

Embodying Artistic Reflexive Praxis: An Early Career Academic's Reflections on Pain, Anxiety, and Eating Disorder Recovery Research

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Abstract: Writing about our bodies, as researchers, does not always do justice to their ebbs and flows—their entanglements with the processes and "products" of our research journeys. In this piece, I share my reflexive engagement with artistic praxis over the course of my early career. Engaging with embodied reflexive praxis through dance, film, and writing enabled me to not only produce but also to feel research and to work through messy and painful experiences. Beyond simply unearthing my spaces of belonging in relationship to participants, reflexivity has meant examining and re-examining my relationship to pain, disability, recovery from eating distress, and research itself.

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1. Introduction

Research is embodied (CHADWICK, 2017; ELLINGSON, 2006; FOX, 2015). Research is sometimes painful (BENOOT & BILSEN, 2016). Sometimes what we hear, as researchers, is hard to make sense of and to theorize. The embodied echoes of the research assemblage can resonate in our bones in ways that we may attend to or, as is perhaps more often the case, ignore. In this article, I explore my embodied experiences of conducting research. Written from the perspective of an early career researcher engaging with embodied distress, particularly around eating and movement, the article offers an invitation to examine ways of making sense of research experiences beyond the written word. [1]

For decades, researchers have remarked upon the body's absence in much of the qualitative health research literature. This absence is consequential; as ELLINGSON (2006) wrote, "the erasure of researchers' bodies from conventional accounts of research obscures the complexities of knowledge production and yields deceptively tidy accounts of research" (p.299). The paradoxes and challenges inherent to writing about embodiment do not escape me and have not escaped those who have engaged with embodiment before me (e.g., CHADWICK, 2017; WEISS, 1999). Still, writing about embodied experiences may help to render them intelligible to those who may hesitate to engage with the arts,

my primary medium for embodied exploration. Writing, here, lives in relation to other researcher-implicating modes of inquiry that invite us to step into relation with that which we are exploring (LANGER & FURMAN, 2004; MACHADO, 2019). [2]

I have embedded into this piece several links to digital stories I have created over the course of my (short) research career to embed a multimodal perspective. While the framing of the stories may help readers to "understand" them, it might also be interesting to watch them without reading this framing, in order to draw conclusions independent of my self-analysis. I encourage readers to engage with the various aspects of this work as they choose, taking from it an invitation to be playful in research and in embodied reflexivity. Though the subject matter I research is far from "playful," the methods I have employed and the theoretical frameworks I use encourage an openness to ways of being in and understanding the world. Inviting readers (or viewers) into my embodied reflexive processes is one movement toward *embodying* embodied feminist reflexivity that others have noted is essential to generating ethical research that moves beyond the mind/body dualisms we seek to disrupt (e.g., BURNS, 2006). My hope is that this article helps to open dialogue around embodied experiences of research and how we might make sense of that which exceeds the formats we are called to use. [3]

I begin by offering reflections on conducting research from a lived experience perspective and how I made sense of my experiences using filmmaking (Section 2). I have embedded four digital stories into this section. I then move to a piece of reflexive writing I created to grapple with illness/wellness and disability as I moved through graduate school and into an academic career (Section 3). I conclude this piece by tying in literature around art and reflexivity, reflecting on the potential of the arts to scaffold reflexive engagement with "what we do" as researchers (Section 4). [4]

2. Artful Reflexivity

The first time I used the arts in an academic context, I entered into the experiment thinking that I was just "putting myself in my participants' shoes." At the precipice of beginning my Masters studies, I believed in the need to explore the relationship between "researcher" and "researched." I wanted to untether these roles from their moorings and to trouble and un-fix the power dynamics that weave their way through research encounters to the extent that I could. Making my own digital story was a part of this process. A fledgling 23-year-old researcher, I made a digital story about my experiences of recovery from an eating disorder, as I saw them then (<https://vimeo.com/537106206> [password for all films: EmbodiedSelf]). MOODLEY (2018), critically reflecting on experiences of making a film in relation to research in postcolonial feminism, remarked on how the experience of filmmaking invited self-critique in relation to positionality. She wrote that "the method of filmmaking had to be inclusive of a process of self-reflection for both the researcher/filmmaker and the research participants" (p.481); here, the act of making a film in relation to research invited further interrogation of positionality. In my experience, I noticed on reflection how my embodied experiences of recovery as described in this piece strongly reflected

my (privileged) positionality and unearthed further grounds for exploration, which I continue to take up. In the story, I speak of the freedom of recovery in embodied terms, sharing a functional view of body image (e.g., ALLEVA, MARTIJN, VAN BREUKELEN, JANSEN & KAROS, 2015; ALLEVA et al., 2018) and appreciating what my body allows me to do. At this point in my engagement with eating disorder research literature and advocacy communities, I was content to engage with a vision of recovery unencumbered by a deep analysis of the entwinings of my recovery with embodied *privilege*. [5]

It was not long before I had started to consider that perhaps recovery was an experience of degrees and inflected with privilege (LaMARRE & RICE, 2021; LaMARRE, RICE & BEAR, 2015). About a year into my MSc., I awakened to a critical health psychology perspective on eating disorders and recovery—one that fundamentally challenged everything that I thought I knew and had been taught (academically and via treatment regimes), about eating disorders and recovery. After working with participants and teasing out how recovery is made challenging by the interpolation of dictates for recovery offered in clinical settings and those for wellness issued in society at large (LaMARRE & RICE, 2016a, 2016b), I reflected back on my foray into artistic renderings of recovery with some self-skepticism. I stopped wanting my story to be shown, because it no longer reflected how I thought about recovery, about my body, and about story. And yet, my embodied experience at the time of making this story was not invalidated by my changing perspective; indeed, I am now glad it exists, if only as a measuring stick against which to gauge my relationship to the sticky and rocky terrain of eating disorder recovery. [6]

Around the time of my critical awakening—when I was consuming Judith BUTLER (1990, 1993, 2004) for breakfast and exploring my complicity with settler colonialism and ableist norms and how to move forward more thoughtfully in a field rife with medicalization—I made a "coda" to my original artistic rendering (<https://vimeo.com/537106454>). On reflection, this follow-up came from an enminded place. In this second story, I reflect on how my participants' visions of recovery challenged some of my taken-for-granted ideas about body love, and how recovery may not be able to be wrapped up in a bow. I used images and lens flare transitions to dissolve the versions of myself into each other as the narrative marches on; and yet, the embodied, up-close-and-personal, emotive character of the first film was missing. Thoroughly intellectualizing, this rendering of recovery served only as an adjunct—and almost self-apologizing—vision for what I perceived to be my "imperfect" first story. [7]

As I continued my graduate studies, I facilitated many digital storytelling workshops with [ReVision: The Centre for Art and Social Justice](#). These workshops brought me into confrontation with the embodied nature of arts-based work. I found great solace in making art during this time and forged meaningful connections with participants doing the same. Workshops took me out of my head and into my body—pushing me up against discomfort both physical and emotive. I spent many nights in Air BnBs and hotel rooms crying and lying on the floor, my back wrecked from a day's stooping over a computer screen. I often had

no words for how this work landed in my body and my mind—for the often-painful digesting of participants' stories. I often felt the need to make art myself after workshops, as a way to channel the emotions that arose into something tangible—to funnel out into the world the stories that had been poured into me. I have since learned that I am not alone in using art as a way of processing and managing my being-scholar; as GUYOTTE (2017) wrote: "shaken, disoriented, inspired—I created. I used art as a way to work through the movement of becoming different and to cultivate a space for the entanglement of body, theory, doing, and thinking" (p.54). [8]

As I worked and studied, I began to notice the entwining of my body's responses and the work I was doing. I had never imagined that academia could be so thoroughly embodied. Embroiled as I was—and continue to be—in neoliberal productivity discourses, I imagined that academic work was largely a "head task." It was several years until I began to realize that there was more to the work than the cerebral—to break down that Cartesian dualism so typical of academic imagining; to stop pretending that it was a coincidence that a particularly stressful time at work and study would lead to intractable pain without a cause or a reason. My body and my mind worked together to generate an anxiety-pain-relationship that rendered the trouble indeed "all in my head"—and yet viscerally embodied. [9]

Grasping at meaning in the first year of my PhD, about a year after I began to experience unrelenting headaches at the very top of my head, I found myself making a digital story about my experience of encountering Elizabeth GROSZ's (1994) theorizing, and in particular her exploration of the Möbius strip. This metaphor helped me to understand the interweaving of my anxiety and my "inexplicable" bodily sensations. In the film (<https://vimeo.com/537544570>), I lay text over still and moving images of my body. I describe the specifics of my embodied experiences of recovery in a way that weaves together the "just anxiety" and "in your head" narratives that dominate the landscape of curative discourses on anxiety. In describing my experiences, I reflect on my openness to describing my recovery from my eating disorder, and how "cure" from disordered eating did not yield the kind of freedom from anxiety it promised. I made sense of my experiences of continued anxiety in making this film; subsequently, I began to be more vocal about it. Making films was then, and continues to be, a way to make sense of theories that can seem opaque when encountered in black words on a white page and of embodied experiences for which we do not have a social vocabulary. [10]

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that I found myself making art once again years later as I struggled through the end of my doctoral studies. I was not struggling on the surface; to the world around me, I looked like the model of success. What I was experiencing did not have any kind of medicalized label, and as such it remained largely culturally unintelligible. I was, however, suffering enormously under the weight of thinking about putting words into the world. Applying for jobs while finishing the PhD and writing up incredibly emotive and moving words from participants who, like me, often felt abandoned by the systems meant to serve

them, manifested in tenacious knots in my back. I was not sick, per se, but I was stuck. I once again turned to art to make sense of my experiences. [11]

I embarked on a choreographic journey to explore the way participants' stories lived in me. I earnestly visited the dance studio I had been attending since I was 4 years old, seeking to turn the vague pain into something tangible. I was not "making a dance about my dissertation" so much as I was funneling out that which had been poured into me. There was no choice but to be embodied. [12]

What resulted was a somewhat messy choreographic piece that simultaneously encapsulated the embodied and often-painful reality of my own recovery and the onslaught of emotion that accompanied hearing about the more challenging aspects of participants' stories. The dance was "about" eating disorder recovery insofar as it spoke to the monotony of navigating systems and ends in an always-improvised version of wading through; it was "about" doing my dissertation in the moments of lightness followed by deep dives onto the ground where I languished and hurt. Meanwhile, making the dance was an embodied confrontation with the possibilities and limitations of my corporeality. It spoke of the physical and emotional pain of trying to fit myself into disciplinary and neoliberal boundaries while wanting to break away. Though originally "about" my dissertation and its creation, this dance became the springboard for another form of art: a digital story about doing a dissertation and experiencing inexplicable pain (<https://vimeo.com/349079233>). In what follows, I share my reflections on this experience, which also acted as the theoretical and reflective scaffolding for the story. I then make sense of the experiences I have described thus far and the reflection to follow, drawing on others' impactful work in this realm to call for deeper reflections on what it means to do research as embodied beings. This is not an indictment of the cerebral work characteristic of much of academic life. It is, rather, an invitation to better understand not only our mental and emotional investments in what we study but also the embodied—sometimes joyous, sometimes painful, sometimes both—aspects of "being researchers" and how the cerebral is perhaps itself embodied. [13]

3. A Reflection on Pain and Ability in Academia

I've never fit cleanly into the categories of well or ill. For most of my life I have floated in between; my pain eludes the medical establishment. I do not wear the legacy of disability on my skin. I have not experienced the same discrimination and oppressions many disabled folks have. Until the age of 23, I knew very little about disability as identity (DARLING, 2013)—as a place of fighting for recognition and fair treatment. I did not know about the legacies of eugenics and the harms caused to disabled folks in the name of "research" and "progress" (DOLMAGE, 2017). The idea of "cripping" something (McRUER, 2006)¹ was entirely new to me. Disability is not often welcome in academia, where "invisible, less known or contested conditions are dismissed as a fabrication, malingering

1 McRUER described "crip theory" and in so doing sparked a movement toward using the term "crip" or "cripping" to refer to engagement with disability—drawing near to what it offers, rather than moving away from it as pejorative.

and an act of a fundamentally lazy or overwhelmed worker seeking validation" (BROWN & LEIGH, 2018, p.987). I admit to feelings of problematic benevolence when it came to disability. I knew very little about the social model of disability. "Disability justice" (MINGUS, cited in TAORMINA-WEISS, 2016, p.279) was not a term that lived in my lexicon; my developing intersectional lens often neglected to acknowledge the work of disabled people of color and those with complex, interlocking experiences of illness, wellness, pain, and oppression. Certainly, I recognized the personhood of a variety of body-minds, but I would distance myself from categories of disability, even when I sought hospital treatment for eating distress. That's common, I think. People with eating disorders live at the interstice of disabled and well, too—and there is a distancing I've observed in that world. A distancing from categories of mental illness or physical illness, while living somewhere in between—while experiencing physical and mental pain so extreme it makes you cry as you lie on the floor in the living room, contemplating the peeling paint on the ceiling. [14]

When I began graduate school, I confronted my internalized ableism in the distancing I'd enacted for most of my life. I realized that time is more than simply a marching forward toward an ultimate goal; it is a meandering river of uncertainty, not content to be governed by the neoliberal time-clocks of progression. I thought about how often I struggled to breathe. I thought about the way that my body has impacted my life, as much as it might appear hale and "healthy" in the normative sense. My Masters work brought me into confrontation with my taken-for-granted assumptions about what fits neatly inside and outside of categories of illness. I saw my story of eating disorder re-written into a neater narrative by others at the same time as I was messing this story up and tangling it up in relation to those of my participants. I sat, and I moved semi-obsessively. I wrote. And I hurt. [15]

Disability is political (GREENSTEIN, 2015; RICKELL, 2003; SHAKESPEARE, 2006). I do not and cannot claim that identity fully. But my body impacts my life, my work, my being in the world. SAMUELS (2017) wrote, "disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings" (§17). My life is a dance between linear progression and those "jerky stops and starts." Outwardly, there is the forward motion, hurdling through academia at a rate that attracts no stares. I began university at age 18, dropped out at 20, re-entered at 21, entered my Masters at 23, my PhD at 25, graduated at 29, and began a full-time permanent academic position at 30. The blip of treatment-time barely registers, requiring only the recall of a student number long gone to retrieve a transcript. Outwardly, the narrative is one of success—and I would be lying if I said I had not taken the path of aggressive forward movement at least semi-consciously. I've been ambitious, I've been persistent, and I've been driven to prove myself against the yard stick of outward achievement. Meanwhile, I keep my PhD diploma on my desk, to remind myself that it is real. [16]

As the counterpoint to this progression narrative, there are the grace notes of pain. I've been told that my central nervous system is hypersensitive; I'm poised for seizing up at the slightest variation in my external or internal equilibrium. The flip can switch without warning. Sometimes I feel like I can conquer the world, my body strong and powerful, ready. And some days I wake up and I can barely move. It is hard not to blame my body for this. The predictably unpredictable pattern of pain doesn't begin there, though—it begins in that linear progression narrative. It begins with a whisper of self-doubt, an error found in work I did years ago, a bureaucratic process that overwhelms me. I stew, and then I stop. The furious achievement comes to a screeching halt and I'm frozen. [17]

I work in fits and starts. I have been known to grade 150 essays in 72 hours, to write 8000 words in a day. I move fast—so fast that I get whipped up into a flurry and find myself physically and emotionally gutted. The next day, or the day after that, I wonder why my body hurts. Aches. Frozen. Seized. My experience of time is tied to my experience of pain. I get high off of the adrenaline of productivity—a salve to the wounds of neoliberal time. And then I dip... and writing a single word scrapes agonizingly across my right scapula. And all I can do is breathe. Anxiety hurts. And I'm still trying to figure out where I fit. Is my pain "all in my head"? If it is, is it not also in my body? I reject the Cartesian logic that places my brain in ultimate control, and as separate from my body, not least because my brain is so often wrong about who I am as a human. [18]

My pain has taught me about disability, about complexity, about time. It has not been the isolating experience it is so often called to be (PATSAVAS, 2014); talking about pain, experiencing pain, has brought me into relation more often than not. I have become unapologetic about lying on the ground in all sorts of strange places. At the same time, my other privileges shield me, to a certain extent, from the unwanted gazes and judgment this kind of behavior tends to attract. [19]

PATSAVAS defined a cripistemology of pain as "a process of knowledge production that situates pain within discursive systems of power and privilege" (p.205). I wonder what pain is for others; I've become quite curious about how to put words to bodily sensations. I am curious about my pain, and I am curious about yours; I know that they are not the same. What burns for me might ache for you. I am willing to bet we would choose different faces on a smiley pain scale. [20]

I've rarely left a doctor's office feeling better about my pain. Mostly, doctors have looked me over and prescribed bandaids or dismissal. There is no cure for something that can't be located. It is, therefore, uninteresting. I continue to march on the linear trajectory, experiencing my disruptions as counter to this progress, continually renegotiating my relationship with pain, with recovery, and with time. There are days when I want a cure, and days where I regret the ways that my psyche is, as ever, tied up in the subtle ripples of my back knots. And all I can do is (try to) breathe. [21]

4. Making Sense Through Art

Would it have been possible for me to build a community, reflect on, and make use of my observations on pain, time, and the academy without the avenue of artistic engagement? Much is made of the possibility of arts-based methods to expose new understanding of social issues and personal experiences for participants (BOYDELL, GLADSTONE, VOLPE, ALLEMANG & STASIULIS, 2012; CHAMBERLAIN, McGUIGAN, ANSTISS & MARSHALL, 2018; STEIN & FAIGIN, 2015). Whereas the body of literature on arts-based work does implicate the personal value for researchers, this body of literature is still vulnerable to an over-focus on the benefits of arts-based work *for participants or for knowledge production/dissemination*. I have previously co-written work on the ways in which the arts in general and digital storytelling in particular offers the possibility of troubling the boundaries between researcher and participant (RICE, LaMARRE, CHANGFOOT & DOUGLAS, 2020). In this work, we make the case that in working differently—artistically, and in community—we might consider in a meaningful and deeply embodied way how we too are tied up in the very social systems that we try to explore in our academic work. [22]

And yet, I have been writing this independent piece or some version of it for several years without releasing it to the world. Art, and reflection, occupy deeply personal places, ones not so easily squared with the kind of expertise required of those who are labeled "academics." Others have commented on the value of the arts for reflexive practice in pedagogical contexts, reflecting on how "the importance of artistic expression is immeasurable" both in society broadly and within research processes (BOGUMIL, CAPOUS-DESYLLAS, LARA & RESHETNIKOV, 2017, p.360). Artistic inquiry is clearly more than simply an academic exercise; others before me have drawn on personal connections and commitments to engage with the arts as a medium through which to get in close to social phenomena (e.g., HODGINS & BOYDELL, 2014). I am certainly not the first academic to lay themselves bare through producing and sharing art; in a special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* in 2019, several authors shared their artistic contributions and reflections on research processes, blending the academic and the artistic in ways that reveal the humanness of encounters with texts and research participants (e.g., CREPS, 2019; MACHADO, 2019). Articles in that special issue also unveil the perhaps inescapably extractive nature of much of qualitative research (LIMES-TAYLOR HENDERSON & ESPOSITO, 2019) and bringing in analyses that "question the division between the social reality under study and the social life of research" (ALLEMANN & DUDECK, 2019, p.891). Such analyses have inspired me to interpret and, to a certain extent, expose, my own entangledness with my research in ways that extend beyond the "reflexivity section" of a journal article. [23]

I believe that for me it would not have been possible to unpack the painful embodied experiences of conducting my PhD research without engaging with the arts. Only by embodying did I "unlock" the potential of reflexivity—and I have never found ways of adequately verbalizing the rubs that came up in doing so. Again, here, I encounter the limitations of the written for describing the embodied

(WEISS, 1999). By providing several digital stories throughout this piece, I have embedded at least one other modality through which my reflexive processes over the past nine years might be made visible. In their progression from certainty to openness and questioning, they reflect my progress as an academic. While the movement from certainty to uncertainty may not seem desirable, on the face of it, I take this movement as a positive step toward destabilizing the expertise discourses to which I (and, perhaps, other academics) are drawn. In destabilizing, we open possibilities for new ways of understanding. In struggling to put words to the embodied explorations many of us engage in, we might call into question the fixing of certainty or staticness to participants' accounts, as well. All meanings are negotiated and in constant flux, constructed for a particular audience, and not possible to know in the kind of deeply embodied way they likely exist. This statement is not intended to suggest that all is ultimately unknowable but rather to offer a (hopefully reassuring) perspective on the conduct of research and the embodiment of "expert." We none of us are experts—sometimes not even over our own embodied experiences. What we *can* offer, though—to ourselves, to participants, to the scholarly communities we are a part of—is an always contextual and exploratory provocation. [24]

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