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An epilogue to two films:

A Cup of Instant Coffee - a van-dweller's  
assemblage and Come Dance my PhD

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*I invite you to watch the films first,  
then read what follows,  
then watch the films again,  
let the experience wash over you,  
join us in the dance.*

Keywords:

*autoethnography,  
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**Film 1: A cup of instant coffee: A van-dwellers' assemblage**



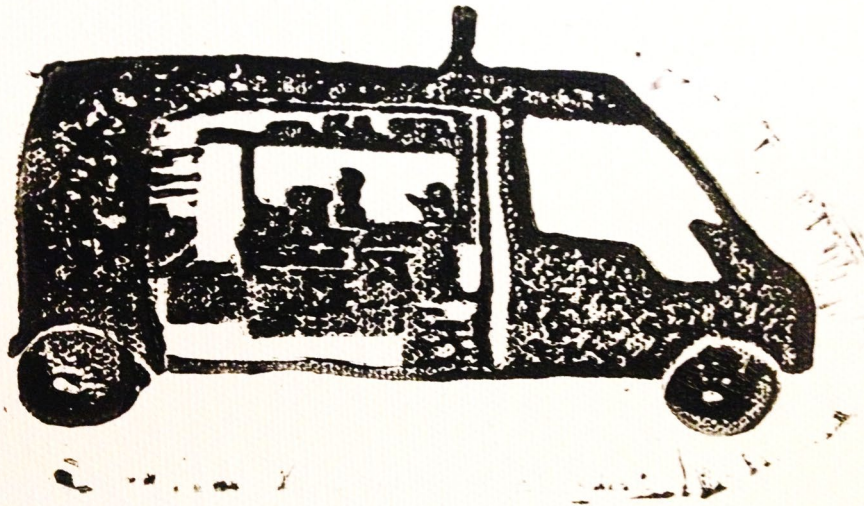
<https://youtu.be/gEfxXuvz28>

**Film 2: Alys Mendus, Come Dance My PhD, 2018**



<https://youtu.be/GllsJd89ioY>

These films intersect the rhizomatic space (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987) between doing, writing, sharing and living an itinerant PhD journey. They weave together my arts-based autoethnographic expression of exploring the less talked about aspects of my PhD experience. During my PhD I lived an itinerant life as a van-dweller in the UK, often travelling abroad for my research (Mendus 2017). I use itinerant here to mean of “no-fixed-abode” as I was constantly travelling, often sleeping in a van or at friends’ houses but not living in a fixed-home-dwelling.



This piece is written as an epilogue, to support the thinking and process behind the arts-based, autoethnographic projects shown in the films. Although I use *autoethnography*, as defined by Spry, as “a self-narrative that critiques the situations of self with others in social contexts” (2001, p.710) I am always aware of the relational aspects and focus more on Spry’s later definition, that “autoethnography is not about ‘self’ but the wilful embodiment of ‘we’” (2016, p.15).

Through this project I also used art-based research defined as:

The use of personal expression in various art forms as a primary mode of enquiry. These studies may accompany or include the artistic expressions of others but their unique feature is the making of art by the researcher. (McNiff 2013, p.5)

From my autoethnographic work, in relation to others, I made art. Art in this project was collaborative improvised dance, movement, play based workshops, assemblages, maps and in-situ installations in nature and old buildings alongside photographs and lino-cuts. I see this as all part of the rhizome:

Rhizome is “a metaphor for an epistemology that spreads in all directions at once” (Tedlock 2011, p.333), similar to a root and flowering system of a lily or rhubarb. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, a rhizome “has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle. It is not made of points, only of lines” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1987, p.263).

I want to give value to the films themselves but also realise many people's need to have access to the written word as well to help in their "sense-making". However, this whole artistic assemblage (the films, the writing, the images) is subjective and the films themselves are artistic pieces. The epilogue is not a discussion of my PhD outcomes in terms of alternative education but shows relational experience between the public (attending the workshops) and my words and the assemblages that I created through improvised dance. (You can access my **whole PhD** from the University of Hull here). These films and the workshops are about movement and dance, about the way that different groups of people relate to each other, the environment, the assemblage and my words through dance and play. Through "voicing the body" (Erb 2018) this work values the unspoken voice of the body.

For Erb (2018), the term "voicing the body" does not grant a supremacy to the voice but illuminates the ways in which the body is intra-active, contradictory, if paradoxical, and is our first and foremost point of contact with another. For her, voicing the body means allowing these intra-actions to have a place within academic literature. It is a place of showing the body's importance and place within discourse that has often privileged the mind. The body has a voice, even if it is often silenced and subdued. Voicing the body breaks these bonds of silence and sheds light on all that the body *is*, even if it is yet unknown. (Mendus, Bodies Collective, 2018)



Inspired by **Shane Waltener's (2010) woven stairwell** at Dovecot Gallery, Edinburgh, I wove a stairwell in an old working Corn Mill in Cumbria with ribbons, creating an interactive dream-catcher, a helix of my rhizomatic PhD. I then worked with exploring movement, dance and trans-materiality. Following the call from the annual **Dance your PhD competition** I led two nomadic workshops in different locations inspired by my interactive stairwell

installation to connect to my van and nature with the same ribbons that had threaded the stairwell.



These two films were presented as part of an embodied paper at the British Autoethnography conference in Bristol in July 2018. I interacted with the audience, the material space, the senses using ribbons, words, film, live ukulele playing, performance and dance so that all become entangled in the rhizome. I aimed in my presentation to extend my research into alternative

pedagogies in education into how papers are presented at academic conferences. Could I create something that steps away from the traditional didactic session even though I wanted the audience to watch my films? I wanted to find ways to engage their senses and to keep their attention throughout.



## Film One: A cup of instant coffee: a van-dweller's assemblage

*Imagine a cup of instant coffee, its bitter taste wrapped around your mouth. Add now the taste of cheap milk and the slightly curdled flavour of your coffee gone cold and you are beginning to enter into the materiality of my life, my quest, my journeys.*

*For I had been a teacher in the local mainstream state funded school, rushed off my feet with expectations, pressure, assessments, marking, curriculum and a life similar to prison run by bells, hierarchy and strict rules and endless cold, instant coffee to wash it down.*

(Film One: A cup of instant coffee: A van-dweller's assemblage)

The main audio in Film One introduces my PhD research, so I invite the reader to watch the film as this epilogue is not written to expand on the themes in the thesis, it aims to support people's understanding of the films and the whole project. For more information on all the schools that I visited and my thoughts on the future of education I refer readers to **my PhD thesis** and future articles that I write. This project is about an arts-based response to living itinerantly whilst studying for a PhD, to be constantly travelling and in relation with so many different things - both human and non-human. As the explanations to the two films show below, key themes in the thesis are entwined within the films as they become part of the consciousness of the group and of me as I edit the films. Part of the post-qualitative approach is not about finding answers but about sharing an experience - these films invite you to step into the unknown.

Film One visually shows the conscious threading of the stairwell. The growing assemblage of ribbons, objects, maps and textures of the life of an itinerant van-dwelling PhD student in the background supports the audio where I share a snapshot of my PhD experience and conclusions. I began with a "thing", an object from the assemblage, a "cup of cold, instant coffee". I was using the work of Jane Bennett (2004) on "Thing Power" to give agency to the objects that directed my study and influenced my life on a diffracted sphere. In the middle of the film the visual cuts from the stairwell to the newest van (not the one we lived in during the PhD). The van is parked and via the same ribbons in the stairwell is woven into the Spring landscape of the Lake District. Here I aimed to highlight the place-based, if ever itinerant, aspect of van-dwelling. The objects: the photos, the ribbons, the van all set up and welcoming gives the viewer a glimpse of van-life and a more open installation of the assemblage than being



closed within a multi-layered helix in the stairwell. The place in the Lake District in this short section is where the first Come Dance My PhD workshop was held. The words spoken in the audio are the same words shared with both groups of people who came to dance, play, and move my PhD journey.

The film quickly returns to the stairwell, only stepping away to capture the voices, the play of others in connection to key themes, particularly that of centre and periphery (Braidotti 2012). As part of the second Come Dance My PhD workshop once we had arrived at the top of the hill I introduced a game: people were invited to pick a word from a basket and then to speak that word as they moved around the space. I finished the first film with this audio, reiterating not only the key themes of “centre and periphery” but also that of being “Fed up with the System”. This is a film, a PhD and a life fundamentally about subverting the current paradigm. Before this final audio the film changes to show the taking down of the weave in the stairwell, symbolising an unwinding and recreation that happens within a rhizome. The weave could be seen as a flourishing, as a flowering of the water-lily which has now died down, not to be forgotten, but to the nourish the process. To show this continuity the same ribbons appear again in each workshop, installations in different places and in the presentation at the British Autoethnography conference (see photos). The same twisting, growing and receding of the stairwell can be seen towards the end of the film where there is a short section of a dance from the first workshop where intuitively the group placed hands on hands and spiralled together.

### Film Two: Alys Mendus: Come Dance my PhD.

The second film relies on the “voicing of the body” (Erb, 2018) as it aims to bring together aspects of van-life, travelling and living life to the “highest excitement” as well as the film-data from the two Come Dance My PhD workshops. The first film was filmed on a tablet by my partner, Bozz Connelly. He had been given the direction to capture as much of the dancing as possible, to include everyone and the assemblage. Learning from the first film and working with Carran Waterfield, she filmed the second workshop on a digital camera. Her brief was to use the idea of “centre and periphery” to infer

her filming: to choose to zoom in and out and to not always have me dancing in the centre as although this is about my PhD, it is about the relational experience which is beyond me.



Using *Final Cut Pro*, I approached the film in a similar way to which I have worked with collaborative narrative inquiry. I initially went through the film and cut sections that jumped out and excited me. What I was seeing as Maggie MacLure’s *data-glow* (2010). From this I went further, slowing down sections to see details and cut smaller and smaller sections, having an awareness that shorter sections hold the viewer’s attention. I began to notice patterns such as running through ribbons, fluttering, the impact of nature and the environment on the dancers, moving close together and moving independently. I then played with repetition, direction, being upside down and multiple images happening at the same time.

It could be argued that I had moved on to use the film as “research-creation” which Manning and Massumi (2014) propose operates at the intersection of participatory arts research, cultural theory and social justice. By inviting people into play and dance with my assemblage, a new understanding was being created. Yet it is also on the editing floor where something happens almost beyond conscious choice: what goes in, what stays, where the image, sound gets cut, slowed down, sped up, reversed, deleted.

I wonder about the autoethnographic element of video editing. My story, my thesis, my assemblage onto the dancers. Were they really thinking or feeling or doing a particular thing I have come to assume as I edit or have placed my theory onto the video-data to create my own understanding or

meet my own needs? However, if I see myself as also part of the assemblage as the Alys-we but further than this connected to nature, the human and non-human participants in the workshops and installations to be the Earth-we (Mendus 2018) that edits not the singular Alys. Then as Harris (2016) argues there are so many possible end points that the final film could become and as I see it they are depending on which element of the Earth-we edits.

Perhaps the greatest strength of choosing video as method is its flexible and almost limitless potential for gathering, analysing, writing up, and disseminating the research findings.

(Harris 2016, p.5)

However, as Spry (2005, 2011) argues, performative autoethnography is interpreted and understood differently by the audience.

We offer our performing body as raw data of a critical cultural story. Performative Autoethnography can interrupt master narratives that become “stuck in time” through its continual re/creation of knowledge by critically reflecting back on who we are, and where, and when.

(Spry 2005, p.501).

It is beyond the teller or here, the artist, making the film. It is constantly relational but what about the participants to the workshops? How did the experience affect them? I was asked did the participants gain new ways of noticing and making sense from their experiences? Some gave me feedback and others said nothing and I will not know all aspects as, following Zembylas (2003), sometimes an embodied experience does not speak in words but emotionally. For example: Carran Waterfield continued to be my guide, my critic and after sharing an early draft of a short film from the first workshop (from the van-installation) she wondered about the connections to

*...handmaidens, wedding rituals, fertility, bridesmaids and sexuality...*

These workshops were being held in April close to the Celtic festival of Beltane and May Day where the dances and the woven maypole have a central importance. These reflections helped me develop the second Come Dance my PhD workshop to recreate a journey, with a spiritual decorated oak tree as the destination and to think further about the performance. The time and place in which I was editing the film and holding the workshops had a crucial trans-materiality into the final edit. Working rhizomatically it is fundamentally complex to come to a final product as there are always new interpretations of ways of editing the film. Or new “strangeness” with each viewing, as Harris suggests:

Through video as method, I’m coming to see research differently.  
 Through using video as a method and methodologically, I’m coming to see myself and others differently,  
 to see for others through framing a shot,  
 coming to see through others in new ways,  
 to make the familiar strange.

(Harris 2016, p.1)

I regularly shared my edits of the films with those involved in the workshops asking for feedback. I even decided to include a short film from the first workshop as a backdrop to a paper I gave on Intertwanglings (Mendus 2018) at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in the USA in May 2018 to gather responses from an international audience. Although I may have been the editor with my fingers on the controls, I argue that it continued to be a relational experience with the Alys-We, Earth-We and the wider community.

I have been practising improvised and contact improvisation dance regularly since 2012 and I wanted to bring this aspect of play and improvisation into my understanding of Come Dance my PhD. It also mirrored the playful, improvised nature of my often whim-led van-dwelling existence and my use of poetry throughout my PhD thesis. Following Harris's idea of the "poetry of video" and by seeing video as poetry it can enable "creators [to] think more critically about seeing, about making, and about the purpose of research itself" (Harris 2016, p.2).

However, there is danger when I "drop" into deep-play that I can lose the awareness of the whole group. Using practices from drama-therapy I started and ended each workshop with the group holding hands and stepping into the improvised play-space bringing the analogy of a golden ribbon connecting us all together whether we move closely or far apart. However, as many people were brand new to this experience it can create an imbalance in skill level and scope of movement. A further workshop with a group of experienced improvised dancers could have been interesting. However, in terms of my thesis exploring sharing the stories of School Tourism, of the different approaches to "educating differently" and then possibly trialling new ideas and pedagogies in a mainstream classroom, amateurs innovatively playing with improvisation also makes sense rather than a more polished performance.

One key event which I included in many different speeds, zoom and focus was where I get squashed. Some people who have watched this film find this part triggering, asking questions such as: Am I ok? Did I consent? What boundaries were blurred here? Yet I saw it being key to my PhD journey as an embodied understanding of the epiphany that I experienced when I realised there was no such as thing as an "Ideal School". I included the "squash" strongly at the beginning to create a wake-up call to the audience - this film may look attractive in the spring colours and bright ribbons but there is a darker side, a cultural shift that needs to happen.



I decided to continually layer the visuals to create different textures of the rhizome rather than binaries of this or that workshop. In many ways the two workshops bled in and out of each other. The journeying in one leading to closer interaction in another. Conversations with Carran Waterfield helped me ponder further about the layers and how I was weaving them all together.

*We bleed... leak all the time... is it a dream of your PhD?*

Aware that my film could be seen as a layered “dream” I wanted to ground it in place-based nomadology (see Deleuze and Guattari 1980/87; Braidotti 2012) of my continual journeying. So I decided to include films from another arts-based aspect of the project that I had explored - mapping and threading the journeys that we took in the van around the UK showing visually where (and where not) we had been. By adding static photos of the red van, (the one we had lived in for almost two years during the PhD that was written-off after an accident two days after my PhD viva) I could connect back to what does not physically exist now. The “thing” that made the whole itinerant PhD possible.

For this film I wanted to include some of the audio from the filming - the wind, the sheep bleating, the cries of the dancers but I also wanted to add music. With hindsight it is interesting that I chose to lead two Come Dance my PhD workshops without music. I often dance contact improvisation in silence and I think I had forgotten that, for some, dance means music. Therefore, I realise that I did not make it easy for some of my participants, I expected a lot. So I really should not have been surprised by the discussion at my second workshop around the term “dance”. Can asking people to “dance” be off-putting for some people? Could I redefine my workshop not as dance? Maybe what was really happening was “movement”? I could extend this further as a workshop of “trans-materiality” for the dancers (movers) and the assemblage (the things) all had intra-acting agency (Barad 2007). I wonder if we were taking it too seriously by unpicking and (re)defining Come Dance my PhD as Come Trans-Materialise my PhD or if we onto something...

The music, the track, when I remembered it was already there in the background of my van-dwelling life. “Metal Shell” was a song written by Singer/Songwriter Conor Nutt from Sheffield in 2008 about my very first van, an old white battered builders van. The tune is catchy and captures the soft magic of the dancing in the Spring time. The words are more profound, thinking about the impact of vehicles on climate change and society. This looking-back to my life ten years ago adds another element to the rhizome of the influences and explorations of my autoethnography of van ownership and van-dwelling, reminding me of a sentence I found scratched into one of my many journals, “*I could not live this life in one place*” and these films, this PhD, could not have been becoming without itinerancy.

This project did not aim to change my practice as a teacher, as the outcomes of my thesis made me realise that I had researched myself out of that role already - I no longer want to be a “teacher” in the traditional sense. This project allowed me to wear different hats (still all aspects of the Alys-we) to be the facilitator, dancer, artist, film editor, co-creator... Through making the films, sharing them at a conference, online and being published within a journal I am able to share my experiences with a wider audience, hoping to create a ripple effect towards the systemic culture-shift that my thesis cries out for. But it was more than that, I realise that creating the assemblage, the maps, sharing my stories and journey, the “things” in my workshops and installation brought me a level of peace with the PhD process, an inner therapy for the complex rhizome of my life. It also brought me joy. I chose to end the second film with laughter as radical play continues to be how I live my life.





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Lino cuts by Alys Mendus

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