institution (involving complex sets of processes) and a set of ideas. Both as an institution and as a

set of ideas, the university may be understood to inhabit spaces (institutional spaces, conceptual and discursive spaces, and imaginative spaces). And both as institution and as a set of ideas the university may be understood as caught in networks (of institutions and communicative systems, and of ideas, visions, aspirations and values). It follows that the university lives (partly) in the imagination, in the ideas, sentiments, values and beliefs that individuals hold in relation to the university. (p. 41)

In this passage, Barnett (2013) articulated not only how the university can be experienced as an institution but also how it exists within our imaginations. And, as Frances Kelly (2017) has pointed out, “ideas about the Ph.D. are inextricable from those about the university” (p. 3). Moreover, Lesley Johnson et al. (2000) pointed to the role of “fantasies” about the university and the scholar’s life as being valuable in explaining the “deep investments in and attachments to the structures of the PhD” (p. 136). While I use different terms, I, too, suggest that dreams and imaginings of the university and the university scholar play a key role in shaping our investments in the doctorate.

Indeed, the importance of imagining, or in this case more specifically re-imagining, is reflected in the focus of this edited collection, evidencing that in scholarly work, the imagination can be a key site for creativity, thinking, and, perhaps for our neoliberal times most importantly, thinking differently. Focusing on how the university is imagined can lead to knowledge about the university’s perceived role in contemporary social life and the way imaginings and aspirations are bound to individuals’ academic identities. As a basis for the discussion that follows, the word imagining is understood to involve an individual “form[ing] a mental image (of something not actually present to the senses)” (Collins English Dictionary, n.d., Definition 1). In contrast to the term imagining, which is primarily used to refer to imaginings that belong to individuals, the term social imaginary is used to refer to the imaginings held at a wider social level. As Charles Taylor (2004) maintained, a social imaginary can be understood as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations” (p. 23).

Doctoral Education in Context

In the following, I briefly trace some of the history of doctoral education relevant to the context of this study, that is, at a research university in Aotearoa/

New Zealand. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the earliest origins of the university more broadly, it is important to recognise the rich traditions of higher learning that exist within many cultures. This is critical to acknowledge, given that writers tend to emphasise the European history of higher education in discussing the origins of the university and the pedagogies employed within it (Bottrell & Manathunga, 2019). Such a Eurocentric approach makes invisible other educational histories and fails to appreciate the existence of longstanding non-European higher education institutions. Indeed, any discussion of higher education within the Aotearoa/New Zealand setting needs to begin with recognising the ancient traditions of Māori higher learning within the institution of *whare-wānanga*.¹ Although the institution and practices associated with *whare-wānanga* have increasingly returned to prominence today, the arrival of colonisation in the 1800s meant Māori knowledge systems were displaced and a university system was established that loosely followed the Oxbridge model (Phillips, 2003, as cited in Phillips et al., 2014).

In this way, the origins of doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as in many places around the globe, can be traced to the European medieval university of the 13th century, where the doctorate was a kind of teaching license (Park, 2005). Its most well-known form, the Ph.D., or Doctor of Philosophy, is a relatively recent invention, it being established in tandem with the research university in Germany in the early years of the 19th century² (Middleton, 2001; Park, 2005). The Ph.D. was adopted in the United States near the end of the 19th century and arrived in the United Kingdom in the early part of the 20th century (Middleton, 2001). Despite discussions about the establishment of a Ph.D. degree in Aotearoa/New Zealand as early as 1906, it took to the middle of the century before the Ph.D. was permanently introduced in 1948 (Middleton, 2001, 2007). For the majority of the last two centuries, participation in doctoral programmes was typically reserved for in-

1 A *whare wānanga*, according to Phillips et al. (2014), is “a term made up of two words *whare* – house and *wānanga*. As a verb *wānanga* means to meet and discuss; as a noun *wānanga* means a seminar or forum, tribal knowledge and learning or instructor or expert” (p. 2-3). Thus *whare wānanga* is translated as a place of higher learning and refers specifically to “Māori institutions of higher learning” (p. 2-3). In recent times, three publically funded *whare wānanga* have been established in Aotearoa/New Zealand: *Te Whare Wānanga o Raukawa*, *Te Whare Wānanga o Aotearoa* and *Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiarangi*. These institutions are recognized as peers of universities and polytechnics and undertake teaching and research from a Māori perspective (Parliamentary Counsel Office, 1989, Section 162).

2 Scholars often point to the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810 as being central to the development of the Ph.D. (see Middleton, 2001).

dividuals from more privileged parts of society (Boud & Lee, 2009), with few students from lower socio-economic backgrounds taking up doctoral studies. In general, the doctoral student of the past was “white, male, young and middle-class” (Petersen, 2014, p. 823). Moreover, doctoral study throughout most of this time was primarily understood as preparation for an academic career where the receipt of a doctoral qualification would lead to a university position (Neumann & Tan, 2011).

However, from the mid part of the 20th century, particularly after World War II ended, higher education expanded³ (Barcan, 2013). This growth represented a shift from a focus on educating elite groups in the first part of the 20th century to the development of a massified system by the new millennium (Leach, 2015). One outcome of the expansion in undergraduate study was that doctoral student numbers began to expand (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008), leading to a more diverse population of doctoral students (Pearson et al., 2011). In line with international trends, doctoral education in Aotearoa/New Zealand has grown significantly in the last twenty to thirty years. Ministry of Education figures demonstrate that from 1999 to 2009, enrolments in doctoral programmes more than doubled, rising from 3,447 to 7,409 students and reducing slightly to just over 7,000 doctoral students in 2015 (Ministry of Education, n.d.; Wensvoort, 2010). Amongst other issues, this period of expansion and the growing diversity of students within doctoral education has led to increased concerns about doctoral student progress and anxiety about “quality,” particularly in reference to doctoral writing (Burford, 2017). And, as David Boud and Alison Lee (2009) have suggested, doctoral education nowadays has become a highly scrutinized area of practice within the university (see Introduction, this collection).

Higher Education and the Rise of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an ideology that has been dominant in the political and economic sphere in western contexts for the past quarter century (McMaster, 2013). It can be described as being “united by three broad beliefs: the benevolence of the free market, minimal state intervention and regulation of the economy and the individual as a rational economic actor” (Saunders, 2010, p. 45). At its center, neoliberal philosophy suggests that the role of the state in society should be limited in favour of the marketplace because the market is

3 From the mid-1990s the numbers of students enrolled in higher education around the globe more than doubled from 76 million individuals to 179 million by 2009 (Brown, 2013).

understood as being a more effective means of meeting social needs (McMaster, 2013). This logic provides the rationale for the redistribution of wealth through taxation and the reduction in public spending to fund welfare, health, and education.

Moreover, from a neoliberal perspective, individuals are viewed as “human capital” and are narrowly and primarily understood in terms of competitive economic self-interest. Michel Foucault (2008) referred to this neoliberal subject as *homo economicus*. He argued that neoliberal subjectivity is defined by competition and that individuals within this view need to strive to be entrepreneurial, self-investing, and responsible for their own success (Bazzul, 2016). Simon Marginson and Mark Considine (2000) also argued that neoliberal ideas have led to the re-framing of higher education as a business to be managed like any other. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, as in many other countries, “cultural activities such as education have become appropriated as economic transactions” (Fitzsimons, 2000, p. 14). From this viewpoint, doctoral students are understood as highly trained knowledge workers fit for the professional marketplace. Such a framing aids the repositioning of knowledge-related research activities to be “increasingly driven by commerce and regulated through economic policies and practices” (Bansel, 2011, p. 547).

In the context of a neoliberal agenda that seeks enhanced efficiency, accountability, and competition (Barrow & Grant, 2016), universities have established complex audit cultures to ensure the close monitoring of performance outcomes (Bansel, 2011). This heightened focus on performance, informed by a managerial ethos, has been applied across higher education. This includes doctoral programmes and is reflected in the introduction of increased reporting requirements, confirmation processes, and standard timeframes for the achievement of research milestones (Bansel, 2011; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006). Given that successful degree completion relies upon the completion of the doctoral thesis, “doctoral writing has emerged as a new problem space for institutional attention and intervention” (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014, p. A13).

Theoretical Orientation and Study Methodology

This chapter discusses the findings of a post-structural research study on doctoral education that involved 15 students attending a New Zealand university. A post-structural perspective recognises the importance of language and discourse as a primary determinant of how we understand ourselves, others, and our world. Within this perspective, language is understood as lacking fixed meanings and as being used in particular ways and with particular meanings by dominant social groups. In terms of the significance of language, how-

ever, there is no automatic or direct pathway to understanding, as language meanings are shifting, highly contextual, and multiple (Beasley, 1999; Crowe, 1998). Therefore, post-structural researchers seek to avoid essentialist generalisations of students' accounts and experiences and seek instead to focus on the local, subjective, partial, or even contradictory (Giddings & Grant, 2009; Hardy, 2012). The work of a post-structural researcher involves close readings of text typically in intensive ways to identify assumptions and locate contradictions and conflicts.

The research participants in this study were first-generation students; that is, they were individuals who were members of the first-generation in a family to attend university and who were at the time either completing, or had recently completed, a Ph.D. or Ed.D. at a research-intensive university. All students were undertaking work in the discipline of education or were undertaking interdisciplinary work with an education focus. The participant group included 13 women and 2 men from a variety of cultures including students from African, Asian, Pākehā (New Zealand European), Māori, and Pasifika backgrounds. Permission to carry out the research was obtained via the University of Auckland Research Ethics Committee. Participants engaged in semi-structured, hour-long interviews and were invited to join a focus group to discuss their experiences of higher education and share images or artefacts that represented the university to them. Both the interviews and focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Students were given pseudonyms unless they wished to have their own first names used within the study.

The texts gathered in this study, including interview and focus group transcripts and images, were subject to careful reading and deconstructive interpretive practices. A number of key neoliberal concepts were drawn from relevant literature to enable an analysis of students' accounts and to identify the presence of neoliberal discourse. These concepts include the notion of competitive economic self-interest as guiding the actions of rational human actors (Bansel, 2011; Louth & Potter, 2017; Marginson & Considine, 2000), self-investment (Bazzul, 2016; Fitzsimons, 2000), responsibility or self-management (Louth & Potter, 2017), and the centrality of the marketplace to all aspects of life (McMaster, 2013; Saunders, 2010). While these concepts are commonly seen as central to neoliberal discourse, it is necessary to acknowledge that neoliberalism is not a fixed group of beliefs and ideas but instead is "a complex, often incoherent, unstable and even contradictory set of practices that are organized around a certain imagination of the 'market'" (Shamir, 2008, p. 3). It is salutary here to remember that the different, and sometimes loose, ways that neoliberalism is articulated and constructed (Ball, 2012) does not mean its power should be underestimated. As Patrick Fitzsimons (2000)

maintained, the discourse of neoliberalism needs to be understood as being not just one among many, but “as a master discourse, or what Lyotard (1984) calls a ‘metanarrative’ to which all developments in the policy sphere must adhere” (p. 14).

Locating Neoliberal Imaginings

It is clear that those who pursue doctoral study can be characterized as individuals who are willing to make major investments in themselves through earning a doctoral qualification, something that requires intensive study to complete (in the New Zealand context, students usually take three to four years to earn the degree if enrolled fulltime). This aspect of doctoral study alone means neoliberal imperatives can easily be ascribed to students’ motivations, given that doctoral education requires individuals be self-managing and prepared to invest significant time and effort in complex research projects. However, this fact must be read in context because the willingness of individuals to make such investments has always been a necessary element in doctoral work and is something that obviously predates the rise of neoliberalism. This means that it is crucial to look more deeply into how the students think about the purposes and the rewards of doctoral study.

Analysis of the data in this research identifies an array of neoliberal conceptions within the students’ accounts. In this study, the willingness to invest in doctoral education was often strongly tied to employment goals with the aspiration to gain a “good job,” particularly a good academic job. This aspiration was typically identified as one of the first students mentioned amongst a range of hoped for outcomes, with two thirds (10/15) of the participants identifying their aspirations to take up academic roles on the completion of their doctoral programmes. When the number of students five years from retirement was removed from the wider group, the proportion expressing their post-doctoral aspirations for academic work grew to 10 out of 12 participants, representing over 80 percent of the students in this small-scale study.

The students spoke about their academic aspirations in different ways but regularly described employment in the university as “good work” that was well remunerated. As one international student stated, “being doctor somebody in society means that . . . in relation to finances, you are going to secure a good job, you are going to be able to get money” (Marie). Another student identified an academic role as a “good job” in terms of economic rewards and where a “person was respected and valued” (Linda). Such comments clearly connected doctoral study directly with individual economic and social benefits. In Linda’s case, the impetus to invest in Ph.D. study was tied to neoliberal

imperatives in a further way, in terms of the international higher education marketplace. She was, as she described, “forced to do that [doctoral study],” as there was a strong drive in her Asian setting to “upgrade the profile of the university.” As such, Linda’s comments could be read as speaking to an educational context where there is significant competition between universities, leading to major pressure on institutions to meet the demands of the market through staff possessing doctoral degrees and achieving high levels of research publications (see also, Introduction, this collection). Such competition is fuelled by intensive audit regimes put in place to enable, amongst other things, the ranking of universities across the globe in the drive for status and funding (Lynch, 2015).

Notably, the students talked about their academic aspirations not only in terms of individual rewards but also in terms of their desire to contribute to the lives of others in their wider families and communities (Fa’avae, Chapter 8 this collection, also explores these desires). This was particularly apparent in the accounts of the students from Indigenous cultures. As one student from Africa commented, “I am looking at supporting him [my father] in whichever way I can. . . and establishing one or two projects where my family can work with me” (Dante). Here, Dante spoke about his hopes to help his father and family based on his doctoral education. He also described “helping the people who are vulnerable . . . and the children with disabilities in this case . . . it will be quite good support . . . for society” (Dante). In this account, doctoral education was imagined in ways that go beyond neoliberal notions of self-interest and competition, and Dante highlighted the ways the doctoral project can provide a basis for the sharing of economic resources and knowledge, revealing a collectivist rather than a solely individualist orientation.

Another student in this study, Sue, also reflected on her early understandings of higher education and how neoliberal constructs were used by teachers to frame these understandings. She remembered one pivotal event in her final years of high school:

They took us to an engineering firm and they did this thing where they took a page from a magazine, and they said, okay, so this outfit costs whatever. If you worked at McDonalds, it would take you three weeks to earn this money, if you did this job, it would take you one week, . . . if you were an engineer, you could make this by Monday morning, and then I was like, I’m going to university.

This articulation of the purpose and value of a university education relies on the understanding of higher education based on money and purchasing power-

er and was clearly presented in “predominantly economic terms characterized in our current times by neoliberal ideology and consumer values” (Sellar & Gale, 2012, p. 105). Although her teachers’ words ignited Sue’s interest in higher study, she felt these messages about university education were simplistic and misleading because higher study, for her, did not automatically equate to earning large amounts of money. While she rejected such narrowly defined neoliberal framings of university study, the connections between higher education and her ability to earn a good living nevertheless remained significant for Sue. She described how her aspirations for doctoral study had shifted over time; having initially desired to become an academic, Sue was now interested in other kinds of professional work. For her, the role of an academic, in contrast to some of the other students in this study, was “no longer appealing ... because of the lack of employment stability and low pay.” Sue’s views can be seen as identifying the importance of economic returns for her doctoral aspirations and thus appear to be consistent with neoliberal values.

The drive to be excellent and achieve at a high level was also apparent across students’ accounts. This may be somewhat unsurprising, given that students need to be highly motivated and academically successful in order to access doctoral programmes in the first place. Nonetheless, it was notable how often in the accounts students mentioned that they were “high achievers,” “top students,” or “perfectionists.” Linda, for example, reflecting on her doctoral studies, connected her drive for success with an implied reference to others; she described how she wanted to achieve something beyond some kind of average or medium level, something that was necessarily identified in relation to the work of other students. As she said, “I have very high expectations. Really, I can’t settle for, like, a mediocre performance.” These comments underscored her focus on high achievement and, to some extent, her competitive orientation. In this way, Linda’s comments may be construed as evidencing neoliberal competitive values, though this drive for achievement was not strongly framed in market terms through any specific reference to consumerism or to particular economic goals beyond a general goal of having a good level of income.

Locating the Presence of the Writer and “Ivory Tower” Imaginings

It was also notable that students spoke of their investments in the doctorate and their aspirations tied to their ongoing university studies in a variety of ways that do not easily conform to neoliberal perspectives. Katie, similar to Linda, described undertaking doctoral studies as a necessary work require-

ment for her to remain in her university position. Yet, she identified her aspirations for study largely outside of employment goals, reflecting on her early imaginings of the university and some of the famous writers who inspired her. She discussed her love of storytelling and her experience of reading the works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, two University of Oxford professors, at intermediate or high school. In her mind, these well-known figures of English literature embodied the university:

I read about how C. S. Lewis and Tolkien used to go to this club, and they would talk together, and I loved that idea of these two professors getting together with their pipes. . . . I had this image in my mind . . . like the hobbits all getting together with them and blowing smoke rings like Gandalf.

Her reflection invokes a fantasy world where writer-academics mingle with their characters and harkens to a realm of old-fashioned men's clubs and privilege from times long past. Her comments also accord with the notion that being an academic within the university "means also being a writer" (Grant & Knowles, 2000, p. 6). As Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler (2012) maintained "writing is integral to the identity of a 'scholar'" (p. 15). In simple terms, scholars are required to write and to produce certain types of written texts. Thus, if one seeks to become a scholar or academic by an alternative name, one needs to take up "the writing project as means of identifying" oneself with a scholarly identity (Thomson & Kamler, 2012, p. 15). This writerly identity, so identifiable in Katie's words, appears to be an especially significant impetus for taking up doctoral work for some in this study.

Katie's recalled imagining, with her identification of two figures enjoying conversation in a convivial environment, also fits with popular perceptions of academics and their comfortable lifestyles. As evidenced by her comments, the notion of a rather genteel scholarly lifestyle continues to circulate in discourse (Brew, 2001) despite the fact that many who work within the university understand academic roles as increasingly "being heavy in workload and unsatisfactory in content" (Tight, 2010, p. 109). Moreover, Katie's account, through its reference to these famous writers and Oxford lecturers in the early 20th century, speaks to a particular kind of academic within the historic university. Allison Kelaher Young (2005) described this academic figure as being imagined as an "older, distinguished white gentlemen-scholar, the liberal intellectual who sits in the Ivory Tower contemplating questions about which the majority of people could care less" (p. 97). Indeed, Katie's imaginings work to bind the figure of the writer-scholar together with an imaginary of the university as an exclusive ivory tower. A feminist analysis of her shared

imagining might also emphasise the elite nature of this university and draw attention to the way in which Katie imagined a place of middle-class White men within this ivory tower university setting—a place that did not have much space for working-class women like herself. Nonetheless, Katie spoke of this imagining as being inspiring and through her reading, she was able to imagine herself into this site of elite male privilege.

The significance of the place of writers further emerged in her account when Katie discussed her engagement with the idea of the university as a place for writers. She said,

As I got older, I became aware that to be a writer there were different things that you had to go through to learn how to write and where the *appropriate* [emphasis added] places to learn how to write might be. . . . So, Tolkien and Lewis lived in a university in my mind.

In her words, the university is a kind of “special” place, one that allows someone to become a writer in the company of others with similar interests and commitments. In this view, it is possible to find some cosiness in her account in which the university is a place where the life of the mind may be nurtured and appreciated. Moreover, she later commented on her aspirations for her doctoral thesis and spoke of her goal to prepare a writerly text that would create a powerful affective response in its readers. It was Katie’s hope that her thesis would be “something stunning that will capture the hearts of people and move them.” Again, her words indicate that writerly aspirations were important in shaping her orientation to her doctoral work, though in ways that do not seem to emphasise competition, economic interests, or employment.

The place of literary works and storytelling in shaping early university imaginings can also be seen in other students’ accounts. Kat, for example, described being so inspired by the story of *The Lord of the Rings* that she decided at the age of eight or nine that she was going to become a film director so she could create filmic stories. In her mind, a way to achieve this was by undertaking university study, and she said that this imagining of a desired future self and the role of the university in helping her achieve it continued to inspire her subject choices and university pathway. This brief account reveals the way Kat’s university imaginings seemed to contribute to her academic journey-making, highlighting the significance of well-known literary or cultural narratives in shaping her university and, to some extent, her doctoral education pathway.

A further link to the connections between higher study and writing was identified by a Māori student. Arohanui shared information about her tā

moko (tattoo), which incorporated a symbol of a writing instrument mixed with Māori motifs to represent her conception of the university as a key site for gaining access to knowledge. Arohanui spoke of her tattoo as representing the knowledge that comes from the heavens and her tīpuna (ancestors), locating this knowledge firmly within her whānau (family/extended family) relations. As she explained, knowledge is symbolized within her tā moko in the form of a traditional writing tool, something that is held in one's hands. Arohanui also identified how her tā moko speaks to the importance of using knowledge with responsibility, kindness, and love in the context of deep social bonds. In this way, a symbol of writing paired with Māori motifs locates the importance of family, culture, and writing at the heart of scholarly endeavours. Furthermore, it seems possible to discern in her account a specific connection to the “ivory tower” university imaginary in the way that her tā moko included a writing instrument used over the centuries and long associated with the images of scholars and “men of letters” within a European intellectual tradition.

Although it is outside the scope of this chapter to explore Māori orientations to the western university in depth, Arohanui's sharing of her tā moko revealed the deep significance of culture in shaping her views of the university. Her educational imaginings connected both Māori and Pākehā (non-indigenous New Zealanders) notions of the university and demonstrated how Māori can rework and incorporate Pākehā knowledge systems within a Māori worldview. Indeed, it may be possible to see such framings as evidence of the potential for new university imaginaries to emerge, in this case, those strongly grounded in indigenous knowledge and practices. How such an imaginary may sit alongside, unsettle, or disrupt other more established university imaginaries, such as a neoliberal imaginary, remains to be seen. However, such an imaginary arguably would, nonetheless, present a highly fertile space for the development of new understandings about the role and purposes of the university within the local context (see also Fa'avae, Chapter 8, this collection).

Concluding Points

In my discussion, I have pointed to a number of university imaginaries, including a neoliberal imaginary, an ivory tower university imaginary, and, possibly, an emerging imaginary rooted in Māori notions of the university. By exploring each of these imaginaries in turn, I have found that, although it may seem each imaginary is fully distinct and separable from the others, in fact the imaginaries can operate together in complex and shifting ways. Indeed, the

university imaginaries discussed here are likely to “wash” together and lead to individuals possessing a mix of different investments in, and understandings of, higher study. This can be seen in the multiple ways students identified their doctoral aspirations and university imaginings, sometimes with obvious reference to neoliberal constructs and other times not. A tight combination of different ideas of the university were also identifiable in students’ accounts. This is particularly apparent, for instance, in the way Arohanui invoked what could be framed as an emerging Māori imaginary while at the same time employing concepts associated with the imaginary of the university as an “ivory tower” as symbolized through the image of a traditional writing instrument.

Overall, my readings of the accounts of the individuals in this study demonstrate that, alongside a neoliberal imaginary, other social imaginaries of the university (such as the university as ivory tower) continue to circulate. This accords with Ruth Barcan’s (2013) view that our understandings of the university should rightly be seen as palimpsestic, in that there is a layering of different imaginaries operating at the same time and where earlier values, notions, and ideals are not fully erased despite the dominant and most easily identifiable presence of neoliberal discourses. Recognising that there are different university imaginaries at play is significant, as imaginaries are discursive structures and, as such, are imbued with power, offering a range of conceptual and identity resources from which one can draw to think, speak, and argue. Such a recognition is valuable in that it reminds us that the university has not always been neoliberal and that the university can be imagined and organized in ways that exceed neoliberal orthodoxies. Moreover, within this varied space of university imaginings, it is possible to apprehend the significance of writing, writers, and indeed, storytelling in influencing student desire to take up doctoral education and to become doctoral writers. In sum, the analysis of the students’ accounts in this chapter reveal how the university and doctoral education is understood and imagined in rich ways and demonstrates that in spite of the impacts of neoliberalism “the identity of the scholar and the practice of scholarship” remain “tangled in writing” (Thomson & Kamler, 2012, p. 18).

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