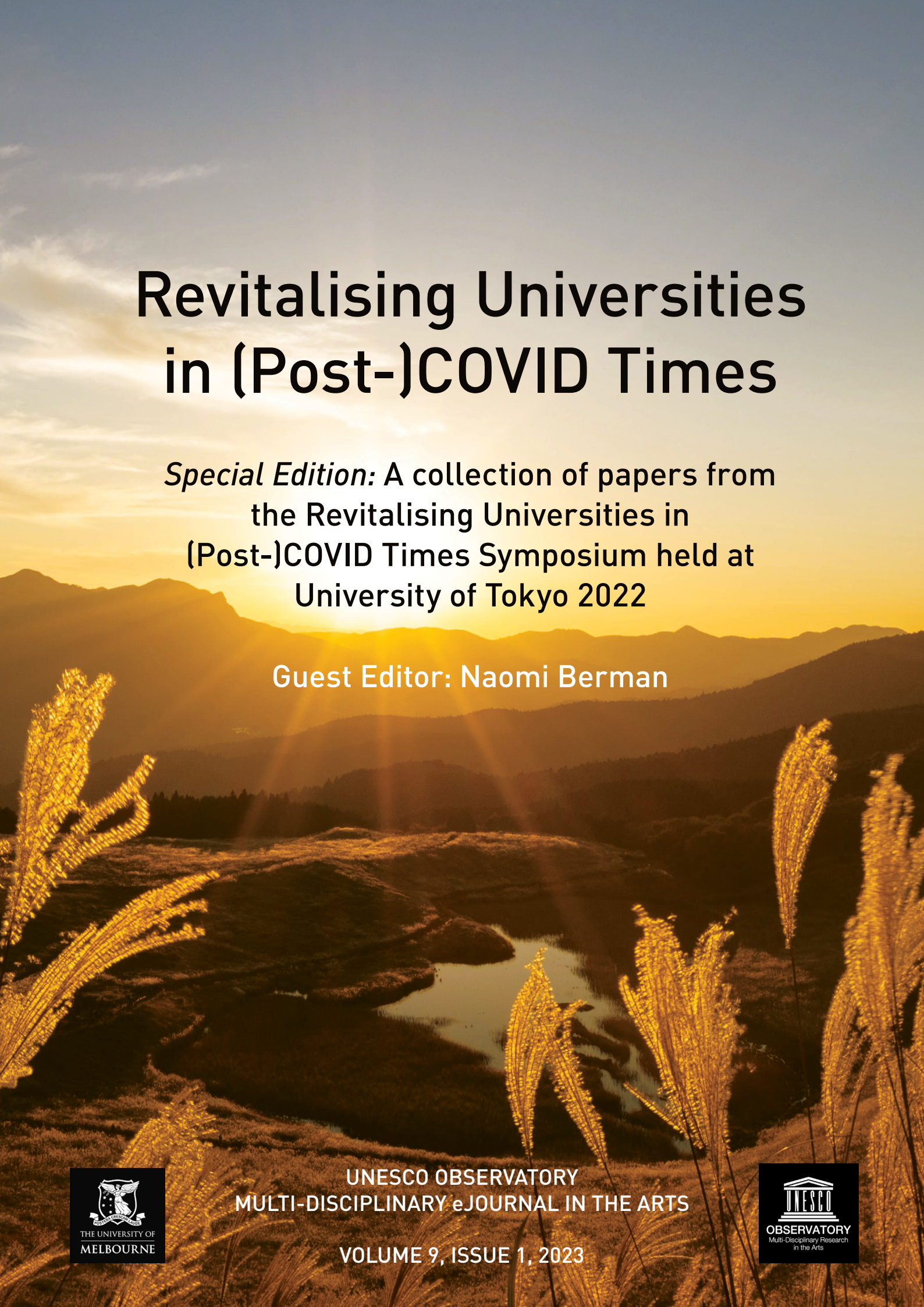

Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times

Special Edition: A collection of papers from the Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times Symposium held at University of Tokyo 2022

Guest Editor: Naomi Berman

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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INTRODUCTION

This special Issue presents a selection of papers presented at the Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times Symposium, held at the University of Tokyo, November 2022. This hybrid event gathered academics, educators, and experts from Australia, Japan and other regions to discuss the future of higher education as universities navigate pathways out of the pandemic. The experience of the pandemic may vary between countries based on cultures, expectations, and social organisation, therefore exploring a diversity of experiences and expectations as universities reopen offers a fruitful point of differentiation and comparison between globally diverse educational spaces.

Echoing Connell's original call to rethink the 'good university', COVID has thrown into question taken-for-granted notions about the position of universities, forcing a reframing of understandings around their social purpose. The pivot to online during the pandemic has highlighted the potential for digital technology to transform the way we teach and learn. Yet it has also become clear that such transformation does not come without its social, economic and wellbeing costs. Indeed, questions around whether the response measures introduced by universities across the globe early in the pandemic are still valid and viable need to be asked, as institutions decide what gets kept, thrown away, amplified, or diminished. The symposium provided a space for reflection on these questions as well as broader philosophical and theoretical deliberations on the 'good university'.

Naomi Berman
Guest Editor

OUTREACH, EDUCATION, AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: SUPPORT FOR GRIEVING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

AUTHOR

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Angela Matthews facilitates support group discussions for children grieving the death of loved ones, and she utilizes autoethnography to examine how personal experiences of grief can contribute to greater public good. Her research explores grief and its connection to college success in addition to utilizing writing as both therapy and method to uncover how we feel about past experiences, process the trauma of those experiences, learn from them, and find ways to move forward. Angela also works as a Course Operations Specialist in the Center for Academic Innovation at the University of Michigan.

ABSTRACT

This article uses autoethnography to share my personal experiences of grieving as a university student, my reflections and realizations derived from analyzing those experiences, and recommendations for universities to support their grieving student populations. This article also promotes the use of autoethnography as a way to facilitate and support the grieving process. Very few people have escaped the COVID pandemic untouched by traumatic loss, so we now have more grieving students than ever before. Universities allowing and even encouraging their students to utilize creative methods, such as autoethnography, could not only help support their grieving students, it could also help retain that population of students.

UNDERGRADUATE DISCONNECT

Not now, please, please not now! People are still filing in but class is about to start, Astronomy 101. Almost 500 other students surround me as the professor walks to the podium and grabs his microphone. *This is not the time to cry!* I scream silently at myself, bite the inside of my cheek as hard as I can, and start writing all the U.S. states and capitals in my notebook. *Augusta, Maine; Montpelier, Vermont; Concord, New Hampshire. Little by little, I stop thinking about my dad. Boston, Massachusetts; Hartford, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island.* The way he looked during those horrible days in the intensive care unit. *Albany, New York; Trenton, New Jersey.* His swollen face. *Dover, Delaware.* The pain behind his eyes. *Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Annapolis; Maryland.* And tried to focus on the lecture.

AVOIDANCE

"We're going across the hall to play Pictionary. You should come with us." Mattie pulls back masses of blond hair in a ponytail, a predictable evening ritual, even after a mere five days of living together.

"I've never played before." The frailty of my excuse disappoints me even as it dribbles out of my mouth. I bite my tongue, disgusted with my lack of imagination.

"Don't worry," Robin assures me as she buttons a black sweater to her chin, "it's easy." Her encouraging smile leaves me conflicted, torn between a desire to hang out with my new roommates and an equally compelling need to hide from everyone.

Panic wins. "Maybe I'll join you after I finish some reading for my literature class tomorrow."

Their sad smiles tell me they don't believe it, but Robin nods her head, going along with my fabrication. "School first, but I hope you can make it."

"You really should get out and meet more people, have more fun," Mattie says firmly, sounding a little like the teacher she would eventually become.

They leave the door open when they go, standard behavior for most of our dorm, everyone leaving their doors open so others could easily pop in and chat. I close it, pick up a book, and slump into a beanbag chair with no intention of leaving it until I crawl into bed.

DOCTORAL SUPPORT

I shut off alerts months ago to more effectively ignore email. From the corner of my eye I see that the message is from Debbie though, my dissertation advisor, so I turn away from the tedium of paper grading and read her message.

Hi, just checking in to see how you're doing. Take all the time you need, but let me know if you feel like talking. If you have the spunk for a visit, I'd love to meet for coffee or lunch. Whenever you're ready. Take care. DC

ONE-WAY CHAT

DC stands up when she sees me walk through the doors. "I'm going to hug you," she warns with both hands held up in front of her. My smile almost turns into a laugh at her gesture then almost into tears during the hug.

We make a couple of cinnamon teas and sit down at a bench overlooking a patch of grass and large fountain. "Do you feel talking about what happened?" At the brief shake of my head, she launches into a tale of a spring break hiking trip. We sip our tea, and I listen more than talk as she chats about students and the tenure process. After half an hour, I thank her for the visit and travel back to the solitude of my home.

REFLECTION

My father died 10 days after a bad car accident and two months before my first year of college. Why I did not take the year off school to grieve, I cannot say except that I had been looking forward to university for years, and it did not occur to me to change plans. That was a mistake. That was the loneliest, most depressing time of my life - up until that time at least. There were days when I missed classes because I could not stop crying and missed assignments because I could not focus. They were also solitary days. My family and close friends lived hours away. Of the new people in my life that surrounded me, none had experienced traumatic loss before then and did not know how to respond. Instead, they felt uncomfortable and at a loss for how to help, even though they clearly wanted to be supportive.

Student services at that university offered me no support or outreach. Though my advisor was aware of my father's death, she did not know how to respond to a grieving person in a helpful way. I did not blame her or the university. At the time, I did not think anything of it. My grief was not their problem. It was mine. Advisors were there to help students with their class schedules and take courses that correctly fulfil requirements for graduation, not guide them through their personal crises.

After that first dreadful semester, I took a break from school. When I resumed my studies, I applied to a different institution. Even though the university I started so soon after my father's death had been my first-choice school and I had been incredibly excited to go, when I felt ready to return after giving myself time to grieve, I did not even consider it. Instead, I started fresh at a new university.

It was not until years later as a doctoral student at a different university that I experienced another traumatic death of a loved one and took a break from dissertation writing. My dissertation advisor had experienced traumatic loss herself, so she was better equipped to offer support. One form of support she offered was outreach, another was simply knowing how to talk and listen to me, and a third was encouraging me to use a creative approach to my dissertation.

With the support of my advisor, I resumed the dissertation, discovered autoethnography as a method, switched to a completely new topic, formed a new and supportive committee, and completed my doctoral work.

Those two experiences were vastly different. Many other variables were involved, but those of outreach, staff who were knowledgeable about grief, and encouragement of creative methods were essential supports in my success as a student. Other grieving students feel similar struggles, and those students would benefit from similar support. We have so many grieving students these days that universities would be remiss if they failed to make a stronger effort to support their grieving population.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Autoethnography is a combination of traditional ethnography and autobiography, and we use it when we want to understand cultural perspectives through personal experiences. Instead of observing others, as in traditional ethnography, autoethnographers observe their own experiences as situated in a specific social context. The researcher doubles as participant, and we learn by examining the intersections of personal experiences and society.

As we approach autoethnography and begin to explore the ways in which our personal experiences connect with the wider world, we use artifacts such as journals, email, photographs, poems, old notebooks - things to help trigger our memories and allow us to recall as many details of pivotal events as possible. Then we construct a narrative around those events, narrative that draws readers into the story and helps them feel what the author felt. The autoethnographic text can be essay-like, poetic, visual, dramatic, performative, a weave of vignettes and reflections, fiction - whatever form allows the authors to immerse themselves in their own experiences and then share those experiences. Autoethnographers then analyze those experiences to learn what they can tell us about the world. In this case, my grief is situated in the cultural context of higher education, first as an entering freshman and then again

years later as a doctoral student. My comparison of those two experiences revealed a notable difference in support offered by the two universities, which influenced my ability to remain in school.

Autoethnography can open up an array of perspectives that demonstrate and uncover insights greatly different from what we learn through more traditional research methods. This method can be particularly useful when studying difficult subject matter, such as grief after the death of a loved one. It is noninvasive. We do not observe or interview others while they are overwrought with grief but look into our own experiences with it, pulling away or stepping back if we need to and then moving into our pain more closely when we feel ready.

I did not recognize the differences in support between the two universities described above until I worked on an autoethnographic article that started with my personal experience. Journal writing followed by rewriting memories in as much detail as possible was very cathartic and helped facilitate the grieving process. Following up with additional reflection, categorizing themes, reading existing research on similar subjects, and making connections between my personal experiences and the wider world of grieving students helped me move through my grief instead of getting stuck in it. Gathering existing research and reading about experiences of other grief-stricken people showed me that I was not the only grieving student feeling isolated and surrounded by those who did not understand grief. The work helped me feel connected to the wider world of the bereaved and believe that if other people could survive the death of loved ones, then maybe I could as well. Reading literature about grief and grieving students and then weaving relevant material within my own writing took critical thinking, an exercise my grief-muddled brain sorely needed. We know that people grieving traumatic loss often have cognitive impairment. It can be difficult to make simple decisions. People are not at their best emotionally or cognitively, so they can have a hard time thinking. Autoethnography offers not only the catharsis of recording painful memories to the safe space of paper; it also offers the additional benefit of assisting with critical thinking and helps the author become productive again.

COVID-related shutdowns, policies, and the increase in online education have hindered the well-being of many and could drive anyone to feel isolated and depressed. Grieving the death of a loved one exacerbates those negative feelings. For university students living apart from family and usual support systems, feelings of poor well-being and isolation can seem overwhelming and potentially lead to complicated grief and attrition. Autoethnography will not be the answer to everyone and everything, but it can be a useful tool to help some of our grieving students. Reliving experiences through autoethnographic writing can give bereaved students a safe space to record and reflect on those experiences, which can offer the benefit of cathartic, healing relief. Researching similar experiences that other students have lived through can help students feel a connection to others even when their closest friends and family are far away. Analyzing their writing and asking themselves what their own personal experiences can tell them about the wider world of trying to be a student while grieving and suffering the effects of COVID can also be a useful cognitive exercise to help grieving students focus on their schoolwork. The overall benefits from utilizing autoethnography while grieving could be a tremendous asset for students. Universities encouraging such creative practices, offering outreach to their grieving students, and teaching both staff and students how to respond helpfully to the bereaved could potentially help many students. How can universities not do more to help their grieving students?