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CRAFTING A DIY CAMPERVAN AND CRAFTING EMBODIED, GENDERED IDENTITY PERFORMANCES IN A HYPER-MASCULINE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: This paper presents a multi-media textual collage that *shows* rather than *tells* the lived experiences of my conversion of a DIY campervan over several months in a diesel mechanic workshop in Sydney, Australia. This is a "small culture," (Holliday, 1999) to which I gained limited access as I developed craft skills and the confidence to speak back to relative, milieu-specific, gendered power. I use autoethnographic textual fragments written shortly after the moment to depict the struggle to acquire skills, build confidence, and cross "small" cultures in an unusual crafting context. Grounded theoretical insights are suggested as they relate to three things. First, I examine the nature of individual, self-directed learning as engendered by the non-expert, hands-on doing of craft supported by *YouTube* instructional videos. Second, I consider positive and negative affective identity factors, particularly feelings of competence or incompetence and challenges to my own (female, middle-aged, injured, and non-expert) embodiment. Third, I consider the collaborative, discursive ways in which hegemonic

and non-hegemonic masculinities were talked into being as contingent, relational identities against the foil of a constructed “other.”

Keywords: adult learning; gender; craft; identity; autoethnography; wellbeing; DIY; campervan

I feel happy when I spend time in nature and, until last year, I often hiked and camped, usually in forests and sometimes in deserts, but almost always alone (Stanley, 2018). As a woman going solo, I sought out remoteness as it gave me a sense of safety. But the snakes and spiders of the Australian bush and the bears of the U.S. Pacific Northwest forests were not my biggest concern. Instead, like many other women who hike and camp alone (e.g. Chasteen, 2004), I worried about ill-intentioned men. So I hiked far and camped in remote places, and there I felt happy. As I walked, I felt the rhythm calm me as if in a walking meditation. I pricked my ears to the shriek of birds, widened my eyes at the play of light through leaves, and inhaled the tang of eucalypts. As I scrambled over rocks, I felt their weathered ancientness with my ephemeral human fingers, and my tininess, juxtaposed against nature's hugeness and ancientness, awed me and made me breathe deeply. Nature is a secular temple, I understood.

But in September 2017, I got injured, developing crippling *plantar fasciitis* and heel spurs while walking on the Pacific Crest Trail in Oregon, U.S.A. Suddenly, I couldn't hike and, very quickly, I felt a sadness that welled and gripped and seized me, taking over my body as if the sadness were a predator, holding onto my throat. I hadn't fully understood before, but hiking had maintained my mental health as much as it had my cardiovascular fitness, and as soon as the forest and I were separated, my happiness began to fade. I couldn't hike far, so I couldn't feel safe. But to be happy, I needed to find a way to spend time in nature.

This paper charts that "journey," which was both a craft project and, as it turned out, a sustained and convoluted piece of identity work…

By way of compromise, I looked into buying a campervan. But prefabricated models — even old, beat-up, used ones — were fiendishly expensive in Sydney, Australia where I lived. And so, from September 2017 until January 2018, I engaged in a big, ambitious craft project: a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) campervan conversion. This paper charts that "journey," which was both a craft project and, as it turned out, a sustained and convoluted piece of identity work, centring on gender and contested perceptions of expertise and legitimacy.

As is so often the case with craft projects, practicalities laughed in the face of predictability. I was living in a second-floor apartment with no outdoor space, so the first thing I needed was somewhere to build the van fit out. Through an online advert, I found a diesel mechanic that rented workshop space. And, taking a deep breath, as I was still not at all sure whether I had the skills to complete this project, one afternoon I signed up as a tenant.

So there I was: a middle-aged, academic woman in a diesel workshop, embarking on a complex, ambitious craft project and teetering on the very edge of my knowledge and skill. Again, I felt tiny, but this time my own tininess scared me.

This paper considers the ways in which I developed relevant craft/DIY skills and the ways in which these same skills, in turn, gave me peripheral, conditional access to the "small" culture of diesel mechanics. By "small" culture, I follow Holliday's (1999) description:

> What has become the default notion of "culture" refers to prescribed ethnic, national and international entities. This large culture paradigm is by its nature vulnerable to a culturist reduction of "foreign[ers]". In contrast, a small culture paradigm attaches "culture" to small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behavior, and thus avoids culturist ethnic, national or international stereotyping. (p. 237)

This is to say: I was a cultural outsider in the workshop, and my socialization and discourse norms differed from those of the mechanics. I am an academic, trained to think and talk in certain ways, while the mechanics are creative problem solvers and hands-on experts in an entirely different, no less challenging or difficult, but much more physically taxing field. In their world, my cultural capital (after Bourdieu, 1986) was extremely limited. Theirs would have been in mine, too, of course, but we were not in my world. We were in theirs.

From my appearance —fat, mumsy, and seemingly sedentary— strangers have often assumed, wrongly, that I could not possibly be adventurous or "outdoorsy" (Stanley, 2018, pp.129-131). Also attributed to my constructed and culturally seemingly "legible" phenotype is the notion of seeming helplessness when it comes to physical, technical, ostensibly "masculine" crafts (Moisio, Arnould, & Gentry, 2013). This is to say that in contrast to home-based crafts, like crochet, quilting, or polymer clay craft —all of which I also do, incidentally— a project as "technical" and as "physical" as a campervan conversion may be regarded as a rather more masculine pursuit (e.g. Bratich & Brush, 2011). Certainly, online blogs about campervan fit outs are overwhelmingly written by men and focus almost exclusively on projects undertaken by men (e.g. Both, 2016; Hudson, 2013; Murphy, 2017). As a bookish woman, therefore, I was immediately on the back foot.

Another part of my identity, relevant here, is my research focus: intercultural communications, towards which I take a critical approach. This means that I view intersectional identities as potential and potent axes of the "intercultural," understood discursively, and as spaces of power relations (e.g. Stanley, 2017; Stanley & Vass,

2018). This meant that, throughout my time in the workshop, I was inevitably on high alert, my ears attuned to the critical, contextual, and gendered aspects of the experience. What I had not anticipated, though, was the supportive, warm, creative community into which I was eventually accepted. What follows, therefore, is a textual collage of lived, embodied experiences, in which I explore the social and gendered aspects of my craft practice.

Crafting a Text about Crafting

This paper is an experimental collage of textual pieces and photos. As very little has so far been written in the scholarly literature about campervans (see Wilson & Hannam, 2017), this approach allows for a grounding of insight in lived, embodied experience, compellingly told. The style contrasts radically, I hope, with traditional academic writing, which Badley (2014) argues causes scholars to sound "more like a jargon-spouting robot" than "a human being with a story to tell" (p. 986). In contrast, in this autoethnographic text, I aim to: "Write from the heart of [my] humanity, be honest, and self-reflexive, recognize the risks for [my]self and others in [my] constructions, allow [my] body to have a speaking presence, and create a better, more ethical world" (Pelias, 2013, p. 389).

The contribution of this kind of writing echoes the purpose of autoethnography more broadly. Its objective is to use the personal (the "auto") to provide insights into wider cultural or human phenomena (the "ethno"), particularly those otherwise hidden aspects of life that are all but impossible to research using other methods.

So it is with this paper. Here, I explore my own and others' gendered and embodied identity performances (Butler, 1990), including hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995). These performances construct and are constructed by intersectional identities attributed and appropriated in the small, intercultural spaces that occurred when I interacted and/or transacted with hardware store employees, diesel mechanics, and other people in the context, mainly men.

Autoethnography is appropriate here, in a context that was never intended to be a formal research project, because it aims to "create verisimilitude rather than making hard truth claims" (Grant, 2010, p. 578). Specifically, the texts that follow are based on notes written at the time of the events or very shortly afterwards and photographs taken at various stages. In addition, one of the diesel mechanics – here called "B," and his wife – here called "G," have become my good friends as a result of this project, and I have discussed with them the ideas examined here. In this sense, the paper also draws

upon the notion of "friendship as method" in that I have since called upon G and B as other sources of insight (Tillman-Healy, 2003).

But in the pursuit of insightful engagement with lived experience, both friendship as method and autoethnography can be critiqued: memory is flawed, experience is subjective, texts are constructed, and textual accounts and friendships alike are performances of versions of ourselves. However, the goal is neither "truth" in a positivistic sense nor the conditional, contextualized Bhaksarian "truth" of critical realism (e.g. Fletcher, 2017). Instead, as Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) explain:

> [W]e acknowledge the importance of contingency. We know that memory is fallible, that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt; and we recognize that people who have experienced the "same" event often tell different stories about what happened … For an autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator's credibility. Could the narrator have had the experiences described, given available "factual evidence?" Does the narrator believe that this is actually what happened to her or him? … [Citing Plummer] "What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller – to see the world from her or his point of view" … In particular, autoethnographers ask: "How useful is the story?" and "To what uses might the story be put?" (p. 3)

Anderson (2006) goes further, suggesting the following evaluative criterion for what he terms *analytic* autoethnography:

> [T]he defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. This data-transcending goal has been a central warrant for traditional social science research ... this means using empirical evidence to formulate and refine theoretical understandings of social processes ... Analytic ethnographers are not content with accomplishing the representational task of capturing "what is going on." (p. 387)

Together, these are very different evaluative criteria than those used for most scholarly writing. However, it is important to note that, in suggesting that we hold autoethnography to *different* standards, I am not suggesting those standards be *lesser*.

As I have argued elsewhere (Stanley, 2019), three criteria are useful for evaluating autoethnography. First, it is necessary to tell an engaging story. Problematically, in some putative "autoethnographic" texts, "writing from the heart" may appear either as an opportunity to rant or as an invitation to present vague statements

about feelings. This is not what autoethnography is. Although the political is never far from the autoethnographic and there are few things quite as theoretical as a good story, "personal" writing does not mean simply grinding an axe or reporting on feelings. Second, any so-called "personal" narrative is necessarily situated. Indeed, the very notion of the "individual" is a situated, Western ontological paradigm that is far from universal (Iosefo, 2018). So, when one writes one's "own" story, there is a need to draw on the surrounding sociocultural literature for context. To ignore this is both unethical and poor scholarship, as the autoethnographic links the personal to the "cultural" at a scholarly level. In this sense, it is a very different genre from autobiography, memoir, or creative non-fiction. The third and perhaps most contentious criterion is that autoethnography has an overt political agenda: it seeks to right ethical wrongs. This is what Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) mean when they ask "How useful is the story?" and "To what uses might the story be put?" (p. 3). This means that an autoethnography may be both compelling to read and well contextualised in the literature, but if it does not work towards making the world a better place, it is not legitimate. Autoethnography, then, is necessarily an activist, change-oriented methodology that seeks to problematize taken-for-granted Western canonical knowledge and to empower other ways of knowing, being, and doing.

What activism is going on in this text? Here, I explore the *fragility* of hands-on adult learning and what it feels like to be on the very edge of one's knowledge. Related are perceptions of incompetence, gradual learning of both declarative and procedural knowledge (Stanley & Murray, 2013), and then, sometimes, eventual mastery. Such feelings about learning and resultant efficacy underpin *subjective wellbeing* (Lucas & Diener, 2015), which is explored in relational terms: the extent to which one is *included or excluded socially*, in part because of phenotypical and biographical factors and in part because of the crafting of an identity performance deemed worthy and capable of "fitting in." Importantly, all of these are underpinned by constructions of *gender*. This text is therefore activist in its exploration of the ways in which the machinations of power operate along many axes of intersectional identity, with a focus on fragility, subjective wellbeing, social inclusion, and gender.

Scenes from a Used Car Dealership: September 2017

I've started researching vans to convert to a DIY campervan. You can start with any size of vehicle and build it into a more-or-less liveable space. But whatever living space you gain on the inside you pay for on the outside: you either have a monster to insure, drive, and park, or you live in a postage-stamp sized space with no dance floor. And who can live if they cannot dance? I've looked at small vans and big vans, but the Goldilocks principle holds: I'm looking for a mid-size van.

Then there are the mechanical and technical aspects: how old of a van can I cope with? Do I want one sliding door or two? Side windows or not? Manual or automatic? A blank canvas or a van kitted out with tradesman-type shelving that needs removing? Crucially, also: what can I afford? These questions have involved a *lot* of online research. What combination of desirable and essential elements exists in Sydney? And what should I be paying for each permutation of van age, mileage, and specifications? I spend a long time online, reading and comparing.

None of this is even vaguely in my wheelhouse of knowledge and skills. But I watch seemingly endless instructional videos on *YouTube*: how to buy a used vehicle, what to look for, what to ask, what to know. From this research, I put together a checklist with space for writing in the details of each van. Then, armed with a red clipboard, my checklist, and my friend M, I show up at used car dealerships on a Friday with butterflies in my tummy.

> “Oh, hi, yeah,” I say, “We spoke on the phone. I'm here to see the Renault *Trafic*?” My tone is questioning, unsure.
>
> “Ah, yeah, it's out front. I’ll show you.”

The used car dealer unlocks the *Trafic* and slides open the door. I hand M the tape measure and she climbs inside and starts jotting down measurements while I pop the bonnet (hood) and start running through my engine checklist. The dealer starts a bit of sales-speak, but we ignore him and after a few minutes he wanders off. We get into a groove, M calling out measurements while I jot things down. Then I wriggle under the van with a torch (flashlight) to look for oil leaks while M makes notes.

After half an hour, we go back to the car dealer’s demountable office, where he's lounging on a reclining armchair. And suddenly I'm sounding knowledgeable, asking about after-market modifications to the battery casing and the questionable grease in the passenger foot well. He answers, commenting that, “clearly you know what you’re doing.” I don’t. But I’ve performed well, and I can see why he would think so. As with so much identity work, this is a performance. I’m brazening it out, but I feel my own uncertainty in the flush of my cheeks and a clenching in my stomach. I’m nervous and my body knows it even if I’m trying to hide it.

But, emboldened by the car dealer’s comment, next I organize a test drive, a mechanical check, a price, a pick-up date, a bank cheque, and a parking permit. Then, the following week, I take the train back to the dealership and drive home, *in my van*. My confidence suddenly feels sky high. *I can do this*. I feel empowered and proud.

Figure 1. The Renault *Trafic* as a blank canvas in B's workshop

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: High-vis and Hiking Boots, October 2017

After an afternoon of online searching, I find the diesel workshop. It has electrical power, shelving, and a key code so I can come and go. There's plenty of lighting, so it doesn't feel too scary, although unknowable sounds in the yard make me jump and start when it's late and I'm the only one there. There are some very basic women's toilets, about which the less said the better. And, as the workshop is next to the canal, there are also some impressively muscular rats and some ferocious feral cats happily picking them off. The rats aside, the workshop is perfect.

B and D and a bunch of other mechanics work here. Everyone wears work boots and high-vis, and I wear my hiking boots with denim shorts and a flowery t-shirt. As I arrive on the first day, the coffee van pulls up and B buys coffee for everyone, including me, laughing at W, one of his employees, who has used glazing silicone in an engine. He slows it down for emphasis: "GLAZING silicone, in an ENGINE," and everyone laughs. D, I notice, is looking at me, seeing if I'm laughing, which I am, although I don't

understand why this story is funny. I swallow my ignorance, feigning confidence and competence that I know are a lie. I cast my eyes downwards and hope no one asks me why I'm laughing, because I don't know. Until this precise moment, I didn't even know silicone came in various types or that some types might be used in engines. My laughter, then, is a lie. I'm out of my depth.

Figure 2. The mechanics gather around the coffee van. B is on the right. The coffee vendor is in white. In high-vis orange, (left to right) are D, K, and W.

Scenes from Bunnings: What Is It You're Trying to Do? October 2017

Before I start doing anything in the workshop, while the van is still empty, I need to buy stuff. So, although I'll end up at *Bunnings* (Australia's answer to *Home Depot*) about thirty more times throughout the process, on that first day, my big task is to go and buy tools and materials. A campervan conversion requires a *lot* of stuff and on day one I buy a jigsaw and drill bits, hole saws and hacksaw blades. I buy screws and corflute and insulation and plywood. I buy things that, just a few weeks earlier, I had never heard of. I had researched van conversions online and so I buy what I think I'll need because the websites have told me I need it. But, again, standing precariously on the very edge of my knowledge, I feel like a charlatan. I may be pretending to know

things I'd only recently read, but my body knows I'm a fake: my cheeks redden and my hesitating voice quavers, giving me away. My body is such a traitor.

My red cheeks, I'm hoping, are why the next thing happens. Still in Bunnings, in the tool department, buying a jigsaw, I'm queuing behind two fellow customers, both men, who are each asking questions about different DIY projects. The expert salesman asks them each, in turn, "What is it *you're doing*?" and offers advice. But then it's my turn, and he asks me, "What is it you're *trying to do*?" Critically aware, I notice this difference in how he phrases the question, and my cheeks flush again. He sees through me. I feel taken down a notch. I feel like running away, but I can't because I'm carrying too much heavy stuff, both metaphorically and literally.

Twenty minutes later, I'm struggling to push a heavily wood-laden trolley that has a wonky front wheel. This time it's a fellow customer that tacitly questions my right to be doing what I'm doing. A man in his fifties, perhaps, stops me and, without preamble, explains how best to push a trolley. Not asking, he actually takes it from my hands. Then he realises it is broken and, without apology, he shrugs. Are these men reading my nervousness? Or are they reading my gender? I cannot know. Now, though, instead of worried and scared, a small flare of anger lights in me. "What the actual fuck?" I say under my breath, to no one. It helps me feel sassy and righteous.

But the damage is done. On the way back to the workshop, I stop and buy take-out coffees for me and for B, to return the favour from the coffee van. But it's raining, and, leaving the café, I slip on wet floor tiles, landing heavily on my knee and scraping my hand. The coffee cups fly in an arc and land, as I do, in the gutter. And as I sit watching coffee wash away down the drain, I cry, imagining my confidence going with it. Everyone else knows I'm an idiot for even trying to do something so obviously beyond my capabilities. *"What is it you're trying to do?*" plays on loop in my mind as I cry because I don't know whether this project will be too hard and I'll end up quitting. As I sit in the gutter in my soggy shorts, I feel beaten. But I stand up, buy more coffee, paste on a smile, and drive back to the workshop. I'm fine. I feign it. I'm fine. My smile is a mask. I'm fine.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: The Jigsaw, October 2017

One of my first tasks is making a template from which to jigsaw the floor plywood. This is a straightforward, confidence-building exercise involving crawling around with large sheets of plastic corflute and a utility knife. This is easy, not least as I do crafty stuff all the time. I remind myself: I'm not a *total* amateur. I'm useful with my hands. I recently fixed a wobbly toilet by making and grouting into place polymer clay wedges. I

recently block mounted a poster for $7 when I had been quoted $80 to do it commercially; it took half an hour. Making the floor template reminds me of this, and my confidence comes back a little.

The next stage is to jigsaw floor panels. I lay the template I've made on the plywood and draw around it. Then D, one of the mechanics, helps me lift the giant, 19 mm sheets of ply, one at a time, onto my little sawhorses. I clamp it in place and get started with jigsawing around the line.

Well, not exactly.

Jigsawing is impossible if you don't know how to do it. On my first attempt, the saw blade bounces off the wood, growling, threatening: far too close to the soft, naked flesh of my hands and arms. It feels dangerous to be messing with power tools when I don't know what I'm doing. Breathing hard, therefore, I stop. I go out and sit in my car in the yard, consciously telling myself to breathe deeply. I'm far too intimidated, still, by the mechanics, and I'm embarrassed to admit I'm stuck. So, instead, I google *YouTube* videos.

"How to use a jigsaw."

"How to cut wood with a jigsaw."

"Cut curves with jigsaw."

I watch a whole bunch of them. Aha! It's in how you approach the wood. Gotcha. Take two. This time I lay the plane base of the jigsaw onto the plywood, get the blade going, and *then* move it slowly forward, and it works! I still very much have all my fingers and, after a few hours, I also have floor cut-outs that fit. Success!

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: Conversations, October to December 2017

As I work, any number of men amble by and stop to chat. They're customers picking up vehicles, friends of the mechanics, or workers from the demolition business next door. Seeing me, most pause and watch, and many initiate a conversation, usually "observational" and "confirming," along these lines:

"Cutting wood, eh?"

> “Yep, I'm cutting out the panels for the floor.”
>
> “Oh yeah? So, you're doing it in two halves?”
>
> “Yep, so I can get them into the van. It won’t go in the doors if it’s all one piece. Then I'm going to screw them down onto these wooden strips that I've glued to the floor.” (points to the wooden strips in place and oozing brown glue. An empty tube of *Liquid Nails* lies on the floor next to the van)
>
> “So, you used *Liquid Nails*?” (This is a commonly used strong brown glue.)
>
> “Yep, that's right.”
>
> “Oh. So how come you didn’t use self-tapping metal screws? You see, the thing with self-tappers is…” And a long explanation follows, during which my conversational interlocutor lectures me while rocking back and forwards, thumbs in pockets, seeming to have scored conversational points.
>
> “Well, yep, I could have,” I counter. “But I don’t want to go punching holes in the metal, because that’s just asking for it to start rusting. By gluing the batons on and using them as my anchor points, I’m leaving the paintwork intact.”
>
> “Oh yeah? Well, good onya.”

None of these conversations is problematic as such, and none of these men are anything other than curious and, I think, well meaning. But I ask myself how the conversation might be different if I were a man. Would there be fewer such chats (because a man doing this is less of a spectacle)? Or maybe it would get more competitive, more silverback-gorilla, chest-beating, dominance-establishing. Certainly, I think, there would be less lecturing. Might the assumption be that I know what I’m doing, rather than that I don’t? Maybe. Or perhaps it would go down exactly the same way. I can’t know. I’m struck, though, by the sheer number of conversations like this and the way they make me hunch over on myself as I stand to chat, my body telling these men that I have no right to be doing these tasks even as my voice says the opposite.

Little by little, this changes. I’ve done *such* a lot of online research that, gradually I realise I’m knowledgeable, even if my body language takes a while to catch up with this new way of being. With strangers – all men, I discuss the relative merits of wool versus polystyrene versus foil insulation, taking into account conduction versus convection versus radiant heat transfer. Passers-by want to talk about the various ways

of setting up solar power systems and the use of battery isolators. We discuss manual water pumps and 12-volt pumps. At first, during these conversations, I feel tested, anxious, uncertain, my adrenalin preparing for conversational battle at even the most casual of encounters. But, gradually, I realise: I know this stuff. And as I realise this, I notice I stand straighter, taller, and less crumpled.

I'm not sure that any of the content is what matters to these men, though. More important seems to be the fact of my having researched it and knowing what I'm doing and why. Throwing in technical terms helps. They seem to enjoy the fact of explaining something that I perhaps did not know, and, failing that, to talk about something a bit technical for a moment. Gradually, I learn to wow them with some jargon and shut down the criticism with a strong rationale for whatever I'm doing. And what starts out as exhausting self-justification becomes unremarkable chatter along the way.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: Finishing the Floor, October 2017

But there's still a *lot* that I don't know, and I make plenty of expensive and time-consuming mistakes. My first mistake is the electrics. Before screwing down the floor, I need to lay the sub-floor electrical cables in conduit. This means knowing exactly where the various circuits will go and what amperage will run off each wire. But I don't —can't — know exactly what sockets and connections will be needed, and where.

First, I buy the wrong type of cable —normal, household wiring— and then, after a conversation with an electrician friend of one of the mechanics, I return it to Bunnings. Next, read tens, perhaps hundreds, of website pages. I download an Ohm's law app to work out the amperage for each electrical circuit and I draw out plans of what will run off each cable. B and D patiently answer questions, and my questions get better, more complicated, more technical. I'm learning. Nevertheless, when I go to buy the wiring — twin core, in various amperages— at an automotive supplier, the salesman still asks, "What is it you've been *sent to get?*" And I wonder again: is this casual sexism or a response to my seeming cluelessness? Because by then I'm *not* clueless. I've got this, now. This is just about who I am and what I'm buying.

Days later, the wiring is in place, the circuits calculated and labelled, with the raw ends sticking out of conduit for an automotive electrician to connect up later. This means I can put the floor back in, screw it down properly, and cover it with vinyl. Late that night, alone in the workshop, the light long gone from the sky, I sit on my newly minted van floor, gently stroking its smooth surface. I lie down, feeling with my body all that I have achieved: a simple floor with a complex wiring system criss-crossing under it, seemingly pulsing, already, with the power it will eventually carry. I lie there for a full five

minutes, feeling proud, capable, and incredulous at my own capacity. With one finger, my nail filthy and broken down to a stub, I trace the path of the wiring that I know runs under the floor. And then I notice a slight movement off to the left and I sit up. A giant rat stands twitchily on the workshop floor, watching me. The spell of my reverie is broken as I shriek, glad to do so witnessed only by the rat. He or she scampers off and I —aching from all the squatting down, crouching over, and bending myself into twisted shapes— stand, and stretch, and pack up to go home. I'm so damn proud of myself.

Figure 3. The floor. The wiring runs underneath in conduit. The vinyl is in place.

I get home late that night, as I do so many nights, and *every* time I'm filthy, dog-tired, and my heels are agony. I wear my gel trainers with good orthotics, but the fact remains that I should simply not be on my feet all these hours while my heels try to heal. I also wear the same t-shirt and shorts every day in the workshop, because the oil and grease gets everywhere. Every surface is filthy, particularly the cement floor. As I often kneel to do floor-level tasks, it takes plenty of scrubbing to get the shadows off my knees and hands. The filth is an unsung part of this craft story. The filth gets everywhere.

Figure 4. Workshop knees.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: Learning by Doing, November 2017

Over the next few weeks I build the fit-out. The bed runs across the back of the van, side to side. It is 60 cm from the van floor to the bed base, and the mattress adds 17 cm. This puts the bed surface 65 cm below the ceiling. B's friend tells me this is standard, Australian-Navy issue bunk height, and I don't know what to do with this information. Do I feel reassured? Restricted? This height is fine to sleep in, but not enough to sit up and write. I'm going to get a pop-top roof professionally installed, but will it work? I'm hoping that what I've gained under the bed in storage space is not going to prevent me from using the van as a place to write. This *hoping*, though, which feels distinctly like *worrying*, is consuming me. It's all I think about last thing before I fall asleep and it's what fills my mind as I wake up.

The entire campervan conversion is like this: not knowing, hoping and wishing, and only finding out later whether things will work. It's like keeping a lot of juggling balls in the air at once, except that one juggling ball falling doesn't really affect the others. This project, in contrast, is a linear series of decisions, the outcome and results of which are unknowable, but in which each choice impacts every subsequent thing. All I can do is carry on building. My dad visits, and together we build the base units for the bed, the kitchen cabinets, and the worktop with jigsaw cut-outs for stove, tap, and sink. We drill hole saw gaps for the plumbing hoses, creatively solving problems as they arise. To him, arriving new to the project, I seem capable, confident, even competent, and he tells me this with admiration in his voice. My dad's always seemed to me like a DIY expert and when he tells me this, I swell with pride.

Please re-read the paragraph above. You'll notice I casually mention a "hole saw." Just a few weeks earlier, I didn't even know what that was, but by the time my dad arrived, I was confidently using one without it wrenching my arm off. Again, this was thanks to *YouTube*. Learning this way is an almost imperceptible, just discernible, process of struggling and failing at first. Then, as I acquired new declarative knowledge ("knowing about"), I would do new tasks with focus and effort. The next step then felt like going backwards, as I knew what I *should* be doing, whereas previously I had been ignorant even of my own ignorance. Gradually, though, I built procedural knowledge ("knowing how"), doing the task carefully for a while before, at last, performing the skill on autopilot with almost no memory of ever having struggled. This sequence repeated itself for every technique I mastered, and it matches well with models of experiential learning more generally (e.g. Kolb, 2015).

Figure 5. Rear storage spaces and the high bed, before pop-top installation.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: The Expensive Mistake, November 2017

Just as I'm feeling confident, I make a mistake that will cost me weeks of time and hundreds of dollars, but I don't know it yet. The problem is one of design. Thinking I'm cleverly balancing the weight of the various components within the van, I build the kitchen unit across the kerbside rear doorway, thinking it useful to be able to access the inner workings of the sink plumbing, the water tank filler, the electrical pump, and the stove from the side of the van. I build it this way and, to do so, I carefully measure out spaces under the bed for the fridge on a slider tray, the water tanks, and the storage units. Then, oblivious, I screw everything into place and build the bed on top of it.

But a piece of legislation exists in New South Wales that prohibits this. The kerbside rear door must be accessible, even though no one is travelling in the back of the moving van (and the kerbside *cab* door is still unhindered). I am unaware of this legislation. And so I carry on: my interdependent setup is not compliant with safety regulations, but I don't know it yet. In January, even after I've been out camping in my "finished" van, I'll have to rip the kitchen out and start over from the floor up, which is

going to cost me several more weeks of work and heartache. But I don't know this yet, and I carry on.

Figure 6. The (illegal) (side-door-accessed) kitchen cabinets: inside the van.

Figure 7. The (illegal) (side-door-accessed) kitchen cabinets: outside the van.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: The Road Train, November 2017

By this point, I'm absolutely sick of Bunnings, but on a Friday evening, I need more plywood, just two 19 mm sheets, each about a metre square. In Bunnings, though, there's no one around: no-one at any of the service desks, and the few times I see staff members in the distance and holler, "Excuse me?" they ignore me. My heels hurt from walking back and forwards and I've been on my feet all day in the workshop. But I can't just buy a giant sheet of plywood. I can't lift it by myself and I've only brought my little car because the van is tucked behind other vehicles in the workshop. I need the plywood cut to a smaller size, and for that I need to find a staff member. And I can't.

"Maybe there's an alternative?" I think, as I walk the deserted aisles. Maybe, instead of buying a large, thick sheet of ply and getting it cut, I can buy four smaller 9 mm-thick sheets of hobby ply and *Liquid Nails*. "I can stick the sheets together!" I think, feeling resourceful. It's more expensive, but Bunnings is like the Marie Celeste. So I buy four sheets of thin ply and more glue and I drive back to the workshop.

D and B are still there and D hands me a beer and watches, amused, as I glue and then stand on two slippery sheets of ply, trying to get them to hold still. But they're too thin and they keep curling up at the edges. As I slide around on the gluey ply, skating, holding a beer, and laughing at the nonsense of it all, the sheets slide out of alignment. The mechanics watch, amused.

> "What you need," B observes from behind his own beer, "Is a heavy object to put on it overnight, to hold it while the glue dries."
>
> "Mmm, but what?" I muse.
>
> "A battery? A couple of batteries?" D suggests. There's certainly no shortage of heavy stuff sitting around in the workshop. But then B starts laughing.
>
> "How about a road train?" he suggests, "I can drive it onto the ply." As chance would have it, a road train —an enormous lorry— is in for servicing and is parked in the yard.
>
> "Should be heavy enough," I say, laughing.
>
> D helps me pull apart the ply panels and glue them again, saturating them. Then we take them out to the yard and put them in place, and B drives the road train onto them.

I say, “Will you be here in the morning, to drive it off for me?”

And B laughs and says, “I'll leave you the keys.”

“Haha. You'll see me on the evening news: ‘Woman drives road train into Sydney canal,’” I say.

But, “Yeah, no worries,” he says. “I'll move it when I come in,” and he does.

Figures 8 & 9. The road train on the glued-together hobby ply.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: Correlation or Causality? December 2017

There’s a picnic table in the workshop, high up at the back, on a raised platform, and the mechanics often order from *Uber Eats* for lunch. Today, someone has sent out for burgers and we all sit around the table. I’m routinely included now, laughing along with funny stories. Sometimes I even ask for explanations when the funny story involves a diesel engine and I don’t know why it’s funny. I even tell a story or two myself, always funny. Stories must be funny. That’s the rule. I’m learning. But I’m still not quite fitting in.

Chewing his burger, W asks me, “So, how come you bought a white van?”

“Haha, well, they’re pretty much all white,” I say. “Not much choice.”

> "Mmm, I saw a thing on *Top Gear*," someone else adds. "Said that white's the safest colour. Yeah, so white should be pretty safe, eh?"
>
> And I can't help myself. "Yeah, I wonder about that though. Like, is it that white is actually safer? Or is it that safe drivers read that and they go, 'Mmm, white's safer'. Then, being as they're safe drivers, they choose a white car. But that skews the stats, because you have all these safe drivers running around in white vehicles. So it looks like white is safer, but it might not be that white is the *cause* of that. Like, if you or I get a white car, are we any safer? I don't know." Leaning back, I take a swig of Fanta.
>
> Everyone chews. Eyes dart around the table. B reaches for more fries, and eventually W swallows and says, "That's pretty deep, eh?" And everyone laughs, relieved.

I haven't used the words "correlational" or "causal." I haven't explicitly referenced my academic work. I'm trying to fit in. Nevertheless, K from the demolition company next door tells me later that he used to teach in a technical college, and B mentions that his sister went to university. And although I'm trying to be a chameleon, sometimes my other identity shows through. But when it does, now, I see that the guys are trying to be chameleons themselves, too. The mechanics are welcoming me now and involving me. They complain endlessly to me about G, a customer who won't stop hanging around, watching everyone work. But still I am conscious of managing both my gendered and professional otherness. Despite everything, I'm still out of place. I may not have mentioned causality as such, but for a second there I felt my mask slip.

Scenes from National Parks: December 2017 and January 2018

Finally, my van is complete. Or almost complete. It is finished (I think) as, triumphant and cautious, I drive it out of the workshop. I'm going camping: heading north for a few weeks, to get the pop-top installed along the way and to visit friends over the holidays. I'm looking forward to spending time among trees again. In a van, I feel safe. It isn't the same, I'll discover, as hiking and camping miles from anyone, but it's good. I'm excited about spending time in forests. Sleeping late. Reading. Writing. I'm looking forward to not scrubbing diesel off my knees and hands every day. I'm eager to try out my campervan.

Finally, I relax. If it's hot, I open up the pop-top and let a breeze blow through the homemade mosquito net that covers the rear door. If it's chilly, everything can be closed and the van feels cosy. In it, I read. Relax. Sleep. Write. Chill. I learn how to stack the

cushions just so, for the best sitting-up-in-bed comfort. I built a bed extension so I can stretch out properly. My van works! I even install fairy lights.

Figure 10. December 2017: It's too hot to cook in the van, so I often cook outside on a Butane stove. A kangaroo hops by to say hello (in Watagans National Park).

Figure 11. January 2018: I don't always camp alone. Here I'm camped with three friends (in Kanagra Boyd National Park).

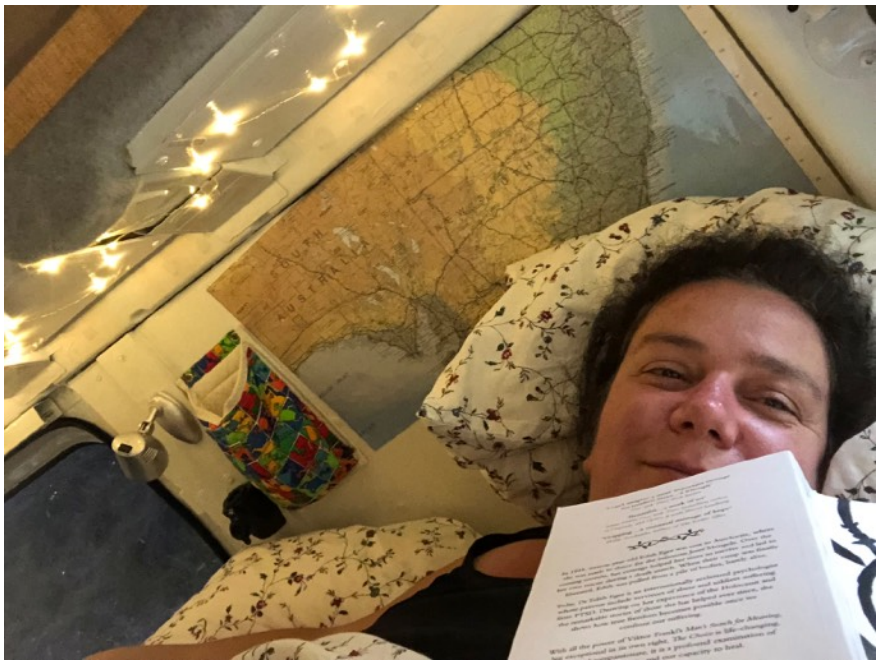

Figure 12. January 2018: I relax.

Scenes from a Diesel Workshop: Resolving Problems, January 2018

On my summer camping trip, someone tells me about my error with the kerb-side rear door and the placement of the kitchen, and, after checking online, I go reluctantly back to the workshop for a few more weeks of grease, filth, and effort to fix things.

B and others tell me this is inevitable: there will always be problems like this. Shake-down problems, they call them. Teething troubles. I hadn't known to anticipate this, though, and it irks me. It's also a hot, hot summer, and I only have certain days free, so I find myself, in early January 2018, in the workshop on a 47-Celcius (117 Fahrenheit) day. K brings me a cold, delicious bottle of apple juice and stops to chat about the trip and how the van held up. He is so impressed with all I've done with it, he says. Then B walks past and I overhear him telling a customer, "Yeah, she built it all herself," and I feel so proud and so capable. I dismantle the side-facing kitchen and build a new, slender version with new worktop, sink, and stove. This is expensive and annoying, but it doesn't fit otherwise and so I grit my teeth and re-do the plumbing and the hole-sawing and all the fixing. I'm good at this now, I realise, but the thrill is gone. All I feel now is annoyance at my own silliness in not checking the regulations properly. Maybe this, too, is part of the learning, I reluctantly admit, as I finish the new fit out in a few weeks and get back out into the campgrounds that are the reason I'm doing all of this.

Figure 13. The new kitchen, with holes cut for plumbing and water tank access. This is after I'd ripped out version one because of legislation I didn't know about.

Figure 14. Rebuilding the kitchen in the workshop on a 47-degree (117F) day.

Figure 15. If forests are good, deserts are better! This was a winter trip in July 2018 (in Mutawintji National Park).

Figure 16. My campervan is built for one, so I carry a tent and an air mattress for when friends join me. The hammocks are a touch of luxury. By the time of this trip —November 2018— everything is in its place and the whole setup runs so smoothly (Cattai National Park).

Figure 17. The finished campervan, interior: bed, fridge, and storage.

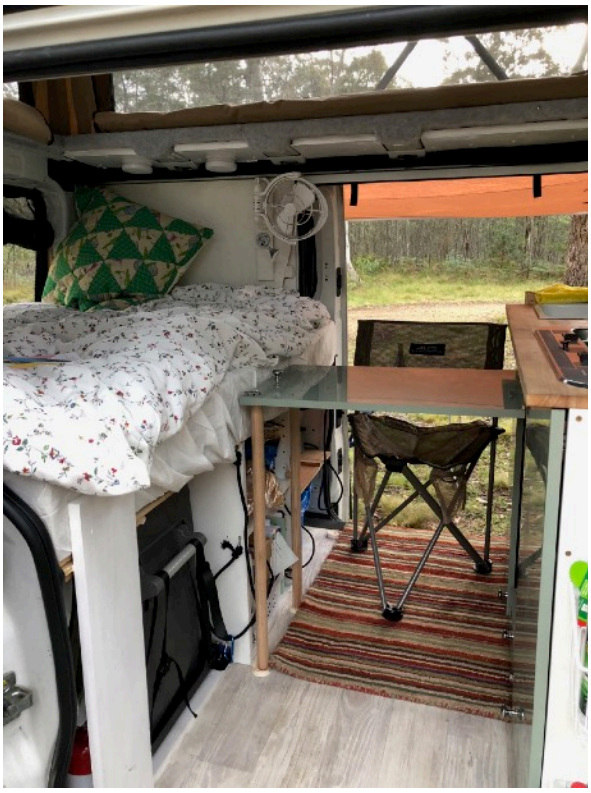

Figure 18. The finished campervan: table and chair.

Figure 19. The finished campervan, interior. It has running water, solar-power, and a spirit stove.

Figure 20. The finished campervan, awning (in Barrington Tops National Park).

Coda: Scenes from a Diesel Mechanic's Barbeque, March 2018

B's wife, G, messages me and invites me to a barbeque. Since I moved the van out of the workshop, I've missed the banter and the nonsense, laughing and joking with B and D in particular, and the mechanics in general. I've missed the feeling of gradually building new skills, and combining new and old skills in creative ways to fix problems. I've missed the endless coffee and the funny stories. My nails have grown long again and are finally clean. I have not missed scrubbing diesel oil off my knees. I don't miss the rats.

I arrive at B and G's apartment and I know a few people: D is there, and B of course. There's T, a German mechanic that works for B sometimes, and there is W, on the balcony. G hands me a beer and tells everyone that I'm "very clever" because I just built a campervan all by myself. There are a few "ooohs" and I downplay it: "Well, everyone needs out of the city now and then. Now I can go camping and still have a cold beer." A few people laugh.

But a man I haven't met before wants to know the details: what kind of battery system did I choose, why that type of solar regulator, and why had I decided to run a 12-volt system rather than an inverter? His tone starts out factual, unsmiling, and perhaps critical of my presumption to doing this kind of thing. And yet, confidently, with this stranger, I talk automotive electrics. I talk rationale for the layout. I describe my plumbing system and my insulation choices. Noticing all of this, B catches my eye and winks over the crowded room. And in the wink is everything I've learned and everything I've done. B's wink contains every funny moment and every difficult moment: the spilt coffee, the tears, the doubting comments, the road train, the white-vehicles-are-safer conversation, my dad's surprised admiration, and the gut-loosening feeling of discovering my expensive mistake with the design. The wink also says I did it, I bloody did it, and now, here I am, hanging out with a bunch of diesel mechanics who have accepted me as a legitimate part of their crowd. They admire the craft project I've completed, and, talking about it to this stranger at a barbeque, I realise I sound like I know what I'm doing and that I have a *right* to know what I'm doing. Because, by now, I actually *do* know what I'm doing.

Conclusion

This paper has explored one embodied experience of a craft project, focusing on the process of hands-on adult learning and the negotiation of gendered and putative expert identities. Throughout the campervan project, I felt variously empowered and disempowered as a woman, as a non-expert, and as an already fairly competent crafter

in other media. These feelings, of course, affected affect: my subjective wellbeing and how I felt about the process but also about *myself* as a competent, confident crafter.

Gender stands out as particularly salient as a line of inquiry here. I theorize that the diesel mechanics, whose masculinity might be seen as contextually "hegemonic" (Connell, 2005), felt little need to perform a defensive, exaggerated "expert" persona as they had nothing to prove in an environment in which they were accorded high, expert status. In contrast, the bystanders and commentators were perhaps less secure in the type of masculinity constructed by their roles in the setting. For this reason, they performed an exaggerated "expert" identity, particularly against the foil of a seemingly inexpert middle-aged woman, who, apparently, was doing just fine converting a campervan all by herself. This, perhaps, challenged their expectations and caused some of their doubting and disparaging comments.

As for a postscript: my campervan is now finished. I call her VANessa. She gets me out into the forest, which was, or so I thought at first, the whole point of the exercise. Certainly, I get out into nature often in my campervan, and even though my heels are now healing, this still makes me very happy.

If I was doing the whole project over again, there are decisions I'd make differently and processes that would be easier the second time around. But as a process and as a product, my van is a success. Converting a campervan is a thousand small tasks, each dependent on the one before it and all of them are things that can be learned. But the biggest learning outcome wasn't any of that. I learned that even though I'm really happy in a forest, I am also really happy hanging out with a bunch of tradies in a diesel mechanic's workshop. And there isn't a *YouTube* video in the world that can teach you that.

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