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## BECOMING BACKPACK: TOWARDS A COUNTER- INSCRIPTION OF YOUNG ADULT COLLEGIAN IDENTITY WORK

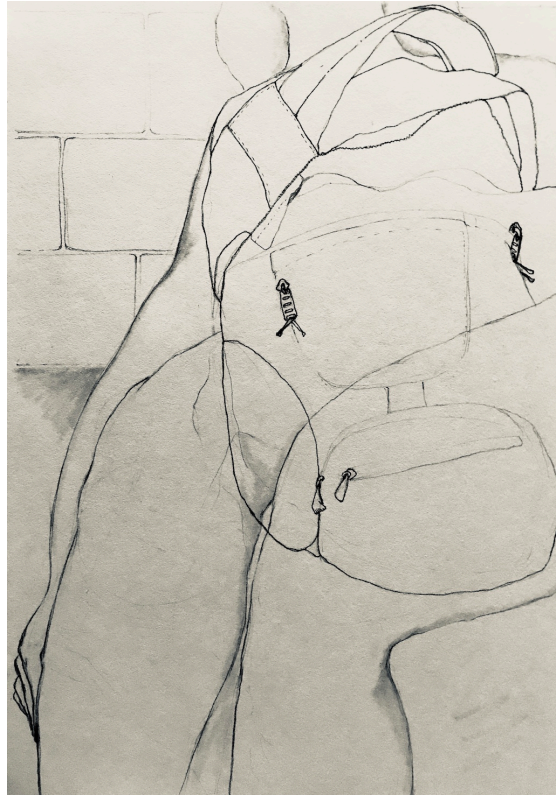
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**Abstract:** This article invites readers to encounter the author's early attempts at engaging creatively with data produced during a research project called *Life Lines: The Art of Being Alive to Young Adulthood*. Launched in January 2019, the *Life Lines* project was conceived as a critical participatory arts-engaged research endeavor aimed at opening up conventional theoretical wisdom about the nature of young adult college student identity formation. In addition to providing details of the inquiry project's design and aims, a series of visual and poetic prose narratives open and become threaded throughout the article. These multimodal expressive forms function as a type of creative counter-inscription device, working both to complicate identity development models that limit subjectivity to human consciousness and agency, and to illustrate a more expansive, somatically attuned, and materially-entangled set of practices and productions of young adult identity work's *work* and its study.

**Key Words:** arts-engaged research; counter-inscription; new materialist subjectivity; young adult college student identity work



*Figure 1. Becoming Backpack, Drawing. 9.5"x11" pencil on paper, by Clark/Keefe*

## Prologue

The quaint leather attaché that was gifted to me so many moons ago as a prideful signifier of my having successfully gained entry into the academy now rests under a thick layer of dust at the bottom of my closet. Tossed-off as impractical and decidedly too predictable, its sleek, sophisticated statement has long-since been traded in for my current companion that declares “sensibility.” This backpack, with its sturdy and generously padded shoulder straps, confidently withstands the ritual sling of twenty-plus pounds of technology and other teacherly peripherals, hoisted from floor, to shoulder, to car seat again and again. Upon automobile ignition, buttonless Bluetooth tunes beam from its outermost zippered compartment and I am oddly reassured by my pack’s capacity for holding captive all the powerful devices that get suspiciously smarter as I sleep. Parked, packed-up and now on my back, I am confident my backpack and I will hold well enough together all that is needed to move through another day in the life of performing professorhood. Both of us versions of mutable mobiles, we are constantly taking-up and transmitting so many material and social relocations of different yet interrelated burdens, privileges and belongings along the way. As my pack and I move steadfast among the sea of so many other wearers in this collegiate

context, I wonder with a little worry as I watch the younger backs tilt like heavily laden tortoises anxious for the water's edge. Why do they move their loads far faster than it seems like they can, toward whatever they are compelled toward or that the tide has told them that they should? Registering the need to rest under the weighty shell of really wanting to keep up, my pack and I decelerate, wading in a tide of rippling curiosities about how is it to become the young adult carrier of so many contemporary commitments and conundrums. What type of back and pack must it take to withstand the tilting towards trending book titles that explain undergraduate students' experiences as *The Stressed Years of Their Lives* (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019) and *Indebted: How Families Make College Work at Any Cost* (Zaloom, 2019)? How is it to be becoming-university student amidst the simultaneous ramping up and rotting away of the industrial-strength stitching devices that suture together glistening promises of a neo-liberal higher education with a concomitant myth of meritocracy? And where, in the seams between all these weighted backs and their packmates might there be space, time and trust enough to maneuver and make mobile the material and nonmaterial possibilities of an arts-engaged relational inquiry? The main compartment of my pack yields a sketchbook, pencil and a yearning to travel a spell with these agile carriers, carving out together an experimental methodological and theoretical path through the thicket of traditional developmental discourses that alone, do not seem adequate enough to sustain all that young adult backs and their companion packs are currently expected to hold.

## Introduction

Launched in January 2019, a project called *Life Lines: The Art of Being Alive to Young Adulthood* was conceived as a critical participatory arts-engaged research endeavor aimed at opening up conventional theoretical wisdom about young adult college student identity formation. The above image, *Becoming Backpack*, and accompanying Prologue, work to situate the *Life Lines* project among broad concerns of the shifting economic, political, and environmental contexts of social and educational life generally, and young adult collegiate subjectivity in the United States specifically. There is ample evidence that traditionally-aged undergraduates (ages 18-21) in the U.S. and elsewhere today, who are on the cusp of maturing into young adults, are doing so during complicated times, with their passage from teenhood to young adulthood being situated in a historical moment heavily marked by foreboding discourses. Communication channels are filled with news of environmental degradation, ideological polarization, high incidences of national and international violence and human suffering, increased global competition for progressively specialized workplace demands, precarious financial markets, deepening economic disparity, eroding public trust in political systems, polarizing governmental leadership, and more. Parallel with these discourses of our rapidly changing and uncertain social and environmental surroundings, young adults are navigating multifaceted internal narratives and emotions related to their sense of identity, belonging, safety, and purpose. Adding to the contemporary collegians' complex subjective meaning-making tasks is the proliferation of technologically mediated

modes by which social and personal narratives get produced and unfold. Social networking and live streaming, for example, have “flattened” campus communities, indeed the globe, throwing open previously more private and controlled channels of communication. Hyper-connectivity and increasingly sophisticated digital applications are now a ubiquitous part of most young adults’ experiences, accelerating access to information about everything from their heartrate on a Fitbit to real-time footage of the latest school shooting. Threaded through this backdrop is a statistical picture in the U.S. related to young adult mental health that is as clear as it is alarming. The National Institute of Health, for example, reported that in 2017 young adults in the U.S. aged 18-25 years had the highest prevalence of mental illness (25.8%) compared to all other age groups (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Specific to university contexts, in 2018, the American Psychological Association reported that one in three college freshmen worldwide reports a mental health disorder (Auerbach, 2018). In this time of unprecedented acceleration and saturation of weighty and fractious personal, social and environmental information, along with its very real physical and psychological effects, researchers invested in exploring subjectivity need human development models adequate to the task of illustrating the complex processes by which social and material worlds—including human and nonhuman earthly bodies, animate and inanimate objects, spaces, energies and technologies of all kinds—come together to *co-produce* young adults’ practices and productions of identity work.

As an educational researcher, much of my work has taken a critical cultural and creative approach to better understanding identity work at the interstices of the broad social, political, economic and ecological concerns noted above. My particular interests have centered around the entanglements between these social and material elements and the specific subjective travels and troubles that schooling and collegiate life present and produce (Clark/Keefe, 2014a; Clark/Keefe, 2014b; Clark/Keefe, 2014c, Clark/Keefe & Haines, 2018). Building on these interests, the *Life Lines* project was conceived as an opportunity to engage a small group of young adult collegians and three faculty researchers over an extended period of five months in a series of visual journaling and creative movement activities aimed at exploring the complex sociomaterial practices and productions (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuck, 2011) of young adult identity work. There were two primary purposes for conducting the *Life Lines* inquiry project. The first, alluded to above, was to problematize traditional conceptualizations of identity and its formation as a human-enclosed, cognition and language-driven system of personal actualization, whereby individuals mentally manage a plethora of external stimuli, constructing an internally coherent and core sense of “self” over time. By contrast, and under the general theoretical banner of new materialism, the *Life Lines* project sought to add to the growing number of studies foregrounding alternative models for describing and further examining young adult subjectivity in educational contexts from a more posthumanist perspective, one that takes subjectivity as a highly affective and radically relational set of practices and processes that get *co-produced* (and are involved in co-producing) vis-à-vis entanglements between bodies, spaces, discourses, material and non-material energies, power relations, and objects of all kinds (de Freitas & Curinga, 2015;

Smithers & Eaton, 2017; Snaza, et al., 2014). Identity in this new materialist view is less something we *have*, and more a series of *some things* (actions, intra-actions, affective arrangements and rearrangements) that are *getting done* among and through us and the environs that we inhabit (and that inhabit us). Creating the experimental conditions for invoking and tracing this first purpose, a second goal of the *Life Lines* project was to cultivate and further theorize a highly participatory, body and space-centered, as well as non-judgmental set of arts-engaged inquiry circumstances through which we could collaboratively explore emergent questions of identity work's *workings* and its study.

In the section that follows, some of the specifics of the *Life Lines* project design are shared as brief context for then turning to the heart of this article's invitation: that is, to witness the ways in which sources of what I am calling "creative inspiration data" gave rise to a set of visual and poetic prose narratives, including the *Becoming Backpack* drawing and the Prologue that open this work as well as subsequent expressions threaded throughout. Started as my routinely creative way to transition from fieldwork to analysis (Clark/Keefe, 2009; Clark/Keefe, 2010; Clark/Keefe, 2014c), these research creations increasingly began functioning as a type of methodological and theoretical counter-inscription device. Law (2004) describes inscription devices in the context of research practices as "systems" for producing "traces," including for example, figures, diagrams, models or other types of visual and narrative depictions that function to stand-in as a form or phenomena (such as identity). In the constitution of these final "traces" or models, Law explains, "*the process of producing the traces melts into the background,*" and more specifically, "*the materiality of the process gets deleted*" (p. 20, emphasis in the original). With Law, and reflecting on what happened methodologically during and post-fieldwork in the *Life Lines* project, drawing and creative writing became a sensorial path for moving to the fore, and working from, that which is so often erased or "deleted" in explanations (and consequently practices) of analysis. Specifically, in a counter-descriptive mode, I took up fragments of dream and emotional data (what, in 1997, St. Pierre referred to as out-of-category transgressive data) that flooded my body-mind just as I and others were bringing closure to the fieldwork portion of the *Life Lines* inquiry. In the face of going it more alone during analysis than seemed appropriate or even possible, I immediately gravitated towards the visual narrative and movement rituals—*the materiality of the data production process*—utilized during fieldwork. Creative engagement in the resonant company of bodily and affective habits gained unexpected momentum and pull, producing an active path for visually, poetically, and relationally resisting conventional expectations that I, the lone researcher, gain distance from the emotional and other energetic invocations of the fieldwork in order to properly analyze data conceived as springing from something "out there." Further engagements with the creative expressive forms shared in this article set in motion an additional layer of methodological counter-inscription. This time the inscription was aimed at disrupting dominant assumptions about analysis practices in qualitative inquiry more generally; practices that prescribe stepwise paths to arrival and closure. Troubling traditional analysis practice's allegiances to coherence, I permitted uncertainty and followed creative's murky engagements. This

activated a capacity for invoking and further cultivating images, sensations, and objects that themselves became involved in intervening, opening and creating still further and differently, data's forces and forms—including its ambiguities, mysterious alchemies, and questions. As I worked with and through drawn imagery and its accompanying creative prose (and these forms worked with and through me), I could sense and visualize the powerful ways in which their *making* was enacting another form of counter-inscription, this time taking the form and force of *conceptual* ruining. Drawing *Becoming Backpack*, curating phrases to story aspects of the somatically-sensitive assemblage that yielded only reluctantly to words, I could feel a slow and subtle deterioration of the durable discursive apparatus of traditional Western psychosocial theories and models of young adult identity and its formation. Keen to attune to the sensorial registers of the discursive logic's press and retreat, I attended creatively to the stirrings via a type of interactive and reciprocal movement-art material-making practice inspired by work in the professional field of expressive arts (Atkins & Snyder, 2018) and which I elaborate elsewhere as *somatography* (Clark/Keefe, 2010; Clark/Keefe, 2014c). Participants' journalings—their heterogeneous lines, shapes, shades and forms—also materialized and moved in ways that both described and defied linear readings, resisted simple capture, and sung, outside of codes and patterns, in a rhythm that *meant* very little, yet moved so much. Overall, in this participant-object-space-time-relation mediated movement and its compelling of my making, I imagined a co-assemblage of counter-narratives that began to call in and call out in their own ways for a re-examination of claims about the primacy of theories that uphold a unitary and bounded depiction of the subject, including the researcher, and their discursive-only construction of identity and its formation. As de Freitas and Curinga (2015) help us understand, conventional constructivist conceptualizations of subjectivity “treat the body and the material world as inert, passive and entirely contained by a catch-all image of discourse” (p. 249). *Life Lines* and the creative inspiration data that participated in producing the early research creations featured in this article seemed to hold differently-analytic space, where the as yet unknown and unnamable passages of *some things* were inter and intra-acting, luring into relation some wilder, less extractable, heterogeneous versions and excursions of what de Freitas and Curinga (2015) describe as, “posthuman identity,” which, “in its multiplicity and virtuality—has become an assemblage or *agencement* of entangled materialities, each with their own speeds of becoming” (p. 263).

## **Becoming Critical Participatory Arts-Engaged Research**

### **Enacting Law's Mess in Social Research and Falling into the Hinterlands**

There is a need for tools that allow us to enact and depict the shape shifting implied in the interactions and interferences between different realities. There is need for assemblages that mediate and produce entities that cannot be refracted into words. (Law, 2004, p. 124)



Figure 2. Passages Tryptic, Panel 1. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, used with permission by anonymous participant

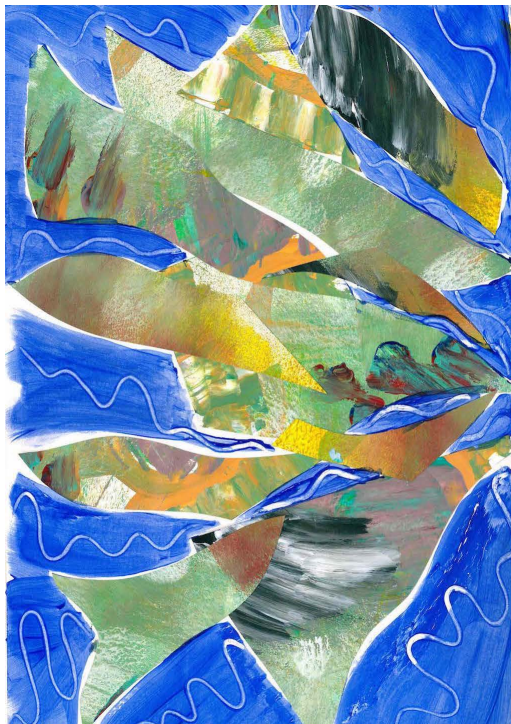


Figure 3. Passages Tryptic, Panel 2. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, used with permission by anonymous participant



Figure 4. Passages Tryptic, Panel 3. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, used with permission by anonymous participant

**In the field/studio methods, media and movements.** A prompt gets dropped into one of the *Life Lines* Maker Sessions by the lead researcher/participant; “*I wonder if we might continue engaging materials as a way to explore how it is when identity work is underway, while it is taking shape, or shifting, or is otherwise on the move. What do its passages do to the thinking, moving, feeling body?*” Participants choose a tune, move about the space, snack, talk, draw in their journals and grow steadily more silent, sinking into the circle’s affective, material, and temporal intra-actions and its productions.

As Law (2004) forewarns, methods in social science “barely catch their own performativity and tend to *disentangle* in theory if not in practice from multiplicity, shape shifting and the indefinite” (p. 122, emphasis added). Designed to work *with* and make *from* the socio-material entanglements believed to always already be at work in and around the researchers’ own and our eight young adult participants’ lives, *Life Lines* was designed to lean into the “shape shifting and the indefinite” of both identity work’s work and of our inquiry practice’s enactments. Building on the methodological and theoretical framing of the inquiry project as noted in the Introduction, what follows are some of the specifics of the fieldwork methods employed.



Informed and inspired by social science studies and material feminist researchers keen to “‘make matter matter’ and in more significant ways” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 5), methods in *Life Lines* placed emphasis on data inclusive of the bodily and other material dimensions of identity work as it showed up, receded, got practiced, pronounced, substituted, questioned, assembled, reassembled, and so on, during fieldwork. Referred to as somatographic method (Clark/Keefe, 2010; Clark/Keefe, 2014c), movement and artistically-engaged making practices were the primary mode by which all participants, including the researchers, attuned to the sensory register of inquiry prompts and its data invocations as they were being encountered and co-encountered in the moment of fieldwork and post, as part of the analysis process. In this way, participants attended creatively to the thought-topic of inquiry *from* the body, while also attending to the embodied qualities of these material-discursive types or modes of exploration—making methods and their discourse-influenced and assembled enactments, data sources in themselves. Meeting weekly from January 2019 through May 2019, our 90+minute “Maker Sessions” took place in a studio space on the campus of a public university in northeastern United States. Working together week-after-week, certain rituals formed supporting our multimodal exploration of identity work’s workings. As these sessions unfolded, there became a strong unspoken emergence of routines around preparations of the studio space for the group’s visual journaling practice as well as expectations of our sessions’ processes. Preparations and expectations included, for example, practices of facilitated movement to music for opening each session and communal snacking and chatting as part of setting the stage before moving to sustained periods of quieter, though not private, visual journaling. In the deep resonances of what became a radically relational space and time, we *did* anticipate, in fact worked hard at cultivating, what we hoped would become the affective and practical conditions for maintaining a rich expressive arts practice (see Atkins & Snyder, 2018; Knill, Levine & Levine, 2005; McNiff, 1998) conducive to creative co-critique of identity work’s workings. What was less expected however, was the extent to which our routinized time at the end of every week became coveted—with students arriving earlier and earlier and lingering longer as we gestured to end. We did not foresee how all of us would end up developing what someone called a “crush” on the relaxed, gritty qualities of our physical studio meeting space. We also could not have predicted the magnitude of openness to experimenting with what one participant called the “edge effects” of what was being explored verbally, visually, materially, and through movement—how identity work was working through, and among us, to creatively compel individual and collective expressions. More than the individual activities or the specific people who consistently showed up to a given role, session after session, routines and rituals created a dynamic container within which relationships among student participants and between students and faculty researchers flourished. Spatiotemporal habits formed and re-formed in a spiritual-like fashion, where and when every Friday afternoon, within a particular space of making, practices and productions of *belonging became method*, and reciprocally, method cultivated theoretical insight (Turner, 2018).

**At the desk/easel/with/in/without: Leaning into the hinterlands.** As with any fieldwork-based research endeavor, closure to the *Life Lines* project was imminent. Yet, come May, when the *affect* of anticipation that each week's end offered up no longer had a plausible place to land, and the grit of the studio suddenly struck me as so sensorially solo and lackluster in its ability to signal belonging, I found myself falling headlong into Law's (2004) *hinterland*. Here, I met a new edge effect; *absence in abundance*. One of many metaphors employed by Law for talking about his version of "out-thereness," the *hinterland* signals a version of reality that is characterized by a "general flux of out-thereness and nothing more" (p. 140). Faced with the manifest absence of data *in-relation* "and nothing more" (p. 140), I felt the omnipresent press to surface some "thing" of an out-there that simply did not exist—or did not exist simply. Lingered in the edge effects of *Life Lines*'s generous porosity to certitude, its fecund ways of working with rich reservoirs of speechlessness and more, I longed to practice analysis "as relations, and resonances" (Law, 2004, p. 140), as messy social science outside of structure. I turned to these resonances, adding to the creative inspiration data, to the transgressive dream and emotion data, and began making from the words and creative ways of participants' engagements with and curiosities about each other's identity work's workings. Images of participants' backpacks lurched to the forefront as I reviewed video data of the studio maker sessions. Still shots of participants' visual narrative journal pages taking shape and being shaped by the studio space littered my sleep. In this hinterland, I was free to imagine even the grittiness of the studio's floor and tables seeking a way to hitch a ride with its fan club, becoming mobile and mutable, by backpacks, to the time and space outside of its architectural moorings. My own backpack bulged with *Life Lines* leftovers, pulling me in and putting me on notice to attune and attend to its containments and proliferations. Creative inspiration data seemed to leak from every edge of the task at hand, helping me break away from any false sense of boundaries between the "field" and the "desk" during something I could newly call analysis.

In these early analytic conjunctions of an imagined "out-thereness," I sidled close to the resonance of Law's (2004) counsel:

If we feel uncomfortable without clear, definite and singular accounts of clear, definite and singular structures, then that is how it is. However, if we are able and willing to tolerate the uncertainties and the specificities of enactment, flux and resonances, then we find that we are confronted with a quite different set of important puzzles about the nature of the real and how to intervene in it. (p. 141)

Working through *Becoming Backpack* now *Becoming Analysis* as an enactment to keep open rather than foreclosing the abundance of absence, the "important puzzle" of traditional explanations of young adult identity work was drawing in and drawing out the anticipations of relations intra-acting with the studio's gritty texture, and, and, and... all becoming habitually creative force and figurations anew.

## Becoming Backpack, Becoming Analysis: Towards Counter-Inscribing How It Is to Be in the Process of Becoming Young Adult Identity Work and Its Study

Backpacks, weighing almost as much their human transport, find refuge, slung onto the gritty floor of the university studio space. All along the cinderblock wall, bodies and (be)longings rest, less straightened by conventional academic expectations about how to be a “proper” young adult within a neoliberal collegiate setting.

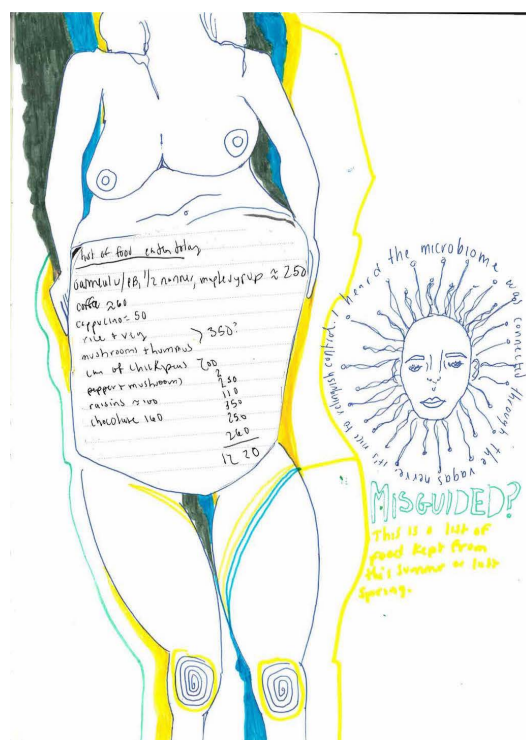


Figure 5. Untitled. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, used with permission by anonymous participant

In this arts-engaged research space, week after week, social mechanisms governing and governed by the commodification of contemporary higher education subjects, get productively disrupted owing, in significant part, to collaborative multimodal creative making practices. Smelling acrylic paint, gluing pieces of memories torn from found fodder, mixing up music with the silences and sounds of studio life ricocheting from what we are all saying are now stressed-less bodies, the energies, moods and movement can pay different attention to the older exposed pipes of the academy’s infrastructure, which have begun taking leave of their democratic senses. Steel girders meet hand-and-ink, re-forming more as embodied affective aesthetics in cahoots with the loyal lines of striation guarding institutional foundations. Here too, previously conceived forms of relational goods and

services that faculty are increasingly incentivized to invent for a marketable (and more measurable) type of college student engagement (Zepke, 2018), get messed up, tossed about, and trans-positioned in the collective and tender moment of noticing graphic elaboration of letters starting to spell and spill out “vulnerability” in the journal of the so-called Primary Investigator.

Pens, markers, pencils and pastels echolocate lines on paper—each dash, dot and slash holding a type of capacity and compassion to listen differently to the omnipresent clocks that tick-tock-tick-talk with/in the main cavities of the bulging backpacks, where precariously subtle timebombs lay in wait. It goes without saying, at least in discursive-only terms, that these sacks are susceptible to feeling the need to pack it all in, successfully, or else (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019). Life lines keep assembling how it is to be becoming through questions about edge effects of identity work, working the ruins of over-essentialist and essentializing models of young/adulthood theory-as-usual. For more than three decades, critical cultural theorists have deconstructed traditional conceptualizations of identity; conceptions that define an autonomous, linearly progressing human being, whose selfhood is fixed within an impermeable, singular bodily boundary. Even with the more multiple, provisional, conflicted and intersectional identity papers, Braidotti’s (2011a; 2011b) and Braidotti and Bignall’s (2019) nomadic subjectivity insists on shifting the scene further, helping tilt our habits of thought for new angles of light and unexpected forms that somehow seem more adequately attached to the textures and tacit qualities of social life becoming with other living forms.



Figure 6. Vulnerable Detail. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, by Clark/Keefe

After Butler (2004), how can identity be anything but performative? And yet, in the dark recesses of each zippered compartment, where the trash of tampon wrappers meet half eaten granola bars and mangled earbuds, a quiet comingling of cramps and calories get counted, sending signals back to the pack; identity has a body that thinks with more-than-human things. Why does everything “identity” get constructed as some “thing” she is supposed to have the agency and will to nurture? And for whom among us is that most seamless, most true, compared to others for whom that strikes as fake news? Naturally, this question keeps manifesting as something so habitually “me,” so serially sensorial. So strong

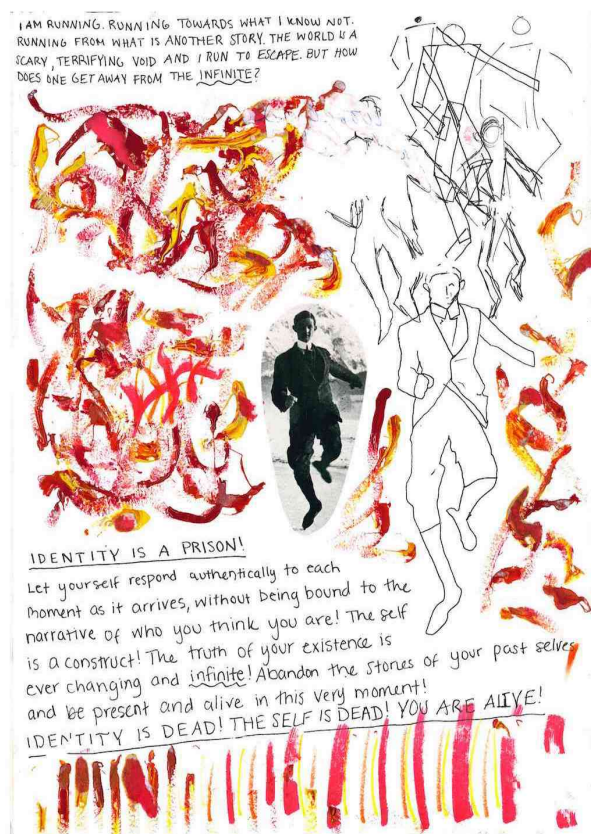


Figure 7. Untitled. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, used with permission by anonymous participant

are the stories of what you are and who I am not, that we all begin to wonder and wander with lines that raise questions about how any of us can be anything but an accident of birth, marked as such-and-such from the get go. But here again, what to do with the fecund excesses of ambiguity and the assemblages that build and build toward performing non-conformativity (Clark/Keefe, 2014b)? This inquiry event keeps searching the edge effects of binary thinking with theory that will not let go of either nature or nurture. In this empirical experiment, Law’s (2004) “slow method,” “uncertain method” (p. 11) is becoming manifest as

the undetermined *thing* of inquiry itself; invitations not obligations to search how it is to be doing and studying identity work through intense attunement to the contingent biosocial (Youdell & Lindley, 2019) processes that are, until they are not, young/adult lives in the context of contemporary education. We dwell in the murky middle of it all, believing the maybe millions of invisible developmental psycho-theoretical threads that stitch identity up, over time, suturing the sum of as many causes and effects as it takes to lay claim to something we call “selfhood.” Meanwhile Braidotti (2006) chides that we are not the owner of a life just because it/l inhabit a particular portion of space and time; she believes “[m]y life is only a time-share” (p. 168).

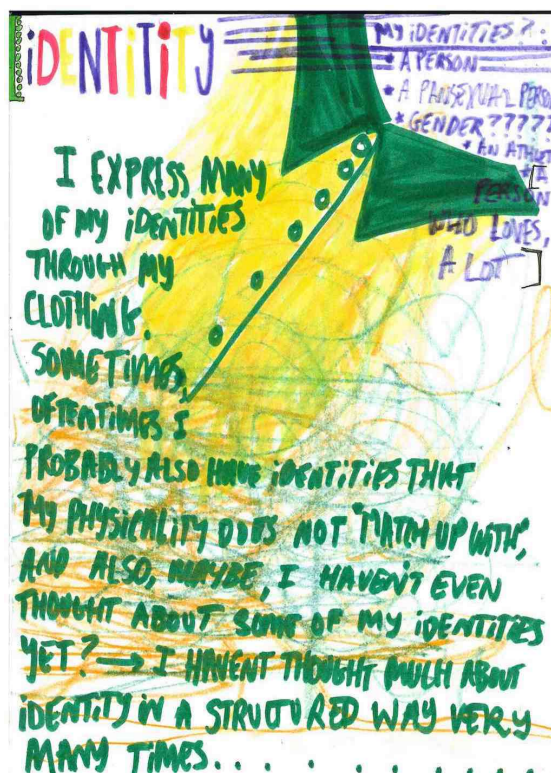


Figure 8. Untitled. Mixed media on paper, 8.5 x 11, used with permission by anonymous participant

In the maker sessions, much of this thinking with theory becomes materially restless. Flatter (not flattened) power relations circulate, working, as Hickey-Moody (2013) would have it, in the aesthetics of affect, where feminist method is an unabashedly political agenda and research has been designed and held in ways that “pay[ ] attention to embodied responses and the ways in which contexts make feelings” (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 94). When life lines draw the studio space with radical relationality and critical artistic practice, media gain an uncanny knack for mediating Law’s (2004) epistemic mess *After Method*. Pigment and water, as much as hormones and helplessness, leak into the conventional knowledge production machine, always already becoming slippery liquid agents greasing the

ways and means by which meanings get making, rather than only ever being able to make “sense,” by splitting it all up and spelling out what it all must mean. Art tools and techniques, like the young/adult bodies with which they intra-act, break from their status as brut mules, blindly serving their less humble master minds; that is, human ideas and their formalization of nonneutral categories within which we are universally expected to labor. In this studio site of inquiry, aesthetic-affective lines of analytic drift are beginning to pile up against the dense theoretical doorways of human identity development and nomadic subjectivity. Our co-activist orientation resists (without insistence) that the notion of identity need not make its path clearer along well-worn lines of Western psychological compliance and easy sociological recognizability. Identity work works *with* the drifts rather than for them, materializing and mattering in previously unimagined artistic, affective and psychic terms. A language-less expressive sense-ability, identity works through becoming backpacks, becoming social potentialities, becoming undone.

### The Ending Unzippered

Walking away from the computer screen that tries to convince me that *Becoming Backpack*, *Becoming Analysis* holds something of the resonances and relations of *Life Lines*, I trip over my backpack, both feet entangled in its sensible straps. Having wandered and wondered with a version of what Law (2004) envisions in his invocation of “methods assemblage,” we both know better than to think that this *Becoming Backpack*, even as a counter-inscription device is anything other than “a continuing process of *crafting and*

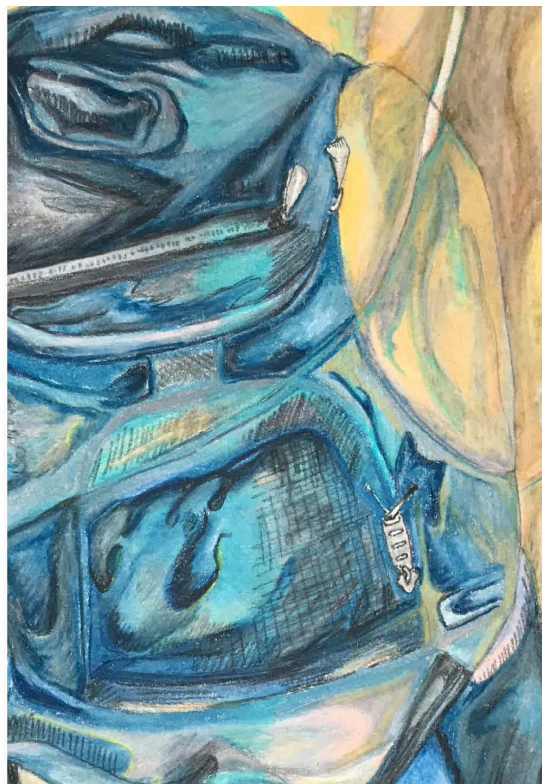


Figure 9. *Becoming Backpack* Drawing Detail I. Pencil on paper, 9.5 x 11, by Clark/Keefe  
*Becoming Backpack*

*enacting necessary boundaries between presence and manifest absence*" (p. 144, emphasis in the original).

Yet in the generative middle, between Law's (2004) call for messy method and well-worn structures of technique that inscribe at the outset foregone realities of young adult identity as constituted by the apparatus of conventional psychological theories of human development, creative counter-inscriptions proved useful. It has been through the enactment of relations and resonances as inspiration data where the edge effects of arts-engaged analysis have been pushing back *and* giving way to a different type of understanding of identity development and its study. Backpacks becoming unzipped at the seams, expose the "system" (Law, 2004, p. 20) of conventionally conceived Western psychological discourse of young adult identity work as itself a still-durable inscription device, where the "materiality of the process is deleted" (Law, p. 20). Becoming with the *Life Lines* pack and its concomitant incitements to co-counter and collaboratively create habits of thinking identity work's workings anew, different filters for further analysis come freshly onto the scene, strongly provoking questions from the manifest absences encountered in the hinterlands:

### **Strong Provocation I**

What social and ethical potentialities are getting re-configured and newly imagined through a model of studying subjectivity production among young adult college students, which uses artistic practices as a process for exploring and producing "material expressions" (de Freitas & Curinga, 2015) rather than relying on language as the primary avenue and indicator of solidifying and, for the sake of research, apprehending identity's meaning?

### **Strong Provocation II**

What is happening to recent medical and mental health crisis models documenting stress, anxiety and depression among young adult collegians (Hibbs & Rostain, 2019) when the study of subjectivity is enacted through material feminist frameworks that promote methods as radical relationality, eschewing the idea (and bodily experience) of the unitary, static, self-bounded subject and its researcher?

### **Strong Provocation III**

What previously unimagined possibilities open up under circumstances of perceiving young adult subjective assemblages less as an arc of the linear, reflexive, and progressing person and more as an aesthetic and compassionately-held set of practices upon which crafting our own, other species' and other earthly elements' survival depends?

## **Epilogue**

Unhinging my feet from the strong shoulder straps, I begin digging through the messy materiality of my backpack. Finding a scrap piece of drawing paper torn loose from the now dog-eared and saturated fieldwork journal, I begin again to sink into the relations and



resonances of *Life Lines* somatographic enactments. Attuning to and attending with my art materials' materialities, I sense the liabilities and assets of my pack's capacities for carrying around my own habitual sense of "selfhood" from place to space, mediating and mixing with the conditions of whatever of "me" is becoming next. I revel quietly in my relationship with this generous fabric vessel, wanting to reciprocate through line and form some of all that it holds and says about the stuff of everyday collegiate life. Through engagement in *Life Lines*, I have witnessed how these humble companions were enlisted by us all to carry and consolidate the material and relational necessities for sustaining its wearers for as many as five or six consecutively-attended university classes a day. I want to know them more. I consider the manifestations of these containers' sustain-abilities, the objects they tend to draw in and hold as mediators for so much: laptops, e-cigarettes, textbooks, breath mints, papers, punch-cards for more coffee, cell phones, debit cards, water bottles, photo identifications, and sometimes, even writing instruments. I feel drawn to take in further the socio-animacy of these nonhuman confidants that are now coming into visual life more abundantly in my sketchbook and on my laptop's screen. I move and make to their accommodating so many young/adult becomings; these backpacks' promises to arrive in an array of sizes, shapes, textures, styles and patterns to suit a wide range of college subjectivities in-the-making, from athletes, to single-parent commuters, to hiking club members, to art majors. Adaptations to these becomings, backpacks also reach across generations, wanting to make more promises. Currently in high-demand in the United



*Figure 10.* Becoming Backpack Drawing Detail II. Pencil on paper, 9.5 x 11, by Clark/Keefe

States, for example, are backpacks constructed of specialized materials rendering them bulletproof (Yaffe-Belany, 2019), transforming their inanimate nature to *some things* that can step in to perform certain affective duties, all seemingly aimed at assuaging concerns about valuable contents and especially their carriers, who may be at risk of damage or destruction. Hardly neutral in their unspoken material pronouncements, backpacks attract attention, conceal, expose, and make mobile their courier's principles as well as politics.

Packed up and on my back, I am newly grateful and confident that my backpack and I will hold and make well enough together what is needed to stay with the resonances, relations, and manifest absences of *Life Lines* enactments, imagining and co-creating together how it is to be becoming young adult identity work's workings as well as its study.

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