Chapter forty

Researching the Taboo
Reflections on an Ethno-Autography

Fiona Murray

When the shit hits the fan, and critical distance is out of reach, outside of capacity, writing into an autoethnography presupposes a subduing of a twisted tongue around words that either can’t or won’t work to shift the shit-fan assemblage on to a shelf. Instead, the shit-fan is there always present in the writing; no distance, plenty of critical. The shit-fan is here with me now as I simultaneously reconnect with my “exemplar” of an autoethnographic article to write this chapter and make the decision to separate from my partner. Each disparate activity as one. An hour’s writing followed by half an hour on the “Edinburgh Solicitors Property Centre.” Repeat. Editing and deleting confused and chaotic lives and words, arranging where to place them, where to place the words and where to place the kids, in surroundings that they will fit best. In the beginning, I didn’t see the separation coming, although now it is here; I have been hands-tied watching it emerge in its own time. It looked a bit like this:

M A R R I A G E
M I R R I A G E
M I R O I A G E
M I R O I C E E
M I V O I C E E
D I V O I C E D
D I V O R C E D

I am recoupling with my article from here; from this shit-fan-hit, from the place of my one-step-world before a divorce. It is from here that I think about “researching the taboo.” Not that divorce is a taboo. But it is my new place, my now-wording, it is the world first, me next, me-not-the-first-and-won’t-be-the-last, the in-between step from where I poise to think about my ethno-autography of the taboo. The world (ethno), then me (auto), or me from it, it’s me and not my’s it.

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In this chapter, I offer “When Dust Gets in Your Eyes: Researching the Taboo” in its entirety as an example of an autoethnographic article. I have included more personal interludes into the original article as I continue to write into some of the taboos around the breakdown. I have simply sign-posted these as “Interlude.” The manuscript “Dust” loomed out of a black cloud and was presented in its earlier form at the Thirteenth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Urbana-Champaign (Illinois, USA; 2017), where it disseminated epistemic knowledge, dust, and soot. It was then published in Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry. “Dust” is an exploration into the writing of a doctoral thesis on a subject that could potentially be considered taboo. My thesis was about the experience of being the partner of a pornography-and-sex-addict.

“Dust” focuses on the ecological aspects of ourselves and contains a broad argument that all-things-taboo are already immanent to the world. The researcher who is produced by, rather than “chooses,” a particular inquiry, is one who at some point in their lives has been intensely entangled with its distinct rhythm and therefore has necessarily had little (critical) distance. The emergence of a particular inquiry and researcher is about gradual individuation and not about the kind of criticality created by the force of hindsight. As a particular, always temporary, researcher-phenomenon configuration is foregrounded from the world around them, a critical position must also always yield just as it becomes. Therefore, “Dust” makes a call for (autoethnographic) inquiries that also linger in the
space without distance, prior even to knowing what
the inquiry may be about, edging their way towards
language from the affective register, before cogni-
zant reactions, emotions, and responses (Gingrich-
Philbrook, 2015).

Therefore, “Dust” contemplates a focus on those
phantasms to which we are not yet aware of our
proximity. An example of this foggy knowing for
me is when my partner was in active addiction, and
I was consciously unaware. People later asked, “Did
you know before he told you?” And the answer was
both yes and no. I knew something was in operation.
I could sense its fidgety and restless vibrations; founda-
tions felt shaky; fur coats with no knickers. I grappled
around with potential cherries on the tree that
could become the operation’s manifestation, and the
hopeful end of the sense of foreboding, of a threat of
pending destruction and brokenness.

Maybe this prior-to-thought’s-thinking concep-
tion of an inquiry is felt most keenly when you try
to make the first marks on paper. “Dust” calls for a
staying-with, perhaps a poise and a prolonging of the
unknown moments before the first mark. It calls for
an inquiry’s ripening in active-waiting and for the
gradual appearing edges of inquiry and researcher.
This perseverance avoids a sidestepping of a proj-
cet’s potential and most importantly, its particular
politics. The risk is that the emergence of the particu-
lar politics may be found to exist within the taboo. A
researcher has more control over the subject picked
as a washed, ready-to-eat and easy-to-reach cherry
from the project tree. “Dust” therefore necessarily
challenges the auto of autoethnography and instead
sees the I as being the interface with the ecological
aspect of ourselves. It places the “ethno” first. It is
the “ethno” that actively delivers the eventual indi-
viduation of the assembling “auto.”

But should you stay in this space of non-conscious
for long enough and end up entangled with a less than
cherry-red inquiry; should you play for long enough
in this place of indecision and end up writing with the
taboo, “Dust” thinks about where the resistance may be
hiding and speaks to the less than favourable structures
of power and knowledge that “tabooers” can presume.

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When Dust Gets in Your Eyes:
Researching the Taboo

Dear Mark,

Just checking that we are good for June. I’m really
looking forward to coming to visit and to meet
some of the other students and hearing about their
research.

All Best,
Fiona

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Hi Fiona,

Good to hear from you. Yes, looking forward to it.
Will you also talk a little about your research?
Cheers,
Mark

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Hi Mark,

Yes, absolutely. I’d love to. I’ve made a couple of short
films that I could show, some special effects which aim
to convey an autistic perception of the world. I would
love to hear how the films work on others. I haven’t
shown them to anybody yet. But, I guess I should also
say that there are a couple of fleeting but explicit sex
scenes in them, just in the background, in the distance,
not at too close proximity. I’d rather people knew
before they came. I hope that won’t put anyone off . . .

Fiona

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Mark does not respond for a while.

INTERLUDE—NOW

As I reflect on where I am now since writing both my
doctoral project, “The Porn Factory” and my paper,
“Dust,” I realise that I haven’t been able to write myself
out of my embroilments and into an un-taboo terrain,
either in writing or in life. Is there a distinction? I tried.
I wrote into the dark corners, spraying words like dis-
infectant, but haven’t managed to wipe the epistemolo-

gical soot from my eyes. Now, in my one-step-world
before a divorce, I am writing this paragraph, hiding
in a cottage in the countryside, quite literally hiding.
Police spent a Sunday afternoon with us in our family
home and advised me it may be a good idea to head
off that night, for a few days. My ex-partner is facing
extortion; payment wanted to prohibit the exposure of
photographs they have of him taking drugs and having
sex to his business contacts. The photos epitomise the taboo. I tell him to brace himself, to leave them to send the pictures anyway. But the fear of uncrafted and uncontrolled exposure of the taboo is considerable especially when there has been no time to develop critical distance. And that makes the taboo powerful; and apparently expensive. I am one of the blackmailers’ bargaining tools for non-payment should the threat of exposure not be enough. I wonder how much my ex-partner thinks I’m worth. But, despite hiding, I am not afraid. My fear is not my taboo. But I guess sex-addiction isn’t my taboo, either. Now, I am leaving him and leaving it to him. But even then, do I hold on by living, writing (is there a distinction?) in the shadow of his/our recovery? My (ex)partner, like me and like you, is imperfect, fragile, fallible.

I pause.

I hear a critical distance in my words.

I wrote in “Dust” that each position would be temporary. Why am I holding on and not relinquishing, letting go, without yielding back into the dissolve (Alaímo, 2016)? Or another way of putting it is, when will this ever be over?

INTERLUDE—ANOTHER LATER NOW

The Airbnb, my countryside haven, has yellowed anaglypta wallpaper and one of those electric wall-mounted fires with the horizontal wires that turn red when hot with the white grid over the front. I wanted somewhere I could bring my two dogs and despite the therapeutic nature of dogs, Airbnbs that let you bring you them, never seem as “haveny” as those that don’t.

I took them for a walk along the beach, threw sticks into the water and let them swim. The carpets in the Airbnb were built to withstand wet dog. You couldn’t help but feel happy at the beach with swimming dogs. The sea air did us all good. I returned to the Airbnb refreshed and ready to keep writing.

But when we arrived back, sadness bubbled up from a shallow depth and spread across the surface like butter. It was like a child’s sadness, easy come, happy one second and heartbroken the next. The kind of sudden outburst of tears that I remember seeing in my children when they were little. I smiled at the suddenness and asked them what went wrong in a sing-songy tone. I asked them who had been bad to them and told them I’d shoot the boots off the baddy. I curled up on the Airbnb’s salmon-pink chair and leaned against its chest. Without warmth, I melted anyway. I don’t think I have ever fallen or melted since I was that child. The chair was real enough to hold me, but it couldn’t know or witness. I want it to tell me that it knows, so that the first time I melt and give myself away, it won’t be to an old shabby chair that smells of dog and doesn’t know anything. But all the same, I yield. I succumb to the inevitable. My needs, for a moment, are my taboo. My letting-go feels like a losing of strength and of fight. My partner is no longer my partner, he is no longer my taboo or my world, and I’m no longer his me. I yield back into the dissolve, where all that can be felt on the wet patch on the chair is the vibration and beckoning whisper of a future.

Four Years Earlier

Agitation fermented in the university classroom as I was asked to enumerate my initial ideas for a research topic. The root of this fermentation was not an issue of having a lack of ideas because as Elizabeth Grosz (2017) says, “ideas follow one another in rapid succession, largely but not solely dependent on the flow of the perception of objects” (p. 77). Neither was the agitation around not wanting to commit. Far from it. My angst was such that I was more than ready to launch in and claim a mission as my own. My perceived “problem” was that I was still inhabiting the “dissolve” that Stacy Alaímo (2016) explains to be where “fundamental boundaries have begun to become undone, unraveled by unknown futures” (p. 2), or that I was perhaps embracing an autistic perspective. This neurodiverse perspective, when entered into from the side and at the angle of speciation as opposed to pathology, is possible for all (Massumi, 2013). Donna Williams (1998) describes autistic perspective as a feeling which comes from a time before words, before thought, before interpretation, before competition, before reliance on the conscious mind and before identity, in a time where all new experiences are equal in their worth and there is, as yet, no discrimination and no established sense of boundaries or hierarchy.

(p. 12)

The circling agitation in the classroom for me was around notions of external pressures to verbalise my topic which at this point had not yet tuned to language (Manning, 2016). For me to have attempted to shape my project by my own volition, to not wait for incipience to become directionality (Manning, 2016), would have been for me to interrupt process and in doing so, unwittingly side-step the particular politics of my project.

How can I work to conceptualise my research whilst working with new modes of expression that curtail any
Three and a Half Years Ago

I’m asked to bring an “object” with me to a collaborative writing group. I think my way around the house and pick out what stands out to me, anything. I gather everything up, all matters of things, take them out to the garden, and lie them down wherever they want to lie. I don’t know why I do that. Some roll away or leak onto the grass or stab the earth. I lie down with them. Again, I don’t know why. But I stay a while.

I wonder about my ability to carry out a piece of research and to meet expectations: my own mainly. I will myself to be more pragmatic. Massumi (1995) explains:

For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously. One “wills” it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on socio-linguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one’s life-by dint of inhibition.

(p. 91)
through me once again. Its dust folds into the fissures at the back of my trachea. I try to wipe its traces of soot from my eyes. The sun goes behind a cloud and I shiver and try to warm myself as a black cloud leaks into my veins, chills my bloodstream, and then dwells for a while. The intensity is both dynamic and compelling but not pleasurable. I move back indoors with the black cloud settled in my gut. What is this black cloud I wonder, losing sight of pale yellow, and wondering what does it want? As Maggie MacLure (2013) says:

Wonder is not necessarily a safe, comforting, or uncomplicatedly positive affect. It shades into curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity. And the particular hue or tenor that it will assume is never entirely within our control. But the price paid for the ruin caused—to epistemic certainty and the “sedentary” achievement of a well-wrought coding scheme or an “arborescent” analytic framework—is, according to Massumi (2002, p. 19), the privilege of a headache.

(p. 229)

What next? I have begun to pave the way, begun to craft a problem but still my project is, as yet, not ready to tune to language. Would it sound at all legitimate to say that I am researching a fog or black cloud? Or should I just make something up? Pluck something from thin air? It may not have the same rigor, but it would at least save me from the anxiety of not knowing. It is only now with some hindsight that I know that at that point I was still eleven giant steps away from being able to answer questions as to what I was researching. The eleven steps looked something like this:

BLACK CLOUD
PLACK CLOUD
PLANK CLOUD
PLANK RLOUD
PLANKGROLUD
PLANKGROLHHD
POANKGROLHLD
PONAKOANKGROHY
POANKGROAHY
PORNKGROAHY
PORNOGROAHY
PORNOGRAPHY

Black cloud tentatively (and at times aggressively) individuates and emerges as pornography. This process may go some way to illustrate that I did not exactly choose this topic, but I was experimenting with the pornographic milieu long before I knew I was dancing, and at times being run over with and by this phenomenon. If I could have picked my topic, resonated with anything at all, I admit to thinking at times that I would not have picked the pornographic cherry from the tree. Viewing it as all too risky or exposing me as researcher, revealing my proximity, wonder, and interest in this topic and for pulling the unexpectant reader in to being complicit with me. I would have perhaps wondered about how some might view my topic. Susanna Paasonen (2017) says that it is “the critic’s point of view that tends to dominate in porn studies” (p. 3) and explains that this is due to people’s activist and institutional passions surrounding it. I agree with her; although my focus too is on the affective rather than a clear and certain feminist position, the topic, by its very nature, can rub up against others in provocative ways, shooting past them or at times even crashing into them (Seigworth, 2016). I may have gone with the phenomena which was singing a sweeter melody, pale yellow. I’m sure it would have had much potential and complexity of its own.

INTERLUDE: SHAMEFUL TABOO

Usually, at this specific point on a Friday morning I am teasing my children that each of them is a mucky pup and that they will never make it past Mr. Phillips. The headteacher greets every child before putting them through an inspection of smartness. Despite it being good-natured, even the teachers report getting a little nervous walking past him in the morning, and I admit to keeping shoe polish and hair clips in the glove compartment for those days when we are slightly more unravelled.

But this particular morning, I don’t turn around and make jokes. I’m tired. My partner, their Dad, didn’t appear home last night. I wait up for him because I am anxious about what might show up at the door. My memory on this particular morning is foggy, but I imagine Mr. Phillips smiles as usual, with his eyes taking in each of the three children in turn. I remember both my oldest and youngest child make it past him. My middle child tried to walk with them but felt a firm hand on his shoulder. Mr. Phillips asks him, “Brodie, what are you wearing on your feet?” I look down and see a pair of old ripped trainers, bright yellow, dirty, dysfunctional. I look at them in horror. The bright yellow and out-of-place shoes are suggestive of the fact that they are the symptom of a much larger problem. They are a mole, a leak. “Sorry,” replies my son. Mr. Phillips says that he has never seen such an outrageous pair of shoes walk into his school throughout
his entire career. As he says this, one eye looks at me and one eyebrow twitches into a raise. Brodie also looks up at me. Brodie has never been a moment's bother since the day he was born, yet I can feel myself getting irritated. The very first time I don't check on him, and this is what happens. A little case of bright yellow trainers is proof that I cannot afford to drop plates. Team Murray can't afford to expose its internal politics, what goes on behind closed doors, to unravel into the taboo of dysfunction at the school gates and by the foot of Mr. Phillips' well-polished brogues.

On my way back to the car, Mr. Phillips calls me back. I hesitantly turn back around. He asks me if everything is well and I could swear he checks my shoes. I also check to see if they are clean enough or if they are holding the debris of the shame I feel standing in front of him. Do my shoes communicate with him that the kids shrieked at me this morning in the car for missing the turnoff to school? Apparently, we only drive along it, like, every day. And apparently, I’m always in a dream. I laugh at my own silliness. I’m distracted because I’m busy looking at the side of the road to see if their dad is lying somewhere in the gutter. I realise that Mr. Phillips never blinks.

Writing into this perturbing moment, I gather some critical distance but become acutely aware of what it feels like to stand in tension to critical nearness. Can I bear to stand in front of Mr. Phillips? Can the “I” of the autoethnographer take standing against the eye(s) that witness? I stay rooted to the spot, witnessing, holding his in mine, staying in contact. I smile at him and tell him all is fine. After all, it is. I’ve got this. And I did. I had it like you have a heavy plastic bag. It’s uncomfortable to hold, but you know you won’t drop it. The pain will only be felt when you let go, unravel, uncurl your fingers. Although heavy to hold, I don’t need to feel any actual pain as long as my fists remain clenched.

He begins to raise his eyes. I regret wearing my ripped jeans. He can see through the holes. He takes a breath and asks, “and Mr. Murray?” Why did he ask? Has he heard something I haven’t? Has my husband been found? There was often a dramatic event when my partner went out that I would work hard to cover. Like the night, my middle son, the one with the yellow trainers, was born. The doorbell had gone around three-thirty in the morning. I had been half asleep. I assumed it was my partner and so didn’t check to see who the figure was at the door. If I had, I would have noticed that there were two men; my husband and a stranger. The stranger presented me with my husband. He was holding him by the neck, and his face was covered with blood and dirt. The stranger threw him onto the floor and then walked past him and me into our living room. “Can I help you?” I asked. “No, but you can pay me,” he said. He was the taxi driver. I went to my purse in the kitchen but I only had a few coins. I could hear “Mr. Murray” scramble up the stairs. I broke the news to the taxi driver that I didn’t have the money on me, that he knew where we lived, that as he could see by my pregnant body that I wouldn’t be running anywhere fast. He could come back tomorrow. He sat on the couch. “No,” he said before telling me that he wouldn’t leave until he got his money and that I would need to go to a machine. This wasn’t an option. My two-year-old son was upstairs sleeping in his big-boy bed, and I wouldn’t leave him. The taxi driver demanded that I then take my toddler with me. I threatened to call the police if he didn’t go, but he scoffed that the police would be interested to know about a family “like this” and surely if they have taxi drivers sitting in their living room, demanding money and refusing to leave then this was not a safe environment for children. Afraid of any kind of intervention, I went upstairs to get my son. I carry him precariously down the stairs to the sound of my husband’s snores.

Logan, my toddler, looks confused, unsure if he is awake or dreaming, as I strap him into his car seat. I am shushing him, his eyes roll to the back of his head and he is back to sleep. And then something pops and floods. It takes me a moment to figure it is coming from me. My waters have broken. Every muscle in my body tightens, every fibre of my being contracts. I get the hose that is attached to the outdoor tap and hose down the driveway, clearing away the mess. I fold the car rug on the car seat and sit on it and leave my partner and the taxi driver at home and drive to the hospital with my son and give birth to Brodie outrageous-yellow-trainers.

On my way back to the car, Mr. Phillips calls me back. I hesitantly turn back around. He asks me if everything is well and I could swear he checks my shoes. I also check to see if they are clean enough or if they are holding the debris of the shame I feel standing in front of him. Do my shoes communicate with him that the kids shrieked at me this morning in the car for missing the turnoff to school? Apparently, we only drive along it, like, every day. And apparently, I’m always in a dream. I laugh at my own silliness. I’m distracted because I’m busy looking at the side of the road to see if their dad is lying somewhere in the gutter. I realise that Mr. Phillips never blinks.

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how we come to see. My conversation with Mr. Phillips made visible certain events to myself.

This doesn’t make it easier. Writing into shame is restless. Shame crawls and squirms. From the place of discomfort, we have to shift and move. The autoethnographers task is to be in-forming. Ahmed (2014) writes, “The very physicality of shame—how it works on and through bodies—means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies ‘turn away’ from the others who witness the shame” (p. 103). The auto, if written from a place of shame, is always reworlding.

My friend breezes past Mr. Phillips with her bright-eyed and bushy-tailed children. She winks a flicker of solidarity on her way past. Mr. Phillips continues to inquire about my partner’s well-being. “Why do you ask?” I ask him. “Well, there is a very good reason for my asking. He’s not normally ok when England beats Scotland at rugby so brutally. I was rather looking forward to seeing him this morning.” Mr. Phillips laughs. I force a laugh and then turn around and walk slowly and deliberately back to the car.

**Soundbyte**

A: I think you always have to grieve the projects that you don’t write before you settle on what you do write.

B: Why must we grieve the projects we don’t write?

They are alive with potential. It would make much more sense to grieve the projects that we do write.

At this time however, it was pornography that was “fielding” (Manning, 2013, p. 2), and it was what felt most resonant and moved me into action. It would seem that working with affect theory and dancing with its forces, and in turn being produced by it as a researcher, means that the unexpected politics that emerge from inside of the process stun me so as to throw me into a shaky and mobile positioning, an insecure and waver-ontology. I am left to steady myself by holding on to the wobbly table upon which affect has squarely placed politics. Kirby and Wilson (2011) suggest that my political task is to “think the always/already of our entanglements and intra-implications” (p. 228) in a way that I may not have been able to should I have chosen a topic, even a very political topic, seemingly external to this process. And for this reason, I feel a certain sympathy for, and affirm pornography as “my” topic. I am in praise of its insurgent qualities and its ability to remain speculative and forward-thinking. Pornography, as it follows lines of desire, becomes a pioneer of new fields and new imaginings, and I am in praise of its ability to quiver and tremble at the edges of thought. There has been a parallel process for my thesis; in its coming to be, it has gradually taken the form of a pseudo-porn site and will not be submitted in the paper form I had expected it to be. This may be a first in my department and I affirm pornography’s potential to move into new modes of existence and to continuously create new forms and concepts. I take full responsibility for my research project but not for the subject itself. As Deleuze (1983) says, “To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives” (p. 174). That said, I can get in touch with something more stoic in me when I find myself in the company of those who are perhaps not as at ease with my topic as others. As Grosz (2017) explains the stoics never underestimate an individual’s responsibility as “an individual’s actions come from what he or she has ‘in them’ as part of their character, what they cause in themselves” (p. 27). At times, I thoroughly embrace working with a provocative phenomenon, and I do not wish to dampen how exciting this can be, but my ambivalence lies around the potential negative impact on me: for what I am about to find out could be seen as thinking with the taboo.

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Hi Fiona,

Sorry for disappearing on you. I’ve had an idea. How about instead of sharing our projects or watching the films, we put together a little working group. There are some scholars here who are researching some of the more taboo research areas like yours and they will probably have similar issues to you around disseminating knowledge. Maybe we could discuss some of these issues? What do you think?

Mark

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It is true that I thought this working group could potentially be generative and it is helpful to feel the support and solidarity of those facing the same issues but, at the same time, there was a loss for each of us to be the motley crew of dissidents under the umbrella of a supposed taboo. And more than this, I had not previously thought of researching pornography as researching the taboo, especially as there are now peer-reviewed journals that are dedicated to this theme; this email was the first time I had been so conscious of the potential my topic had of being received in this way.
In the word “taboo,” I hear a question around what kinds of bodies, what kinds of knowledge, and what kinds of experience sustain norms that can so often be upheld through questions of quality and rigor (Manning, 2017). And it seems that it is at the specific moment when these knowledges and bodings take on an (un)recognisable form that they can be erased or removed. From my email exchange, I am left with questions around what kind of knowledges can be truly heard, and what bodies may act as the purveyor and guarantor of what counts as experience and knowledge in the academy (Manning, 2017).

If taboo means improper or unacceptable, prohibited, excluded, or forbidden, then this would capture an albeit small part of my experience of studying this phenomenon: after all it had been difficult for me to find those who would help me to build a pseudo-pornography website, or to act in or produce films with me which contained background explicit material from a website. Yet, sometimes being with others who are under the same umbrella, in the way Mark suggested in his email, can be easier.

Nearly a year ago at a conference the chair of my panel introduced me: “And now we welcome Fiona Murray from University of Edinburgh. I’m sure she will be the climax of the panel today as she brings her paper, “Online Gonzo Pornography: Feminist Struggles.”

Laughter.

I walk to the front of the room.

There was no resistance to my topic in the beginning, before the study was named. Now, resistance can be found hidden in the inflection of the introduction at a conference or the force of the joke made to “lighten” the academic atmosphere. This policing can come in the form of sniggers, furtive glances, and on occasion, the odd dismissive sner. It is not that I am against some humour. And I do understand the specific provocations of “my topic.” I want my topic to play and not act in a supercilious manner. Yet at the same time I would also like it to be met seriously and for others to tease out its complexities and make sense of its embedded trajectory (Alaimo, 2016). And most of the time my topic is met with sincere interest. But when I am introduced at the conference as the “climax” of the panel, I go through a kind of subjectivation process (Foucault, 1982) where I am more than the amp, or the conduit, for expression but rather a phenomenological subject whose project is about my direct experience rather than about our entanglements of which we are all a part. And if the climax happens during the second of the six speakers, this makes for a rather long post-coital phenomenological love-in.

At the same time, during this panel, I performed an autoethnographic piece which is no mean feat, and not without its tensions when embraced a new materialist lens, and so in many ways I encouraged ideas of my own solipsism in order to challenge it. In my mind, I referred to this as my ethno-autography where I recognise the entangled nature of my own transcorporeality, whilst putting the ecology and the field of which I am already (t)angled first (Seigworth, 2016). This seemed to pay due respect to the knowledge that “the human has become sedimented in the geology of the planet” (Alaimo, 2016, p. 3), and at the same time recognised my own coming to be as the architect of my research. It felt like an effective practice where experimentation can play in the void, with all its exposures and vulnerabilities and pleasures. The “I” being interface with the ecological aspect of ourselves, a superject (Whitehead, 1927), where experience is not belonging only to the human. My ethno-autography pays minute detail to how an individual comes to stand out as one from a broader field of activity (Massumi, 2013, p. xi). It is not an “I” of a singular, localised subject but a tentative expression towards an “autie-I,” a heterogeneous, neurodiverse “I” which embraces the production of the whole; connecting the human, the nonhuman, and the more than human, where there is always more than one, more than two. My ethno-autography pays close attention to the work of the hyphen (autie-I) asking once again with Manning (2016), “in what ways does the hyphen make operational interstitial modes of existence?” (p. 11).

INTERLUDE: THE TABOO OF TOXICITY

At the back of a cupboard, I have a dusty box that my children call “the witchy box.” It contains crystals and gems, some soap nuts, incense, tarot cards, an angel ornament and Himalayan sound bowls, amongst other curious objects. In a sense, the box is a taboo. It is full of superstitious, more than human, forbidden epistemologies. Or as my sons say, it contains “tat.” My young daughter brings the box out of the cupboard so that I can add some new objects: dried sage, palo santo, a scallop shell, a feather, and pink salt. These new objects together become a “smudging kit.” The act of smudging involves burning the dried herbs so that the smoke picks up any lingering toxins in a room and carries them away through the open windows. The shell with salt in it catches the falling ash, and the feather sweeps the smoke out the window. I heard it is good practice to smudge after there has been illness, or conflict, or when moving to a new home. Following this process enables the cultivation of an affective
blank canvas; makes room for the new. My ex-partner and I have sold our house, and we are moving to separate homes. I will smudge this home before we leave, clearing out our dysfunction to make space for the new family. And I will smudge our new house, in case the old owners forgot! Smudging is like a probiotic for the soul of the home.

Autoethnographers link their experience to culture. What if we think of culture differently? What if we also thought of culture as a more-than-human process of “culturation” that includes the growth of bacteria and germs, biological and affective contagion, and toxic entanglements? Autoethnography becomes an analysis of what is being cultivated in and by a particular assemblage. In my cultural analysis, all that was propagating was that which could thrive in damp and stagnant conditions. To separate, my partner and I had to discharge the toxins, clung between us, through the slow opening of curled fingers. I feel the need to withdraw for a while as I begin to detoxify, to disembowel the toxins. Keep my distance. You better not touch me or be touched by me. This risk is the potential danger of writing with the taboo.

I must proceed with caution as I am (chemically) reactive. In the space of two weeks, three times I have been called out for something I have said that has offended or stung. I realise that I need to burn the sage allowing the smoke to billow around my body. There is a childish part of me that thinks it is unfair. I want to write angry words, words that point towards the object of my pain, that shout of betrayal and deceit. I write this and stamp my foot, causing unsteady vibrations across my detoxography.

In our research methodologies course at the university where I work, we warn students not to write an autoethnography that could be read as being a revenge piece or written to hurt. We may be better to advise students to smudge their autoethnographic work, to allow smoke to swirl in the spaces between their words and to create future-oriented affectivities. We could encourage them to write as a means to clap loudly into the corners, to awaken stagnant energy and write stories with movement.

Anger shouldn’t have to mean the avoidance of writing autoethnography. Writing in these transitional spaces is more than purely poison. This rawness can lead to writing that throbs with power and vivacity. The process of smudging the writing makes space for some of the good bacteria to burst forth. In this space, I’m more reactive but more spontaneous, more scared but braver, angrier, and more loving. My senses are alert, allowing for sensual and sensitive writing. I write on the edges of affective seizure. I’m an “auto” writing to find my “ethno” so that I can background. Rest.

Pause. Until then, I hold on to some black tourmaline from the witchy box. I trust that it may know what it is doing.

Our new home is a top floor flat in the centre of Edinburgh. There is a percussion of tram bells and car horns. I open the windows and the witchy box. We strike matches, and each hold some burning sage and prance around. We ceremoniously smudge the windowsills, the doors, the skirting boards, and each other. We let the smoke dance around our bodies. We smudge our home, our hearts, our words. Our aim is not to be pure or clean, but to be burnt-out and then reinvigorated. We are left standing here together, a bunch of humans in a room without furniture, without Dad and with shells full of ash to scatter. We don’t know this world, and there is a big space to fill.

In the Future

I find myself on a panel again at the next conference. So as to avoid a similar dis-parity (hilarity?), this time I am with others who “chose” similar topics. Just like when I go to visit Mark, I shall meet with others who have perhaps “chosen” similar taboo topics. Choice is something that is celebrated by neoliberal feminism, celebrating a woman’s “choice”: choice to objectify herself should she wish, or to choose a taboo topic should she wish, and that if I don’t want to be met with such issues then I should “choose” another cherry from the tree. As Michaela Ferguson (2017) says, “This focus on individual freedom, choice and autonomy is what undergirds new-liberal feminist ideology: women should respond to gender inequality by making better individual choices” (p. 59). Such “choosing” takes the political back off the wobbly table again.

Is there a loss to this making-coherent (rational) of the panel? How can conference panels be more capacious and work so as not to collapse divergence into coherence and consistency and into restrictive limits, ensuring “consensus and inclusion in advance of political action” (Ferguson, 2017, p. 53)? How can they work to maintain the hyphen in order to see its effects across the different papers and disciplines?

INTERLUDE—TABOO AND TENDERNESS

I’m at the Roehouse, our local pub, with a few of the mums and dads from school. As seems to be the way with the school crowd, stereotypes are played out, and
Hi, I am 41 and have three children. I am just coming out of a twenty-year marriage, although I currently still live with my ex-partner. I am overly-defended, afraid of intimacy, self-contained and pretty much terrified all the time. I want to meet new people but please don’t be kind to me. The worst thing that could happen is that I fall in love with you. That would be dreadful. I’m not sure what I want in a partner. Maybe I’m poly. Yes, let’s go with that. The more, the merrier. But not all at once. At least, I don’t think so. I have two gorgeous dogs. I play the piano. Maybe I’m mono. Fancy a drink?

Or maybe I could delete Tinder from my phone. I go with that option.

The following week I am at a school concert. Ben asks if Aaliyah wants to come for a sleepover with his daughter. This isn’t unusual. They are good friends. Then he asks if I might like to stay for some dinner when I bring her round. This is unusual. Very unusual. I look horrified and sheepish, both. He suggests we just have a drink. I apolgise for acting like a twelve-year-old. He responds with, “That’s ok; we could just play ‘Connect 4’ if you prefer.” That’s funny. “Connect 4” seems like a pretty good way to start connecting to me.

Now

As I near the end of the creation of my research project I contemplate that—should I actually have the choice, if what I could choose was distinguishable from the choice (Deleuze, 1986), would I continue to work with my pornographic cherry? I’m not sure, but if I do then I hope for capacious conferences and journals with my own words, and (t)angles through engagement and participation in a “creatively productive fugitive zone (where) we might practice the arts of divergent, tapestried becomings” (Fradenburg & Joy, 2016, p. 168). And I would do it for the reasons

the mums are sitting at a large table thoroughly dis-owned by the men who stand together at the bar. On the table, for discussion, is my new single status. They want to know when I will change my Facebook status to “single” and if I am yet on Tinder. I remind them that I am at this moment still living in the house with my ex, that his side of the bed is still warm, that I am an emotional wreck or worse, a toxic wreck. These facts do tend to culminate in the umbrella fact, that right now, I am not a good catch.

This large fact is ignored by the suggestion that we should set me up on Tinder now. I stupidly, curiously, tentatively yet pretty enthusiastically agree. It would be fun to see what or who was out there, to meet new people. It takes minutes to set up the account, and I am before long an unexpectedly proud Tinderite! I have connected to the broader world, rebirthed. We put up a few photographs and leave my profile unwritten. Amy, a mum who sits across from me, begins to swipe through the human-shop. She reports that the first one is creepy and is trying to reel in victims through showing pictures of puppies. She screws up her face and says that the next one is divulging his length. And then the next one there is no picture, and his profile has four words, “Carpe fucking Diem bitches.” It is only a short while until we all start to lose interest. More interesting conversation resumes but Amy continues to swipe. That is, until the moment she slams one hand down on the table and her mouth opens, staring at the phone. Someone asks her if she has just seen her husband on there, but she slowly shakes her head with eyes still wide open. She holds the phone up and rotates it around the table. In turn, everyone opens their eyes and mouths before looking at the men at the bar. One of us shouts over, “Nice pics Ben,” Amy announces that she’s swiping right. One of the mums shouts, “Ben! Fiona just liked you on Tinder.” Ben takes out his phone and moments later, Amy shouts, “You’re a match!”

At home, I think about my experience so far as a Tinderite. It pushed my boundaries in a way that opened me up to new possibilities. Ben had seemed at ease with us looking at his profile, or let’s face it, his advert. My advert. Now on my own, without the others around to laugh with, I felt less confident about putting myself “out there,” split between the need to withdraw and the need to reach out. And I felt trapped in the former—a simple case of choosing a place of familiarity and safety over leaping out into the world and connecting with others. I think it is called “fear of intimacy.”

The Scottish Psychoanalyst Ian Suttie (2014) writes about intimacy with others and about a phenomenon that he calls, “the taboo on tenderness.” He theorises that we tend to pride ourselves on how strong we are and our ability to be independent and manage alone. We, as a society, are losing our ability to be “with.” Reaching out could be felt like weakness, and weakness is a taboo. This particular taboo develops over time and strengthens deep roots. It takes away our ability to allow ourselves to lean on others in fear of becoming dismantled. Maybe I could write my unwritten tinder profile like this:

Or maybe I could delete Tinder from my phone. I go with that option.

The following week I am at a school concert. Ben asks if Aaliyah wants to come for a sleepover with his daughter. This isn’t unusual. They are good friends. Then he asks if I might like to stay for some dinner when I bring her round. This is unusual. Very unusual. I look horrified and sheepish, both. He suggests we just have a drink. I apolgise for acting like a twelve-year-old. He responds with, “That’s ok; we could just play ‘Connect 4’ if you prefer.” That’s funny. “Connect 4” seems like a pretty good way to start connecting to me.
offered by Rosi Braidotti (2006): “for the hell of it and for the love of the world” (p. 259).

I start to pack up my things. I’ve been at the office on the top floor all day. An office of around forty hot desks. I like desk number twelve. I wonder if anyone would mind if I left folders on the table since I’ll be back early tomorrow. No. I better not. I put them in the locker, clearing all traces. I wonder if anyone else will sit at “my” desk today and what they will be writing about. The door closes behind me and I wait for the lift. Someone is just arriving. We say “Hi” as we pass. They enter the office and sit at desk number twelve. The seat is still warm. They take out their folder and log on to the computer. They wipe the black dust from the keyboard and a little bit of soot gets under their nail.

INTERLUDE—ETHNO-ETHICS

The taboo is ontological in that its remainder pushes limits and boundaries of being as well as of knowing. Living and writing the taboo requires processing of life-stuff, always more into discomfort or out of the zone of thinkable thoughts, leading eventually, hopefully, into empathy, recognition, resilience and endurance, as a being-in-knowing, into a knowing-about-being. It requires stamina and takes away from the whitewashed walls to the yellowing-anaglypta. The word taboo could be replaced with the word unthinkable or even unmentionable, because when you are being produced as researcher by the taboo, it is at that point where articulation becomes possible, a moment that otherwise could be felt as joyous, a pass go moment, one that requires instead a moment of decision, a will I or won’t I? Rather than knowledge that pushes limits, the taboo verges towards the off-limits. This knowledge implicates the being of the researcher and that being may then potentially fall out of the bounds and structures of what may be seen as acceptable ways of knowing. There, is therefore perhaps, an ethical imperative to think of the ethno-autography, of the world first and being second. The world implicates us all, each of our beings, in all of our entanglements even if we can’t quite see our own proximity as the dust gets in our eyes.

NOTES

1. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY 4.0) capaciousjournal.com https://doi.org/10.22387/cap2017.6
2. The idea for this word-play came from a presentation by Helen Palmer (2016).

REFERENCES


