

Not-knowing-in-advance: Trying to think and see as if not doing a PhD.

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Abstract

In this piece, the writer offers up a tentative exemplification of how reframing a thesis in terms of what it can *do* rather than what it *is* has the potential to generate a joyful-artful engagement with the PhD process and to engender a more *response-able* relationship with the world. By refusing to engage in the *dis-abling* processes prescribed by institutional expectations of doctoral study, the act of writing emerges as a powerful antidote to the constraints of the neoliberal, *neurotypical*, university. Exploring a mode of expression that intertwines text and image, the writer enacts Erin Manning's philosophical projects of *research-creation*, *artfulness* and *thought-in-motion*.

Keywords: research-creation, artfulness, thought-in-motion, neurotypical, exemplification

Starting in the middle

“Was I searching for a dancer whose name I did not know or was I searching for the dancing part of myself?” (Winterson, 2004, p.40)

*At a dancing school in a remote place, Fortunata teaches her
pupils to become points of light,
They begin with her as early as six or seven and some stay
for the rest of their lives.
Most she releases like butterflies over a flowering world.*

Bodies that could have bent double and grown numb she maintains as metal in a fiery furnace, tempering, stretching forcing sinews into impossible shapes and calling her art nature.

She believes we are fallen creatures who once knew how to fly. She says that light burns in our bodies and threatens to dissolve us at any moment. How else can we account for so many of us who disappear?

It is her job to channel the light lying in the solar plexus, along the arms, along the legs, forcing it into fingertips and feet, forcing it out so that her dancers sweat tongues of flame.

To her dancers she says, 'Through the body, the body is conquered.' (Winterson, 2014, p. 78)

Erin Manning exploded into the middle of my doctorate. Where else would she be but dancing at the heart of the event? Swirling beneath the stars. Sparks flying. Her dress in rags and her slippers worn through.

As I write this piece, I am re-reading *Sexing the Cherry* by Jeanette Winterson (2014). It is a later edition to the one I travelled with almost thirty years ago. That copy, I gave away in a desolate town on the Syrian/Jordanian border. A place of mud and rubble and corrugated iron stalls selling tins of army issue corned beef. In return, I was given a terrible book, a romance wrought from stodge and lard. Greasy. Obvious. Predictable. Lying in a lonely bed in a bleak hostel in Eilat, I felt I would never forgive myself for giving up my treasure so easily. I would have happily read it a hundred times. Winterson's words dance with lightness, laughter and the stench of a malodorous, seventeenth century London. I have only consumed the first few pages and already I am beginning to remember why it is one of my favourite books.

The story skips across space and time as the reader travels to places real and imaginary with Jordan, the baby rescued from the stinking Thames by the formidable Dog Woman. In the city of words, there is a house whose inhabitants refuse to allow their feet to touch the floor. The furniture is suspended from great chains and, in order to join the household for dinner, visitors must be winched up to the table in a gilded chair. It is here, in the house of ceilings, that Jordan falls in love with Fortunata, the youngest and lightest of the twelve dancing princesses, the only sister who refused to marry her prince and who flew from the altar "like a bird from a snare" (Winterson, 2014, p. 63).

In the introduction, Winterson (2014) describes a book's narrative as the string that holds the holes together. For her, it is not the words but the spaces in between that matter. And though written language works upon us differently to other art forms in which empty space, stillness and silence, are rendered more obvious, more tangible, and more affecting, we must never forget that

the words on the page are really only there “for the invisible space to become visible” (Winterson, 2014, p. xi).

In the preface to *The Minor Gesture*, Manning writes: “[t]here’s something about writing books that is out of time. As though the writing only really knows what it’s after once it has begun to make its way into the world” (Manning, 2016, p. ix). Reading Winterson’s book as I write has created a choreography of movements and minglings, shiftings and shimmerings that has infused and energised this story of an entangled, emergent, eventful thesis. Reading, thinking, and writing with Winterson and Manning has generated a tentative *exemplification* (Massumi, 2002) of how writing to the not-yet-known is brim-full with beats and rhythms and speeds and intensities that do not just work to prompt thought, but also “generate sensations resonating in the body as well as the brain” (MacLure, 2010, p. 282). Immersed in a whirling dance of matter and movements, my doctorate is a myriad of texts that speak of being in the world. Of invitations and becomings. Of assemblages and entanglements. Of walking with the world. Of channelling the universe. Of matter that matters and the agency of things. Of the compulsion to write. And the need to create movements and moments of meaning.

Brian Massumi (2002) says writing should “accept the risk of sprouting deviant” (p.18) and that we should “take joy in our digressions” (Massumi, 2002, p.18). Like Manning, he argues that “if you know where you will end up when you begin, nothing will happen” (Massumi, 2002, p.18). For him, writing is about the potential to surprise even yourself, and to write things that you did not know you thought. His words resonate. I have been writing my PhD since I started my PhD. I have written thousands and thousands of words. I cannot help myself. Often the process starts with an encounter. Sometimes an event. Like Kathleen Stewart (2016), I find the hauntings and troublings of the world whisper to me. Sometimes I carry words with me for days in the pockets of my mind. They rattle and clink, jostling for space. Rubbing up against each other, they begin to glow. The urge grows stronger. My fingers move across a keyboard. And I am lost to the writing.

At the beginning of *Sexing the Cherry*, Winterson writes:

Matter, that thing the most solid and the well-known, which you are holding in your hands and which makes up your body, is now known to be mostly empty space. Empty space and points of light. (Winterson, 2014, p.v)

Like Winterson, Erin Manning does not conceive of the body as a “stable locus of enunciation” (Manning, 2007, p. xiv). For her, the body is never static, it is always in movement. And this moving, sensing body is also a political body:

Without a commitment to the ways in which bodies move, bodies become stabilised within national imaginaries in preordained categories, such as citizen, refugee, man, woman, homed, homeless. Deliberately avoiding the entanglements inherent in articulating (and ordering) sensing bodies in movement, the state can claim that its body-politic is unified. The body can be

described and politics can be defined. Within state discourse, common sense is at stake, not the senses. (Manning, 2007, p. xv)

Like most dominant modes of knowledge production, the traditional PhD process is loaded with common sense and taken for granted practices and processes. As Alecia Youngblood Jackson notes, in the academy “everybody knows what it means to conduct good fieldwork. Everybody knows the process of forming a research question, searching the literature, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up findings” (Jackson, 2017, p. 671). Doctoral students are expected to have everything pinned down and mapped out from the start. We dutifully complete our project proposals and transfer documents. We define our research questions and outline our methodologies. Constantly policed by the institution, we are coerced to conform. Electronic systems track and record our progress. Against each milestone, there is a small circle: Green to reward. Red to reproach. Intermittently, a warning message appears: Deadline overdue! These disciplining systems that demand linearity, uniformity and conformity, all work to stifle creativity, still movement and suffocate the joy of just seeing what might happen. As Manning and Massumi write, “[w]hat is startling about the neurotypical is the capacity to background the in-formation in the field, and to pre-subtract from the expressive potential of its relational complexity” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 11). The joyful, entangled, eventfulness of the past five years, the fabulous middling, is reduced by the system to a colour-coded series of interactions that function to deny “the *agencements* at the heart of the event’s dance of attention” (Manning, 2016, p. 120).

Jackson describes common sense as “an illusion that subordinates difference ... governed by sameness, identity, resemblance, and sedimentation” (Jackson, 2017, p. 669). For Donna Haraway (2016), common sense represents an “abandonment of thinking” (p. 36) and yet, as she argues, we must think hard, and we must think clever if we want to story the world differently. Seeking out the “the interstices where thought bubbles into orientations as yet uncharted” (Manning, 2019a, p. 104) is the work that must be done, for it is here that thinking and writing can begin to “turn away from the notion that it is the human agent, the intentional, volitional subject, who determines what comes to be” (Manning, 2016, p. 3). But it is not easy to write in a way that does not simply “take us back to the ‘neurotypical’ account of experience and its alignment to subject-centred agency” (Manning, 2016, p. 120), or to create texts that are “non-representational, non-interpretive, a-signifying, a-subjective, paradoxical and embroiled with matter” (MacLure, 2013a, p. 663). This kind of writing needs the human to get out of the way so that its inherent *artfulness* (Manning, 2015) is allowed “to do the work it can do within an ecology of practices that, while often directed by us, does not find its resting place solely in the world of the human” (Manning, 2015, p. 75).

Escaping the “I” is hard. How to story and not tell *my* story? There are many traps and snares. It is not easy to dance over them lightly. A toe, a foot, an ankle is always at risk of finding itself caught in the vice-like jaws of a humanist subjectivity. The English language foregrounds the subject. The doer precedes the deed. I think, therefore I am. The all-knowing, all-doing subject reigns supreme and, as Manning (2019b) reminds us, we know this subject so well because it “is given to us again

and again as the leading feature of experience... The subject, we learn, is the agency behind bodies, the agency that orients experience” (Manning, 2019b, p. 2). But it is this very notion of a subject-driven agency that serves to perpetuate the enduring arrogance of Western-centric thinking, which “reeks of whiteness and classism” (Manning, 2016, p. 3), and which continues to shore up the same old hierarchies that get to decide “which lives are worth fighting for, which lives are worth educating, which lives are worth living, and which lives are worth saving” (Manning, 2016, p. 3). And it must be refused.

As I began working towards my PhD, my strongest instinct was to resist the taken for granted and commonsense practices that pervade institutional expectations of doctoral study. I dared to sail the uncharted waters of the not-yet-known and in doing so somehow managed to evade the “all-seeing universalizing gaze” (Manning, 2019a, p. 100) of the privileged (male) subject which, from the earliest religious universities to contemporary times has mediated what comes to count as knowledge (Manning, 2019a). I found myself energized by this speculative process of not-knowing-in-advance but, as I stumbled at each institutional hurdle, the pressure to pin down and explain my approach stifled me. My thinking slowed. My writing grew leaden. My words got stuck.

For Manning, “writing is an act, alive with the rhythms of uncertainty and openings of a speculative pragmatism that engages with the forces of the milieu where transversality is most acute” (Manning, 2016, p.42). Therefore, it is the not-knowing-in-advance that is the crucial element in processes of research-creation, for “knowing is always to some degree reducible to the already known” (Manning, 2016, p.92). And if you already know, then what’s the point? Engaging in an *ontology of immanence* (St. Pierre, 2019) and reframing the writing process as the research process, has come to be the work that my doctorate does. An attentiveness and an increased sensitivity to “how the world gyrates with potential” (Mukhopadhyay cited in Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 13) has engendered a mode of writing that is concerned, not with producing the thesis as object, but with producing the thesis as movement. It has opened up a space where language can be *agitated to the limit* (Manning & Massumi, 2014) and where the “not-yet glimmers seductively and then escapes in fits and starts” (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 3). This kind of writing does not exist to point out things for others to recognise (Massumi, 2015), but to create texts that can “convey the ‘too much’ of the situation – its charge – in a way that actually fosters new experiences” (Massumi, 2015, p. 13). Kathleen Stewart describes writing as a “metronome keeping time in relation to things that call out” (Stewart, 2016, p. 99), and Clough and Issevenier (2016) talk of it as the production of *wild probabilities* that create “patterns or information that are not inherently there in things that are happening” (p. 14). Writing itself is the movement that promotes other movements.

In *The Minor Gesture*, Manning (2016) asks:

What else could be at stake in the encounter if it weren't organized around the certainty of knowing? What might become thinkable if knowledge weren't tied to an account of subject-driven agency? And what else might value look like if it

weren't framed by judgement? (p. x)

These simple yet profound questions somehow manage to dismantle the very premises on which the traditional doctoral thesis is predicated. Enshrined in the processes, policies and technologies that construct, govern and police higher educational institutions, the primacy of the researcher, the quest for knowledge, and the inevitable scrutiny of the examiners, all frame and constrain the experiences of doctoral students in very particular ways.

For Manning (2007), one way to push back against such *dis-abling* constraints is to shift the question of what a thesis *is* to what a thesis can *do*. Trying to reimagine my doctoral studies as a mode of existence that is concerned with “the emergent quality of the experience, not with the factually cross-checked identity of the objects featuring in it” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 11), has enabled me to open up my thinking and writing to moments defined by what my senses “are compelled to attend to” (Mukhopadhyay cited in Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 13). Walking to work along the narrow path that skirts a small harbour, I have been lured by the entanglements of human and non-human matter that float in and out on the tide. This *vibrant matter* (Bennett, 2010) calls out to me and invites me to dance. To move. To act. Attending to, attuning to, the “nonhuman powers” (Bennett, 2010, p.ix) of the detritus floating in the sea, has worked on me in ways that have been both unexpected and productive. Instinctively I knew that this was not data to be collected and analysed, but I could sense its vitality, its agency. For Maggie MacLure (2013b), the wonder of data is “their capacity to enter into relation with researchers” (p. 231) and, throughout my doctoral work, I have been compelled to respond to the potential of everyday, ad hoc assemblages of human/non-human matter to convey “*singularities*” of experience (Manning, 2008, p. 12) that are charged with the potential to affect. As Massumi (2015) argues, “[W]e are our situations, we are moving through them. We are our participation—not some abstract entity that is somehow outside looking at it all” (p. 14). And, like Bennett (2010), I have become fascinated by entanglings of matter. The stuff that sticks and stays. The stuff that does not. The dead gull. The Starbucks cup. The burger carton dancing in the wind. The rubber glove whose curled finger somehow beckons towards a world where desperate people pay their way into Europe with body parts.

The ritual of my daily walk has produced thousands of photographs of flotsam and jetsam, of debris, and of matter that no longer seems to matter. And it is through the writings and through the thinkings that have emerged as a response, that my relationship with the world has changed. It is an ongoing and entangled process of improvisation, akin to what Manning terms *research-creation* (Manning, 2016), a process which demands from us a refusal to posit “the terms of the account before the exploration of what the account can do” (Manning, 2016, p. 29). As I revisit the texts and images I have produced over the past five years, they tell me what I need to read. As I read, the writing burgeons. Sometimes I feel I am writing the same texts again and again, but each time the thinkings I am trying to articulate deepen. Sprout. Grow. The words have their own playfulness. Their own power. Their own vitality. As Bennett (2011) says, words are sticky things. The trick is to not get stuck.

Resisting the normative, or what Manning terms the *neurotypical*, is not easy in the neoliberal university, for “[i]n the middling, everything is at stake” (Manning, 2016, p. 108). But risk is needed and risk is necessary if we are to find ways to make educational research matter and not just want to matter (Haraway, 2016). In *The University and the Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2004) write of the *subversive intellectual* whose path it is “to sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of” (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 101). The subversive intellectual, they say, is the one who comes to the university out of love, only to find her “labor is as necessary as it is unwelcome. The university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings” (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 101-102). I came into the university out of love. A love of learning. Of thinking. Of reading. I sought out teachers, educators and scholars who nurtured that love. Perhaps I was lucky. Or perhaps we just forget that universities are still full of subversive intellectuals who *know otherwise*. As Manning argues, there are always enclaves of resistance “where the university cannot steal from us” (Manning, 2019a, p. 104), and once we open ourselves up to the necessity of subversion and subterfuge, these enclaves of resistance can be found in the most unlikely places.

What follows is a text fashioned from the writings that emerged over a two-day period in February 2019. Desperate to steal some time to write, I enrolled on a non-residential retreat organised by the Doctoral College at my university. Held on campus, the chillingly named *Thesis Bootcamp* was billed in the monthly newsletter as “*an intensive and supportive writing environment for mid-late stage postgraduate research students to give you the necessary time, space and encouragement to write a large number of words.*” How could I resist?

Re-reading the texts in all their fragmented glory, I am surprised at what I have written. And a little shocked. I cannot remember writing some of the words at all and I experience the texts as “fleeting openings, now forgotten” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p.10). Revisiting these writings in the company of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, the Thesis Boot Camp is reimagined as a tentative response to the critical question: “How to steal from the university the quality of what moves across it without being consumed by it?” (Manning, 2019a, p. 104).

Constraints that enable

I arrive late. As usual. Hot and flustered. The room is full. People sit at tables. Laptops open. There is talk and tea. I try to squeeze myself in. It’s not going to work. Too many bodies. Too close. Someone says there is another room I can use. I go in, but it is already occupied. I sense my presence is not welcome. Embarrassed, I gather up my things and move on. Behind the toilets is a desk. It is near a window. I squat down hoping to see a socket. Yes. I plug in and arrange my books and notes. I have found my perfect space.

On the walls are photographs from an exhibition I had visited several months before: Refugees Mapping Memories. In front of me is Waleed. A Sudanese human rights activist and interior

designer. Behind me, Maria from Honduras, in the corridor, Mahmoud from Syria and Arzu from Azerbaijan. I remember meeting Arzu in the summer, at one of the free English classes I run for asylum seekers who have been 'dispersed' to the city. She is quiet, but fiercely so. The artworks are beautiful. Each is accompanied by a photograph, a map, and a piece of writing.

My toes begin to tap.

It's 9.45.

You may begin.

Figure 1

Nine twenty-five



I look at the pile of notes and papers I have brought with me. They sit in a plastic envelope on the rectangular desk. Who will reach out their hand and lead me to the dancefloor? I spy Maggie MacLure and a quote I have picked out in bold:

Representation serves the “dogmatic image of thought” as that which categorises and judges the world through the administration of good sense and common sense, dispensed by the autonomous, rational and well-intentioned individual, according to truth and error. (MacLure, 2013a, p. 660).

Common sense. Such danger in two small words.

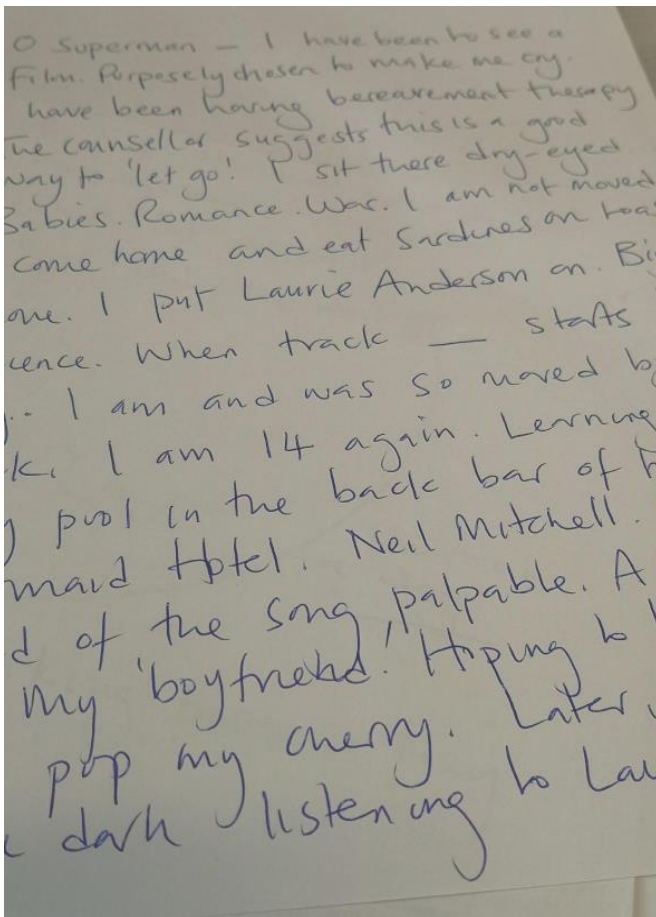
There are sheaves of lined paper, covered in blue ballpoint pen. I rarely write that way anymore. I

tap, tap, tap, instead. The words take me back to a time when the physical, embodied act of writing seemed so important, and so fundamental to the powerful process of inquiring through writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). And yet, and yet, these days I type. The keyboard distances me from my words. From the physical formation of the words. Tap, tap, tap. They appear. But I feel I am losing the ability to spell. I think it is the disconnection. Words were once learned through the act of writing them. The forming of each letter, at first with a pencil, later a pen. Words inscribed on paper. Again and again and again. Ingrained in my muscle memory. Waleed's words in front of me are written in fine black ink.

I tap, tap, tap, below them.

Figure 2

Oh Superman



I come across the first article I read by Erin Manning (2009). I remember how much I loved the title: *What if it Didn't All Begin and End with Containment? Toward a leaky Sense of Self*. I have written in italics:

Leaky. I like leaky. I leak. I am not self-contained. I spill out and fall to bits. My eyes well up. In laughter. Sadness. My nose runs. My bladder fills and empties. I

lie awake at night, drenched in my own sweat.

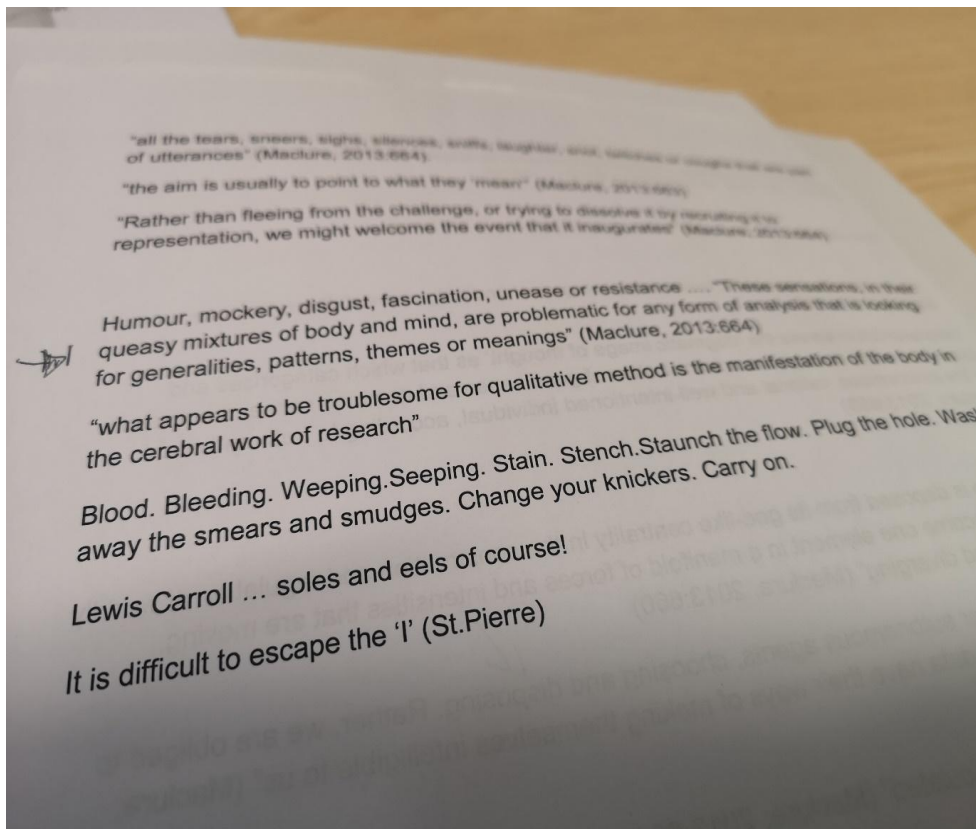
There are some type-written pages. They read like a crazed stream of consciousness.

Blood. Bleeding. Weeping. Seeping. Stain. Stench. Staunch the flow. Plug the hole. Wash away the smears and smudges. Change your knickers. Carry on.

When did I write those words? It must be some time ago. I bleed no more.

Figure 3

Leaky bodies



I listen to the sound of someone peeing in the adjacent toilet. We have been writing for 45 minutes. The body calls out for comfort. For release.

Tea break. I photograph the toilet. Free tampons. Signs proclaiming how much water is being saved. I dash to the library. I can't find the self-issue machines. Doesn't anyone borrow books anymore? I head back. People chat and make hot drinks.

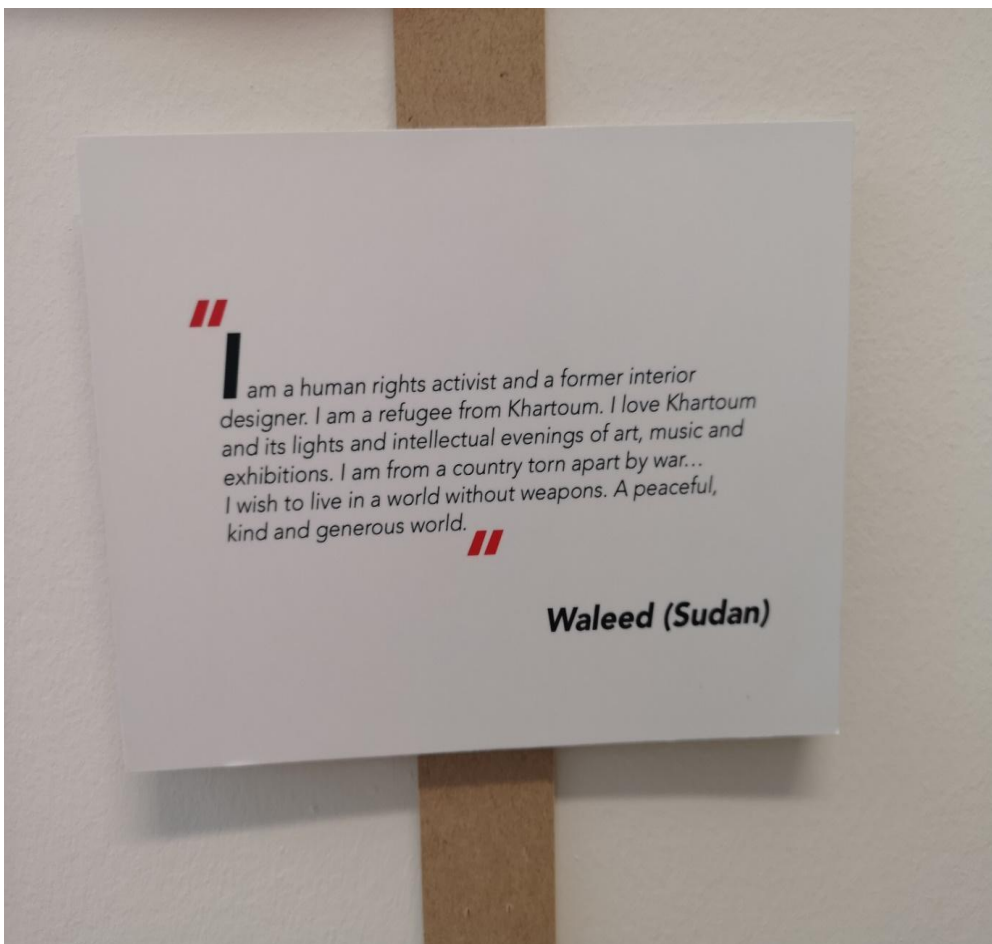
Sat at my desk, I look at Waleed's map. A red thread traces his journey from Khartoum to the UK. He has travelled the length of Egypt. Crossed the sea to Greece. Negotiated multiple European borders. To find sanctuary here. In this hostile land. The walls speak to me of lives that have somehow been deemed to matter less than mine. Maria's cotton thread crosses a vast expanse of ocean. Honduras to Spain. Over 5000 miles. I look Honduras up on Wikipedia. It has the highest

murder rate in the world. It is one of the poorest nations in the Western hemisphere. Its history is a litany of exploitation. It is a country of exploitable, expendable, disposable bodies (Braidotti, 2013).

The desk is bathed in sunlight. I can see clouds moving quickly across a blue-grey sky. It is windy outside. The tail end of Hurricane Ciara. But I am warm. Well-fed. Comfortable. My lower back presses against the soft material of the cushioned chair. The space is quiet. I am privileged. I am white. I am not Waleed. Or Azur. I have not escaped war like Mahmoud. I am not Maria, dreaming of a day when her country is no longer riddled with violence and corruption.

Figure 4

Waleed



How to push back against the kinds of sedimentary thinkings and doings that shore up and exacerbate the terrible human rights injustices, insidious inequalities, and toxic discourses? Human-centric practices conspire to impose the neurotypical as the unquestioned and insurmountable site of power in the world. The same power inherent in the very desk I am sitting at. A desk that represents and reinforces dominant discourses around education and educational practices. A desk that plays into an education system where hierarchies are continually defined

and delineated. It includes and excludes. Generative for some, a physical barrier to learning for others. The desk tells us how and where we should sit. Its shape encourages rectangular configurations that fit into rectangular spaces. This desk, this space, this university, is yet another site of white, male privilege.

The toilet flushes. Again.

Figure 5

Did you know?



Writing up. Writing up. Writing up. Up, up and away. The impossibility of writing to the not-yet-known. To the not yet articulated. It is a challenge indeed.

The thesis as event. The thesis as eventful. The thesis that dances in the shadows. Resisting. Refusing. Responding. The dance of attention.

Balancing on a tightrope

In the *Politics of Touch*, Manning writes:

Tango is the dance of the impromptu rethinking of the politics of communication. Tango is the dream of the known played out in the night of the unknown. It is the politics unwritten, yet the palimpsest on which everything political aspires already to have been written. It is the voice of the immigrant displaced through movement. It is the movement of the stranger, echoing in the distant resonance of a music that has many times crossed the world. (Manning, 2007, p. 3)

Tango, for Manning, is a movement across space and time, “an errant politics that calls out to the night world to re-orchestrate its systems of governance and exchange” (Manning, 2007, p. 2). It is a dance that evokes the *undercommons* (Moten & Harney, 2004) and the *minor* (Manning, 2016). These are sites of great power and potential, but they are hard won, for as Manning writes, “when an undercommons of thought reveals itself, it is not because the university has fostered it. It’s because an enclave has grown in resistance to all the university devalues” (Manning, 2019a, p. 104). Tango, like the undercommons, like the minor, exists on the edges, on “the periphery of the social order” (Manning, 2007, p. 2). Yet, Tango is also a paradox. At once a *stable signifier* of Argentine national identity, it also transgresses nation politics. And, as Manning notes, within the academy, there exists a similar paradox:

We are excited by the openings research-creation provides and yet remain largely unwilling to take them on their own terms and experiment with them as new modes of existence and new forms of knowledge. We remain held by existing methods because we remain incapable (or unwilling) to evaluate knowledge on its own incipient terms, or, better, to engage productively with new concepts of value. (Manning, 2016, p. 42)

Pushing back against the constraints of the traditional thesis is not new in (post) qualitative inquiry (see, e.g., Cannon, 2020; Bridges-Rhoads, 2018; Bridges-Rhoads, 2015; Guttorm, 2012; Guttorm, 2016). Indeed, as far back as 1995, whilst struggling with her own doctoral thesis, Elizabeth St. Pierre wrote, “I believe the persistent critique urged by poststructuralism enables a transition from traditional methodology to something different and am not too concerned at this time with what might be produced” (St. Pierre, 1995, p.209). Both St. Pierre and Manning have come to see method as “an apparatus of capture” (Manning, 2016, p.32), and therefore it is not new methods that are needed, but “a reaccounting of what writing can do in the process of thinking-doing” (Manning, 2016, p.42). Engaging in a speculative process of research-creation insists that we embrace the “necessity to undo the dominant and pre-existing, the self-evident” (Guttorm, 2016, p.354) and to find ways to “experiment and play with something “new” (and never new)” (Guttorm, 2016, p.354). But, the writing of the new (and never new) demands much and, for those of us who find ourselves *in* but not *of* the university, there is an urgent need to be brave and resourceful (St. Pierre, 2021) and to find the courage “to be surely unsure” (Guttorm, 2012, p.600).

As I write this piece, I am acutely aware of the ongoing interplay of transgression and cohesion. Is the string holding the holes together? Or is there too much nothing and not enough something? I

do not know. But I can only try, for as Cannon (2020, p. 44) pointedly and poetically asks:

*What's a girl
to do
When she's told
To put her
Joy
In a box
Tied up tight, kept controlled, disciplined*

I am balanced on a tightrope. It feels precarious. Exhilarating. Risky. Will the thesis have value? Rigour? Integrity? Or will all this work be for nothing? Even Manning concedes that it is easy to fail when one is engaged in processes that to attempt to make a difference, as “they must be created such that they can perform, reshape, constrain in ways unforeseeable” (Manning, 2016, p. 108). Nevertheless, it is vital that educators and academics, thinkers and writers, artists and philosophers, keep striving to find ways to challenge normative, neurotypical ideas of what constitutes value and to reinvent them “at that lively interstice between bodyings and worldings” (Manning, 2016, p. 95).

In *The Minor Gesture*, Manning asks us to consider “[w]hat techniques can we put in place to open the world to its constellations of potential?” (Manning, 2016, p. 155). This is my response: a tentative attempt to create, what Manning terms “the best kind of encounter with thinking’s outside” (Manning, 2016, p. ix), the kind of encounter that:

deeply listens to what the writing is trying to do, almost thinking beyond what the author is capable of thinking, then returning that thinking, almost beyond what the reader can think, to the author. In this gesture of encounter no one is trying to convince anyone: thought is thinking collectively at its limit. (Manning, 2016, p. ix)

Responding to an ongoing interplay of text and image and event, this work attempts to exemplify how not knowing in advance has the potential to generate a joyful-artful engagement with the PhD process and engender a more *response-able* (Haraway, 2016) relationship with the world. Beginning with a fascination with the refuse floating in a small harbour, I have found a way to “catalyse the ongoing movement-in-thought necessary for inquiry, especially inquiry that asks what else words, bodies, actions, relations, and so on, might do besides mean” (Bridges-Rhoads, 2018, p. 646). Data are no longer framed as “an inert and indifferent mass waiting to be in/formed and calibrated by our analytic acumen or our coding systems” (MacLure, 2013a, p. 660), but are reimagined as creative, improvisational *events* (Manning, 2016), where value is enacted by the process rather than what is produced. Finding the courage to resist institutional imperatives to map out exactly what is to be done, the author has opened herself up to a writing process that emerges from a heightened sensitivity to the world’s murmurings and matterings, and which has enabled her to channel energies and intensities into tiny acts and interventions that might just

have the potential to make a difference in the world (Massumi, 2015). Thinking with Manning has enabled me to find ways to better conceptualise and articulate my work and, more importantly, to find joy in the creative intellectual endeavour that is writing a thesis.

As I write, I am empty space and light. I have found the dancer whose name I didn't know. I have found the dancing part of myself.

This is cosmic pathfinding in the making. Activism as thinking, writing and doing. *The politics to come* (Manning, 2014).

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