

My dysphoria blues: Or why I cannot write an autoethnography.

In this essay I would like to ask if we are concerned with writing about difference or writing differently. I attempt to present an account of my on-going experience of dysphoria and consider how I write about that experience. I reveal how my writing has no epiphany, is repetitive and in its characterless depiction of others is a 2-dimensional, monologue that fails the conventions of an evocative autoethnographic account. My writing is 'bad writing' but what should become of it? Does a concern with style, whether or not over content, based on taste preclude some stories and different ways of writing? Should I be excluded from academe and silenced, or can room be found for a tasteless account like mine? I end my essay by provocatively owning the label of bad writing.

In this essay I wish to consider my somatic experience of managing dysphoria and reflect a little on writing autoethnographically. My account veers from a reflexive narrative of life events already lived and understood towards a presentation of an unfolding life as it is lived. I thus wish to ask a question: is my processual account more one where I muddle through and learn by doing than a reflexive one? More pointedly – do I write autoethnographically or is it merely self-indulgent, bad writing?

This essay is a subjective, emotive, and at times, visceral account of two aspects of my life as a non-binary transgender person - transition and dysphoria. (I am 'non-binary' as I do not identify as either male or female.) Transition and dysphoria appear as tropes in official medical narratives and many lay autobiographies of transsexual folk (Prosser 1998) but whilst they are pertinent to my life I would contend that it is not in the way those official narratives suggest. My concern with dysphoria arises as it is officially presented as the cause of transsexuality but a cause overcome by transition. Transition and dysphoria officially are thus definitional of the transsexual subject but rather strangely transition negates dysphoria and so erases the transsexual subject. My experience of dysphoria differs and may offer a counter-narrative that adds a different voice and understanding of this complicated trope. I find they cross over, inter-relate and become braided together in a way glossed by official narratives. That I cannot untangle this braid, part constitutional of my lived life, is evident in my narrative where there is often not a clear boundary between the two and one infects and provides meaning for the other.

My story is one where an un-reflexive self endures, rather than achieves, (self-)improvement. Such a meta-reflection on reflexivity and what it means to write subjectively may be of interest to those concerned with writing differently and with issues of (self-)knowledge and learning. It is an essay that contains more questions than answers – how can I find answers to my life even whilst it unravels as I blunder through repeating past mistakes and making new ones? This essay makes very little attempt to explain my life to a reader; it does not convince by logic, rational argument or weight of objective evidence and analysis but attempts an emotional resonance through an evocation of an abject life not by writing well but by writing badly.

Bad writing

Since Geertz (1977. See also Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus, 1986) first wrote of 'the crisis of representation' autoethnography has become an established method and voice in social science. For Anzaldúa (1981 and 1987) writing about difference, or rather writing difference, is not just for those able to write well, different voices, particularly those so often silenced by the demands of academic

writing, must also be heard. In autoethnography – and I would suggest in academe generally - difference is something we write *of* but often excluded from how we write: one *must* write well or not at all.

Autoethnography, often criticised as a self-indulgent narcissism made public, is considered credible when a reader is convinced that the story is plausible (Ellis et al., 2010). Plausibility requires an evocative account where a reader can follow a narrative path toward an intended conclusion. Autoethnography, in short, should have the aesthetic merit of being a coherent, consistent, convincing and well written teleological story ‘capable of being respected by critics of literature as well as social scientists’ (Denzin, 1997, 200 quoted in Spry, 2001 713). It is not sufficient to write and reflect on one’s life; one must also write *well*.

Le Roux (2017), following Pace (2012), suggests autoethnography be considered as a continuum ranging between the evocative and the analytic: the first conveys emotional experience and achieves an emotional resonance (Anderson, 2006); the second narrativises one’s experience as empirical evidence for analysis to theorise broader social issues. Maréchal (2009) adds a third – postmodern/post structural accounts that may be fragmented and include multiple viewpoints and may overlap with ‘new ethnography’ (Goodall, 2006). Regardless of the paradigmatic differences evident between analytic and evocative standpoints both require autoethnography to achieve aesthetic merit and reflexivity. Autoethnographic accounts must satisfy both academic and literary criteria or be deemed ‘bad’. Given this emphasis on aesthetic merit I beg to ask if one must remain silent if one writes poorly?

I am no Proust able to evoke lost time, what I write is mediocre. I was never taught how to write at school, we were just expected to get on with it. It really didn’t matter what we wrote just so long as we wrote something, anything. If we wrote enough we would surely learn how to write well through osmosis and repetition. But the lie evident in the enthusiastic cry ‘just write’ was made clear when my essays were returned with words, phrases, sentences and whole paragraphs circled, underlined and crossed out. With every mistake underlined in red the page changed colour. The barbed comments about my rebarbative writing summarised as a percentage easily mistakable for a mark out of ten. ‘See me!! Incorrect use of the subjunctive!!!’ My writing was judged so bad that one exclamation mark was not enough. My English teacher’s annoyance made manifest by how hard she had pressed her biro to etch those words onto all the succeeding pages of my work book and so predict that all my subsequent attempts would also contain an ‘incorrect use of the subjunctive!!!’

But still I didn’t learn. Aged 12 I didn’t know what my teacher meant by ‘subjunctive’ and I still do not. Then, as now, my essays are poorly written, repetitive, grammatically flawed on a line by line basis, of no interest to a reader and in a nut shell plain badly written. I am a bad writer but does this mean I have nothing worth saying?

Much of what I write is laboured and tendentious – a tendency Grey and Sinclair (2006) express aesthetic concern over. They regard bad writing as deliberative of a pretentiousness and obfuscation that does not aim to convince through clarity of prose but confound and confuse and one often reliant on multiple academic citations. And not just any citations but those of white, male, Anglo-European obscure philosophers misunderstood by all but the authors, and best of all dead. Citation not a means to support an argument but to show off how much one has read rather than how well one reads: never mind the quality, feel the width. Bad writing goes hand in hand with bad reading. They exhort us instead to ‘write more stylishly and accessibly’ (449) because:

Good writing is suggestive and pungent, it evokes feelings—relief, recognition, drama, disdain, horror—and bodily responses—the flush of recognition and the sharp intake of breath, the tingle as

we feel that this might be showing us something we hadn't thought or experienced before. Good writing is often unpredictable—shocking in its terseness or economy, audacious in its sudden sweep or the intimacy of a confidence. (452)

At first this concern appears to echo Sedgwick's (1990) bearding of much of academic prose as 'flat' but it goes much further. For Sedgwick, or at least what I understand by her, academic writing often assumes a neutral, thus supposedly objective, voice and authorial distance in contrast to prose that forsakes distance in its audacity not to shock but emotionally affect a reader. To describe academic writing as 'flat' does not however dismiss it as 'bad' – indeed Sedgwick (1987) uses both flat and emotive prose for different ends - but rather provides a descriptive label. Flat writing has a certain logic, purpose, and is allowed a space.

My writing is a 'corrupted reflexivity ... [as a] self-flagellating defence against criticism' (Grey and Sinclair, 2006, 447). Masochism writ large; bad writing indeed. Good writing has no truck with difference and no taste for 'modes other than the declamatory or the plain' (Hayot, 2014, 59) little realising that such judgements are only an expression of an equally self-indulgent sense of taste. Good writing, palisaded behind a once arbitrary but now objectified sense of taste, excludes what it is not, not through self-flagellation but through a narcissistic inflation of ego that achieves its purity by denying a world of difference (Bersani and Phillips, 2008). Writing differently or cant?

I am not a critical management scholar or for that matter an academic but nonetheless feel the weight of Grey and Sinclair's (2006) judgement. The demand of good writing fills me with dread and despair and nearly scares me into silence. But I have learnt to be self-indulgent over many years and even if my writing is habitually bad no longer feel bad about it.

[It's all about me and writing transgender narratives](#)

Anteby (2013) argues that autoethnography is particularly suited for management research concerned with diversity and the experiences of marginalised identities since it 'lend[s] visibility to less common experience' (1284). These subjective accounts provide both a proximal account and understanding and add polyvocality to the more distanced, neutral and objective accounts more common place. They rely not just on the writer's presence in the narrative but also on analysing their personal investment and involvement to lay bare the exotic within the mundane as if the mundane was not sufficient (Poulos, 2009). For Poulos the secrets, lies and contradictions of an otherwise mundane life may stretch it so thin as to break its elastic limit. These thin descriptions may reveal a dark side for ethnography to explore issues of vulnerability and abjection to complement Geertz's (1973) cry for thick ones. Such self-reflexivity whilst 'noticeably absent from contemporary organizational scholarship' (Anteby, 2013, 1281) may be particularly suited to writing transgender stories.

Away from management academia Jay Prosser (1998) discusses both autobiographical accounts of being transsexual and how transsexual subjects are often depicted in official accounts to question the trope of 'transition' for us trans folk. Transsexual autobiographies are considered to provide a potential counter narrative to the official, often medicalised, descriptions of us. Prosser places considerably more emphasis than Anteby on the potential politics involved between officially sanctioned and counter narratives. The former are about but fundamentally not ours yet the latter may be dismissed as vanity projects particularly if they do not cleave to official analysis and tropes.

Since Brewis et al (1997) first wrote in a management and organizational context about transgender folk there remain very few accounts of us folk in managerial and organizational settings. Those that exist allegorise (Brewis et al 1997; Pullen and Rhodes, 2013; Pullen et al 2017), or provide qualitative

empirical examples ranging from those where a researcher tells our stories (Muhr and Sullivan, 2013; Muhr, Sullivan and Rich, 2015; Schilt, 2006; Schilt and Connell, 2007; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009) to self-reflexive accounts (Author, 2016 and 2018; Thanem, 2011; Thanem and Knights, 2012; Thanem and Wallenberg, 2015). This polyphony of methodological concerns and understandings present transgender as a polyseme but where it is not always evident which transgender folk are represented by the stories told.

Transgender, commonly considered an 'umbrella term' under which those whose gender presentation differs from that required by a normative society, is based on a heterosexual binary (Butler 1990, 1993). The umbrella includes but is not limited to, for instance, cross-dressers, transvestites, drag kings and queens, and transsexual folk but where transsexuality is considered more narrowly as grounded in genital dysphoria. Dysphoria here results in a desire to undergo an invasive, difficult and high risk medical transition to align external appearance with internalised identity where a male subject becomes female, or vice versa, to achieve coherence between ontological and somatic selves in a story grounded in presumptions of a binarized cis-normativity (Butler, 1990).

Transition provides the basis of mirror stories that dominate our subjective, unofficial biographies where a post-surgery person finally regards their reflection as their true self, official medical stories, and popular media accounts of transsexuality (Prosser, 1998). To be officially regarded as transsexual both grounds and starts the treatment pathway for transsexual folk: one must identify first as a transsexual to be referred for multiple psychological assessment that formally diagnosis the condition of transsexuality. It is only once one has an official diagnosis that transition officially starts: this narrative glosses that one must first be transsexual to be diagnosed as transsexual and so be permitted to become transsexual (Spade, 2006). A failure to establish and repeat this circle carries a heavy price – the removal of care. (See Spade, 2006 for a description of how treatment was withheld from him in the US of A. In the UK medical treatment only commences after multiple diagnoses and reassessments. Break this circle and treatment may be withdrawn or withheld.)

I was first referred by my GP for treatment in March 2015; my first diagnosis was in July 2016, confirmed by a different specialist in October and who approved the commencement of hormone treatment in January 2017. It is now March 2018 and I wait for a transfer to another specialist for conformation of my diagnosis only after which will I be referred to a specialist surgeon where my diagnosis will again be discussed. If surgery is approved I will then join a waiting list for surgery. It is not without irony that trans folk repeatedly question this circular pathway.

It is not just the official narratives however that gloss how we trans folk move through repetitive diagnostic stages toward an eventual treatment and 'cure'. The dominant lay story of transition is one written *post*-transition where the one who writes recalls both their past divided selves and reveals themselves to be what those divided selves wished to become but is otherwise absent from the story. Retrospection allows for a coherent teleological story as a clear path through life is revealed and where any dead ends, aimless wanderings or circular routes taken can be glossed. These stories reveal a strange erasure where the one who writes is not the persons written of and where the subjects of the story desire their own erasure and are no longer here; the writers have transitioned are cured of and sundered from their past. The subject of transition is an un-reflexive dupe waiting for the Godot writing their story to finally, hopefully, wistfully make an appearance, but an appearance that presages the subject's demise.

An alternative and often transphobic media story of transition refuses to let go of a past preferred lost in the previous lay accounts. This lost past – the historical, biographical self - is dragged up in

such a way that newspapers present trans folk as 'X' born 'Y' to question the validity of 'X'. This is less a past self subsumed in to the present than one invoked to undo the reality of the present where, for instance, Caitlyn Jenner will never be allowed to be a 'real' woman (Author 2016). Such transphobic narratives are not Hegelian narratives of improvement but instead condemn us to an endlessly repeated past co-existent with a present to negate different futures.

These timeless stories cross each other to form a subject supposedly made whole through reflexivity and knowledge that Leo Bersani (2013) critiques as a Cartesian spectral figure neither present here nor quite there that has abandoned its past. This however is not my story. I have never had an epiphany. I have never looked in a mirror to have a road to Damascus revelation and suddenly seen myself anew. I have instead always been becoming trans.

Against the official medical story, the dominant lay narrative and popular media accounts is a fourth story but one that Prosser (1998) argues is seldom told – that of 'transitioning' subjects rather than of transition past. Lives lived rarely follow simple, coherent pathways toward a definite goal but are messy, full of wrong turns and contain misunderstandings, mistakes, secrets and lies (Goodall, 2006). A 'transitioning' story is a processual memoir rather than an autobiographical recollection. As memoir it is not written by a better self who has learnt the lessons of their past but instead reveals a flawed subject who makes, and often repeats the same, mistakes; who stumbles through life unsure of where their path takes them and what the future may hold and what direction to follow. As Peppiatt (2015: ix) writes a memoir 'far from the objective account of a life... presents an intimate, revealing portrait... in a way that no formal biography could convey'. In a memoir we may carry our past with us not as something we already understand, have learnt from and so directs our steps along the correct path in life but instead as memories that help orientate us towards and suggest possible futures (Ahmed, 2006). It is here, I would suggest, that we might begin to find my counter narrative to transition.

My mum tells me that I chose to wear my sister's clothes aged 4 (author, 2017). A photo of me aged 15 - pink Mohican, ripped CRASS t-shirt, DMs and a black skirt. Another aged 19 – an early girlfriend wraps her arms around me and we smile into the camera. I'm clearly wearing a pale blue dress covered in white embroidered birds in the photo. I came out to her a few years back and she responded by saying, 'That doesn't surprise me at all. It was always obvious.' There has been no epiphany; I have always been transsexual yet I am only now officially in transition.

Those who are non-binary are erased from an official narrative where binary transsexuals exist pre- or post-transition but never as transitioning. In a concern to write about difference we should not lose a focus on a diversity of voices and identities.

I write while under erasure.

My UK passport allows me only to be male or female and my driving license codes me as female. Only one or the other, never both, never neither, and never between. The UK Ministry of Justice says non-binary folk do not exist. I have been told frequently by some binary transsexuals that non-binary 'ruin' things for them as they turn away and refuse to accept us under the transgender umbrella. For many non-binary is an embarrassment, something to deride and pour scorn on, something to deny three times before their sun rise.

This is my memoir as a non-binary person writing of my desire not to be a binary sex/gender and where my dysphoria queers official and lay binary transgender tropes. Bad writing by a 'bad transsexual'.

I have always been trans...

... But I have also long been dysphoric and the latter may not simply be formative of the former. Not all transsexual folk experience dysphoria despite it being a definitional trope to the extent of desiring medical transition. Some of us may never transition, others may transition but have a different experience of dysphoria, and some may be dysphoric but do not want to align body with an internal sense of self (Bornstein, 1994; Author, 2017).

My dysphoria blues. A non-binary counter narrative

The needle slides in and I watch blood flow in to the first of three small, coloured ampules.

'It's a small price to pay to be happy. You must be so much happier now that you can be you!' I look at the practice nurse taking my blood for my routine quarterly hormone level analysis.

Haven't I always been me? Briefly, oh so very briefly, I contemplate my reply, before concurring, 'Yes, you're right, I'm so much happier now.' I tell her nothing of the verbal abuse and physical and sexual assaults that I routinely experience. I tell her nothing of the poverty and unemployment that is my unchanging life. There's no point.

Why did I tell the practice nurse that transition makes me happy? She expects affirmation of the official monosemic understanding of trans folk where we are expected to desire transition to align a sense of self with a somatic reality and where dysphoria is presumed localised at erogenous zones. A belief that also forms the basis of popular lay 'sex change' stories (Prosser, 1998). Such an alignment supposedly reduces dysphoria and consequently increase positive affective states, including happiness. It is not however my experience and story – my dysphoria is not localised erogenically but is felt elsewhere - at my neck, left shin and left arm. Despite this my official NHS narrative not only talks of genital dysphoria, it ignores my actual dysphoria.

The clinician asks about dysphoria and I tell her how I dislike certain parts of my body but not why. She shows no interest, takes no notes and stops me to pointedly ask instead about sex. I describe myself as anally passive. She perks up, 'So you don't like your penis?'

'I don't hate it. I've gotten used to having one. I just prefer only to urinate with it.'

'But you don't like it sexually.' A statement not a question. She starts writing once more. My notes now describe me as dysphoric.

My on-going transition has not decreased my dysphoria that still comes in waves so unbearable that I suffer suicidal ideation How might I reveal I manage ideation by self-harming when I know that to speak of either may result in the termination of treatment? Even if she had the time to listen how do I speak to her when to talk about my life may drag up memories that trigger my dysphoria? It is far easier to repeat the medicalised myth and say I'm happy and align with the official medical story of my life. I am left alone with it and must find a non-official means to cope. The circle remains unbroken. And so I self-harm.

On my back in the dark

New Year's Eve 2015 I stand alone surrounded by revellers in a pub in Newcastle. A group of 4 or 5 young guys lark about, daring each other to 'twist his nipple'. I edge away not wanting to be caught up in audience participation. But not far enough. One staggers towards me and then puts his arm

around my neck and pulls me toward him. 'Fuck off! Leave me alone. Get off me.' I rage at him. Scalded he lets go. It's impossible to know who is more embarrassed and shocked by my over-reaction, him or me. I fill the silence, 'Sorry it's been a bad day.' I don't really know if I'm apologising to him or trying to excuse myself. And to what day do I refer?

...

47 years previously, engrossed in mimicing the few strokes of a pen by Givenchy for a dress design, I was oblivious to the world. Oblivious of my father, back from the parade ground, entering the room. Oblivious of him crossing the space between us to look over my shoulder at what I was doing. Oblivious until I felt his hand close under my chin and clamp tight around my neck and throat.

Forced up slowly, very slowly by an inexorable, upward pressure, I rose from the chair to stand on tip toes as he stared at my sketches and the fashion magazine scattered across the kitchen table. 'Why,' he breathed in to my ear, 'can't you draw cars, or cowboys like the other boys?'

I had no answer, couldn't answer, all I could think of was both my neck, suddenly very conscious of its fragility, and that I was slowly choking. More upward pressure and momentarily I dangled off the floor. Then the hand was gone and I fell face forward down towards the table...

'Stop trying to scratch,' my mum admonishes me. 'You need to wear the brace a while yet. Maybe that will teach you not to ride your sister's bike.' And she gives me a long hard, quizzical look, 'Funny how there's no scrapes or bruises.'

...

Aged 14 I'm overly proud of my dress and take every opportunity to wear it outside school. At school I'm restricted to wearing the standard boy's uniform of trousers, shirt and jumper but outside I can be myself, just another teenage punk dressed in ripped jeans, t-shirt, and an army surplus coat. And my sister's dress.

Last week school finished for Summer and tonight there's a party to celebrate. I make the rounds saying hello to friends, ignoring and avoiding enemies, a little curious about those I don't know but am too shy to say hello to. I step in to kitchen to get a glass and bump in to my friend's older sister. I chat to her briefly before her boyfriend appears and drags her away. She shouts, 'Dump your coat in my bedroom.'

The bedroom light is on and I chuck my coat on the pile. Feeling guilty but fascinated I look at the make-up arranged on the bedroom table. The door opens behind me and I mutter, 'Just dump your coat with the others.' The light goes out and I'm grabbed, spun round and pushed face down in to the pile of clothes. I'm pinned down by someone kneeling on my neck and back, my right arm caught underneath me, my left pulled up and to the side in an arm lock.

'Pull his pants down.' There is more than one of them in the room. 'Keep still poof. Your sort like this.' Struggling for breath I feel something hard and cold pushed against my leg. 'Stop struggling!'

...And I find myself on the settee at home. 'Back in the land of the living? It must have been a good party.' There's a bucket next to me. I can smell Dettol, which adds to my feeling of nausea and disorientation. I'm not sure how I got here, I've blanked out hours of my life that I don't want to think about.

'Um, sorry. Was I sick?'

'Yes. Quite a bit but it doesn't matter, everyone gets drunk at least once in their life. Tell me about the party'

'I've got to go to the toilet.' I rush upstairs and in to the bathroom where I lock the door. Dry retching over with I sit on the toilet and try to 'go'. 'Going' is incredibly, horribly, painful, like I'm shitting glass. It leaves me sobbing in pain, shaking, gasping for breath, in a cold sweat and on the verge of vomiting. Eventually I reach behind with a wad of toilet paper and try to wipe myself clean. The paper comes away soaked in blood, stained with shit. Blood and shit; I flush the paper away. Blood and shit; I flush me way.

I sit there for a long moment wondering what to do next; scared what to do next. I can hear my mum moving about downstairs. Very soon she'll want to know why I'm taking so long. I rifle through the bathroom cabinet and take a razor blade and track it down the length of my upper arm. Once, twice, I lose count of how many times I do this lost as I am in my desire to clean myself.

Weeks later I confess to my mum that my arm has gone septic. She removes the bandage, 'How on earth did you do this?' My arm is a maze of infected cuts and scars, some oozing yellow pus.

'I fell off a bike. It's road rash.' I lie.

'But only hurt your arm? Really? No other cuts anywhere else? No bruises? Nothing?' She stares at me, incredulous. She doesn't believe me but I remain silent and eventually she lets it slide

...

1980. A tent in a field of tents away from the noise of the stage. In my afterglow I lie hidden from the world outside, protected by his encircling arms. I stretch against him as he stirs and gently runs his finger down my cheek and nuzzles and kisses my neck. Happy in his embrace I sigh wanting this moment to echo throughout my future years as something to remember and cherish.

Samuel Beckett's (1980) novella 'Company' repeats the refrain 'you are on your back in the dark' and through repetition asks if life is ceaseless repetition 'with only minor variants the same bygone' (5). Still later:

Another trait the flat tone. No life. Same flat tone at all times. For its affirmations. For its negations. For its interrogations. For its exclamations. For its imperations. Same flat tone. You were once. You were never. Were you ever? Oh never to have been! Be again. Same flat tone.'

Bersani (2013: 32) considers if memory 'allows us to sequester the past in the past' as a function of a supposedly conscious, thinking and reflexive subject. I have a wealth of memories both bad and good about my neck but some seem too much for me. The ellipses marking the start and end of the middle two of the four vignettes above hide what I do not remember, or perhaps more precisely, what I do not want to remember. The past is however not so easily sequestered. Whilst those ellipses mark memories I'd rather forget they still rear up to infect and stretch thin the mundane present (Poulos, 2006). In the absence of memory, in the void marked by three dots, I cannot reflect on, and so cannot learn from, what I wish to forget. In refusing to remember I may be doomed to drift aimless, lost in an open field previously traversed a thousand times before only to find myself still nowhere in particular. There is no epiphany.

Perhaps the closest I have ever come to an epiphany was the slow, rising realisation of my ex partner's destructive transphobia. That dull, flat repetition enacted over more than 8 years (hardly an overnight revelation!) finally weighed so heavily on me that I could endure it no further. This was no

epiphany but a flat despair I tried (but have not managed) to escape from, first by self-harming and then by exchanging one vulnerable life for another - poverty and homelessness in preference to the cyclical everyday similitude of marital abuse. It hardly matters; the same flat tone realised through dysphoria and self-harm.

I am told that my writing is repetitive and that merely repeating a point does not make it more true. I am told that my repetitions detract from coherence as I circle round to find fault with, and pick holes in, things previously said. But I am not trying to establish a coherent truth. In repeating myself I want to question how things remain the same even whilst change occurs. Repetition allows me to revisit an event to draw out and dwell on different details and so add density to my account not through polyvocality but polyseme. It lets me look at a single issue not to find similitude but different perspectives to try to capture a kaleidoscopic, if not a 3-dimensional, image. My vignettes reveal what I know to be true - I don't like my neck being touched as it nearly always seems to end in tears; mine. The same flat tone as a similitude calls up my rage where my neck is a locus of pain and painful memories. But is it only this? In raging I forget I once wanted someone to stroke my neck and for the memory of that touch to echo on forever – *that* truth seems lost amongst the others, hidden by the ellipses that hide what I do not remember and do not want to recall but cannot seem to forget. A truth forsaken to maintain the comforting silencing of others. Perhaps what I mistake for similitude is merely my ordering of disparate memories to make a coherent narrative.

I am made worse than Beckett's subject since I do not repeat experiences in a spiralling temporalisation (Bersani, 2013) that bring me back to myself changed but unchanging (Peppiatt, 2015: 283-316). I instead seem to move along a hysteresis loop to find myself both back where I started but inverted. In raging at the poor guy in the bar I become what I fear most; my father mirrored in his child. Where is the polyvocality? My father does not have an opportunity to speak for himself in my vignette. He has no voice.

The father whom I run from was once real. His biography would reveal the second youngest in a family of 11 brothers and sisters. A life of urban poverty in the slums of Cork, Dublin and Liverpool only escaped by joining the Army where he was stripped of his past to become a parade ground RSM and learnt to rage his pain at others (a mirror story of sorts). In my writing he has no vitality, no hopes, dreams or motivation other than to be brutal. I do not talk of a man who could be endlessly generous to his friends and found salvation in work but drowned himself in whiskey. I dehumanise him and replace his humanity with a vile brutality. Even if this was fiction he would make for a weak, shallow character but I victimise him in yet another cyclic repetition where abuser becomes abused by the abused; similitude achieved, the same flat tone. I invoke a 2-dimensional, depthless cipher to excuse myself of blame. If a researcher should aim to do no harm than I have failed quite spectacularly. This abhorrent child that I am is worse than the origin to write a self-flagellating, self-shattering ego inflation that refuses both what it is and is not. I am no postmodern auto-ethnographer. Bad writing. Indeed.

[My dysphoria once more – a vulnerable conclusion of sorts](#)

Does writing of my past bind me to an unchanging past-present? How do I write when there is little, if any, similitude? Am I left frozen in time and on my back in the dark unable to change, unable to transition?

An email arrives recommending minor revisions for this essay. An email that means I must revisit my same flat tone many times. How may I change, let alone improve, my writing when each time I read I

start to cry, the words dissolving on the screen like a corrupt email (McGregor2002)? I can barely see, let alone write. I am not enough for this.

... Aged 5 I tried to auto-castrate in the hope that if I could be more like my sister my father might cease to rage.

... Aged 14 ideation first became physical reality as I ran a blade along my arms. Real again aged 21 and 54.

... Aged 27 and I had stopped self-harming for 6 years. Except for when I broke a wine glass and drove the stem in to the palm of my left hand before raking it up and down my arm. Now I have tiny slivers of glass in my palm, a memorial to my friend Jason who had to go and get HIV. Who had to go and die aged just 25.

... Aged 47 and I've started self-harming again, cutting my upper arm and my left shin. It helps me cope with the transphobic abuse I get. Or perhaps it merely marks it.

... 53 and I still self-harm. Two weeks ago someone my ex sent me a series of emails; emails that I read in the quiet study area in the city library. They start by accusing me of being infected with HIV. Disgusting, degraded, polluted, I'm not a human but a vector of disease and contamination. Mere words on a screen that invade me; the email corrupts me. Without thinking I rake my fingernails along my left shin as I read, re-read and re-read again those emails. I brush hair from my face and smell the iron stink of blood on my fingers, under my nails. I shut down my laptop, pack up and leave. I need to continue but away from anyone who might ask what I'm doing and why I'm doing it. I need to just do this rather than think about or explain it.

My self-harming and bad writing are not just masochistic self-flagellation – if only things were so simple and clean. I self-harm as a way to cope with my dysphoria rather than forget or negate it. This is not an *ébranlement* that links Thanatos with Eros through a self-destructive, ruinous intimacy (Bersani, 1987 and 1995). Like Yanagihara's (2015) 'Jude' I self-harm to cope, cutting myself momentarily breaks ideation brought on through dysphoria and tethers me to my life: realising I literally have blood on my hands, under my fingernails, brings me back to myself. Self-harming does not reveal a hierophanic space where epiphany may occur (Poulos, 2006) to negate dysphoria, it is merely a way to cope with a life made vulnerable. Nothing negates my dysphoria, not even the official narratives that elide my dysphoria blues.

Autoethnography is expected to be well written to evoke an epiphanic experience and provide an understanding through emotional resonance. I have never had the epiphany of a mirror experience that reveals me to myself as transgender – I have always been trans. This essay is not written by a future me made better through reflexivity but in the present by a me that continues to endure a vulnerable life as it repeats. What resonates through my life, hidden in the ellipses of my memories, are painful events I choose not to remember. They undo, rather than constitute, a different future me. Unlike Derrida (1995; Author, 2002) I do not ask of a deferred future self 'when will you come?' It has always been here beckoning me with the injunction 'Come!' in to a future I only vaguely glimpse and dooms me to repeat a past I would rather forget.

Good autoethnographic writing attends to the requirements of a well presented narrative, has believable, 3 dimensional characters and is polyvocal in order to convince a reader of the truth of the story with a coherent and logical narrative. I fail at this utterly – my narrative is instead a monovocal argument that undoes any chance of a logical narrative in a circular account that both refuses similitude and questions official stories yet offers little if anything in exchange. I am not sure

if my bad writing is down to my ignorance, or from trying to write a processual account as I muddle through life. If I have any excuse for such self-indulgent writing it is because it may reveal how transgender has a polysemic nature that may not be understood by only reading or writing one form of narrative.

I accept the label 'bad writing' for my work to claim and own it. If I am a bad writer so be it, I am not ashamed to be one, it, like being transgender, non-binary and dysphoric is what I am. This is not a story, it is my little life.

References

- Ahmed, S (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. London: Duke University Press.
- Anderson, L (2006) Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35: 373–395.
- Anzaldúa, G (1981) La Prieta. In: C M Moraga and G Anzaldúa (eds) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*. Berkeley, CA: 3rd Woman Press, pp. 198–209.
- Anzaldúa, G (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute.
- Anteby, M (2013) Relaxing the Taboos on Telling Our Own Stories: Upholding Professional Distance and Personal Involvement. *Organization Science* 24(4): 1277-1290.
- Author (2002)
- Author (2016)
- Author (2017)
- Beckett, S (1980) Company. In: Beckett, S *Nohow on: Company, Ill Seen Ill said, and Worstward Ho*. London: Grove press.
- Bersani, L (1987) Is the Rectum a Grave? *October* 43: 197-222.
- Bersani, L (1995) *Homos*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bersani, L (2013) I Can Dream, Can't I? *Critical Inquiry* 40(Autumn): 25-39.
- Bersani, L and Philips, A (2008) *Intimacies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bornstein, K (1994) *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge.
- Brewis, J, Hampton, MP and Linstead, S (1997) Unpacking Priscilla: Subjectivity and Identity in the Organization of Gendered Appearance. *Human Relations* 50(10): 1275–304.
- Butler, J (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J (1993) *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York: Routledge.
- Clifford, J (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, J, and Marcus, GE (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Derrida, J (1995) Sauf le Nom (Post-scriptum). In: J. Derrida *On the Name* (trans D Wood). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ellis, C, Adams, TE and Bochner, AP (2010) Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* [Forum: Qualitative social research] 12(1), Art. 10. Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108>
- Denzin, NK (1997) *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. London: Sage.
- Garfinkel, H (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Geertz, C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goodall, H.L. (2006) A Need to Know: The Clandestine History of a CIA Family. New York: Routledge.
- Grey, C and Sinclair, A (2006) Writing Differently. *Organization* 13(3): 443-453.
- Hayot, E (2014) Academic Writing, I Love You. Really, I Do. *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Autumn): 53-77.
- McGregor, J (2002) *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Maréchal, G (2009) Autoethnography. In AJ Mills, G Durepos and E Wiebe (eds) *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 43–45.
- Moraga, CM and Anzaldúa, G (eds. 1981) *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*. Berkeley, CA: 3rd Woman Press.
- Muhr, SL and Sullivan, KR (2013) “None so Queer as Folk” Gendered Expectations and Transgressive Bodies in Leadership. *Leadership* 9(3): 416–35.
- Muhr, SL, Sullivan, KR and Rich, C (2015) Situated Transgressiveness: Exploring One Transwoman’s Lived Experiences across Three Situated Contexts. *Gender, Work and Organization*. Published online before print May 26, doi: 10.1111/gwao.12093
- Pace, S (2012). *Writing the Self into Research: Using Grounded Theory Analytic Strategies in Autoethnography*. Retrieved from <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue13/Pace.pdf>
- Peppiatt, M (2015) *Francis Bacon in Your Blood. A Memoir*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Poulos, CN (2009) *Accidental Ethography: An Inquiry into Family Secrecy*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Prosser, J (1998) *Second Skins. The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pullen, A and Rhodes, C (2013) Parody, Subversion and the Politics of Gender at Work: the Case of *Futurama’s ‘Raging Bender’*. *Organization* 20(4): 512-533.
- Pullen, A, Rhodes, C and Thanem, T (2017) Affective Politics in Gendered Organizations: Affirmative Notes on Becoming-Woman. *Organization* 24(1): 105-123.
- Le Roux, C (2017) Exploring Rigour in Autoethnographic Research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 20(2): 195-207.
- Sedgwick, ES (1987) A Poem is being Written. *Representations* 17 (Winter): 110-143.

- Sedgwick, ES (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Spry, T (2001) Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7: 706–732.
- Schilt, K (2006) Just One of the Guys? How Transmen Make Gender Visible at Work. *Gender and Society* 20(4): 465-90.
- Schilt, K and Connell, C (2007) Do Workplace Gender Transitions Make Gender Trouble? *Gender, Work and Organization* 14(6): 596-618.
- Schilt, K and Westbrook, L (2009) Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: “Gender normals,” Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality. *Gender and Society* 23: 440-64
- Spade, D (2006) Mutilating gender. In: Stryker, S and Whittle, S, (eds.) *The Transgender Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp. 315-332.
- Thanem, T (2011) Embodying Transgender in Studies of Gender, Work and Organisation. In: Jeanes, E, Knights, D and Yancey Martins, P (eds.) *Gender, Work and Organization Handbook*. Wiley: Oxford, pp. 191-204.
- Thanem, T and Knights, D (2012) Feeling and Speaking through our Gendered Bodies: Embodied Self-reflection and Research Practice in Organisation Studies. *International Journal of Work Organisation and Emotion* 5(1): 91-108.
- Thanem T and Wallenberg, L (2015) Just Doing Gender? Transvestism and the Power of Underdoing Gender in Everyday Life and Work. *Organization* 22(2): 235-250.
- Yanagihara, H (2015) *A Little Life*. London: Picador.