



Abandoned ideas and the energies of failure

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ABSTRACT

Our academic life is ripe with failures and things abandoned, with hurt and feelings of defeat and despair. Already as students, we learn how to hide and tuck away such experiences and the impact they have on us. As a result of this the surfaces of our texts, our presentations, the things we make, have come to resemble certain industrial products, cleansed of any traces of dirt, human toil, crookedness and suffering. However, that which we hide tends to live on, even when we succeed to forget its existence – as bodily tensions and shame, roaming around in our interiors, eating their way into our practises. In this article, three authors, together and by themselves, explore the hidden geographies of abandoned ideas and failures both as a cultural phenomenon and as bodily experiences. Our hope in doing this is to open up for more gentle and affirmative practices, practises that release the energies of the hidden; the hurtful, the minor, the modest, the bent, tentative and crooked. To be able to resist, to counteract we have to begin with what we are forced to forget, hide and suppress.

1. Introduction

In extension of recent theorisations of failure, we will try to thematise what Horton described as “the increased acknowledgement of *failure as unspoken*: a typically unsaid, although everyday experience within the contemporary academy” (Horton, 2020, p. 2). We will try to do this by reflecting over the hiding away of failure, that is, writing *about* it within contexts we are used to, but also by “acting our failures out”, by experimenting with *writing* them out into the world. We will do this by avoiding censoring ourselves in ways we are used to, but try to censor ourselves differently. We will not eradicate the traces of pain in our sentences, the shame and uncertainty from our paragraphs and by toning down the urge to process, understand and qualify in ways that leave the tentative, the shivering, the failing without voice, unspoken.

For the most part, we are able to hide or camouflage our shortcomings, defeats and misfortunes. We are expected to do so, as adults, and even more so as scholars. Our skill in this is most evident in our texts, where we demonstrate our ability to handle and process subjects, questions and answers in legitimate and acceptable ways. The bulk of academic research, in journals and books, reveals few traces of how they came in to being. They are purified of things and thoughts not deemed worthy, purged of failures and their ghosts. In this article, we want to move our attention backwards, through our bodies, to the things and thoughts that we have left behind, that are carved into our corporalities,

hidden in their depths, inscribed on our backs and sometimes get visible through rifts and openings in our skin; a sudden rush of blood that creates nervous flecks on our throats. Since this is a text, we must fold our arguments through text, through the screen, back inward and then outward again, to try to face and take hold of what is made invisible, of what is abandoned. We write about this in some sort of ‘general’ sense first, to prepare the ground for more in-depth explorations of how failures and abandoned ideas permeate our research and our academic careers. Then we present three vignettes, in which the individual authors have tried to evoke the sense of experiences of failures and abandonments that they have encountered. Towards the end we will try to make some sense of what we have wanted to do, try to map it, and thus make it easier to grapple with, possibly less harmful, maybe more productive, hopefully creating a sense of both resistance and care.

“Writing is not a transparent medium, nor something that comes somehow after the event, a simple ‘outcome’ of research that always takes place elsewhere, in the archive, in the field or the focus group, on the Web, but is a mode of inquiry in its own right.” (Gibbs, 2015, p. 222). To be recognised as an academic you have to do the kind of writing that Gibbs warns against. That is, you can deviate within certain limits, in the foreword, in excursions, in the margins. However, the general provision is to conform your language to different sets of standard languages; you have to make it fit an introduction, a discussion, to serve as a proper vehicle for presenting outcomes, conclusions; only then will your

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contribution be accepted as a contribution proper. This means the writing must be stopped from roaming around, be stripped for its protuberances, bumps. You must domesticate your writing, silence the howls, speak up when you whisper; reformulate your brown sentences, your faltering and moving sentences, your filthy and confused sentences, your too careful sentences, your shameful and insecure sentences, into straight white sentences. It is not enough to use the right words; the words must be arranged in specific ways also, have the proper flow. Avoid staccato rhythms or rhythms at all, too much melody, or the total lack of it; discard sentences that move too slow, like turtles do, or too fast, like jazzy slang. The strict control of language should not surprise anyone, “Use the minor language to send the major language racing” urge Deleuze and Guattari in *A thousand plateaus* (1987, p. 105). No one knows what’s going to happen if we loosen the control over language, the words and the arrangements of them, the proper command of them, allow the small words to mess with the big ones, open up for closing or even start discussing the gaps between “what happened on the ground and what finds its way into the page” (Katz, 1994 in Harrowell et al., 2018, p. 2).

Texts are perfect grounds for the ambitious, they offer both time and space for hiding, omitting, showing off, avoiding, processing, cleansing. It takes time to write texts, and time offers us possibilities to accommodate, forget, play down the things that bother and disturbs us. However, our lives as academics also include events and geographies where there is no or almost no space or time between what we are trying to do, or are supposed to be doing and the visible, audible, sensible results of our attempts. In these situations, we are left on our own, exposed. There is no time to accommodate, to disperse, thin out in time. “Ideologies happen. Power snaps into place. Structures grow entrenched. Identities take place.” (Stewart, 2007, p. 15).

To achieve success through thematising failure is ripe with paradoxes, dilemmas. If you are no longer affected by that which you write; it is because you have transcended it, maybe even betrayed it. Fear of betrayal should be kept alive as we reflect critically over states, conditions and results that we are (un)able to pursue ourselves. Others have thematised similar paradoxes, like the feminist writers in *Critiquing thinness and wanting to be thin*; they write about the paradox of how we critically reflect over another kind of failure, the failing body: “how is it possible to critique ideologies and practises of slimmish while wanting (and trying) to be slim?” (Thorsby and Gimil, 2013, p. 106).

In this article, we present three stories where we write about and reflect over situations and events from our ongoing research projects and professional lives. All three writers have different backgrounds. The collaboration revealed that we shared a common fate of sometimes trying to cope with almost unbearable feelings of failure, of being matter out of place (DeSilvey, 2006), of “failure in terms of ... not belonging” (Horton, 2020, p.3, p.3).

Vibeke’s story is about caring for the things that are not permitted, that do not fit. Her story is the longest because it is not about her alone. Her approach is to dig into the abandoned, the waste and abundance of ideas, sentiments and dreams that are left behind, chopped off, lines that are straightened out, the mess that is smoothed over. Her story starts as an exploration of students’ abandoned ideas; she finds the students more rational than she is. To abandon the things they dream of, their hopes and ideas, is part of being a student. Students are at the forefront; they are at the same time the miner’s canaries and a sort of avant-garde; the first to faint, but also the ones destined to take over the world. To research often means to confront oneself (emerald and Carpenter, 2015, p. 746–747), and this confrontation creates tension. In this case, the student’s mix of rationality, compliance and sense of loss evokes Vibeke’s memories of abandoning, of being abandoned. The doubling of attention bares the devastating mechanisms of education and reason. Still, it also gives space for resistance, noticing, remembering and caring for the fearful sides of us, the shame we are subjected to, the loneliness we sometimes suffer.

Geir’s story is about the feeling of time and time again presenting

ideas and approaches that do not quite fit, ideas and approaches which are perhaps regarded as interesting, even fascinating, but somehow flawed or at least too quirky to count as proper research. He is currently working on a project that probes into the relationship between audiences and museums. His story is rooted in a presentation of his research at a conference. The story is about affects that are cutting through the corporal space of someone being told that his habit of paying attention to questionable things has – yet again – been noticed. However it is also a story about a researcher being both haunted and blessed by a past as a writer of non-academic texts, by bent sensibilities ripened in different environments, who now fears that he is liable to counteract against that which haunts (or blesses) him to achieve recognisable success in the professional academic life he has surrendered to.

Lars’ narrative is about positioning oneself in the academic world somewhat ill-equipped, outfitted with a naïve will for honesty and openness but failing in his resistance and thus succumbing to the codes that permeate the academic sphere. His adaptation is not complete, but the question of how far one can and should purify academic or scientific accounts of personal faults and failures always remains open. The question also gets more urgent over time, as he moves up the ranks, now inhabiting a position in the centre of a peripheral institution, thus becoming the voice and the embodiment of the codes and norms that constantly create failures which often cannot and should not simply be transformed into another lesson learned.

Our three stories trace different spaces and areas in the geography of failure, but they are all stories where we remember events and emotions we tend to want to forget. To remember that which we are encouraged to forget is to “undo the main effects that this system has upon its minority subjects: wilfully instilled amnesia, symbolic misery, lack of self-representation” (Braidotti, 1996, p. 312). The abandoned, that which we did not do, was too scared to do, to think, are encouraged to forget, may have tremendous energy, but we have to re-direct our attention to get hold of it. “We tend to author our identities with reference to positive phenomena – who we are, what we have done, what we know – but turning over the mirror, we find an inverse, parallel collection of experiences not had, which can be equally significant and meaningful” (Scott, 2019, p. 81). The “turning over the mirror” has indeed affected all three of us. One thing is the exploration of the bent, the hidden, the abandoned, the not done; another is to make these explorations visible to each other and possible readers of this text. Both created new hopes, new feelings of solidarity, but maybe most of all a promising feeling of wonder; the cracks, rifts, hopes and wounds we showed each other have opened for glimpses of possible, colourful, vibrant geographies, full of hidden mysteries, movements, energies and hope. But do not mistake this text as a proposal for a lowering of the criteria for research. It is not a retreat into obscurity, it is a proposal for openness, for transgressing the barriers between the messy realities of life and the ordered and enclosed formulas of academic thinking and writing. It is an attempt to fuse moisture and dryness, impulses and analysis, lived life and our attempts at communicating it, analysing it. It is a shot at including life instead of treating it and the events within it, as mere raw materials for “extracting constants” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 106).

2. Three stories

2.1. Vibeke’s Story: Abandoned ideas in design education

‘No frayed lines in design sketches.’ Frayed. No shivering lines. No shivering. We don’t allow shivering people here, trembling limbs. No old, crooked people. Not too young, either. No loitering. No jumping, no shivering, stay in line. The line is there. Go there. I shiver all the time; all my lines are frayed. I am a frayed line. My mother shivers. Life is shivering, is a frayed line. No shivering, no loitering. No life here.

A student of mine told me that she, in her first year as a product

design student, was told that her way of drawing was frayed, vague and tentative. The teachers said that lines and strokes should be confident, conclusive, fast, clean, without residues of any kind. She never forgot this. The hardest part is getting the hands to obey. Lines and strokes in drawings are, like voices, ways of walking, fingerprints, individual, singular, unique. To tidy them, to straighten out the bends, crooks, twists and shivering in them is also to abandon something within ourselves, to cut away the subtler energies that seek out and retract; probing, feeling. We are constantly forced to abandon or modify our ways. Our bodies tell stories of years of abandoning; tense and superficial breath, subdued movements, high-pitched nervous voices. To be a teacher also involves being an incarnation of social processes. Few make much fuzz about the everyday brutality of the educational world; we are trained to handle hurt, shame, and abandoning things we love and believe in without letting it show. That is maybe the reason for the discomfort I felt when I listened to and read the student's stories. *-Please tell me about an idea you would love to do, but you don't or can't... and why. Please make a short description of why you abandoned this idea.* This was the task I gave to my students. Their stories led me into a trail of uneasiness; I began remembering my own abandoned ideas, recalled the shame and embarrassment from back then. The regrets came back to me; me showing things to the wrong people, sharing ideas with people without sufficient ability and time to care about them, discarding my ideas and imaginations all too fast, and the shame, most of all me exposing my shame to them, my reddening face, dejected eyes, the apologetic submission. The anger of giving up too much of *my own* to fit in, of letting others thrive on processing my ideas for me and others like me. It is not over; it goes on.

To care for that which is abandoned, or to prod through what is disposed of or ignored can be a "proactive and provocative" (Harrowell et al., 2018, p. 1) way to approach an investigation in the educational system and the forces that cut through it. Exploring abandoned ideas and the energies of failure has a resemblance to Susie Scott's "sociology of nothing". Her research is exploring negative phenomena – things that people do not do, have, say, know or feel – and how this affects our lives. Negative spaces are formative, and as Scott says, they are "shaping biographical selfhood" (Scott, 2019, p. 2). Abandoned ideas are *not* nothing, but they *not quite* something either, conceptually they connect to the *not yet* or the *vague* or the *messy*.

Space, time and society mark us all. One of my students replied, when I asked them about abandoned ideas: "I don't abandon them. I just wait until it is feasible to execute, or it has matured. Either that or the idea is stupid or silly." Answers sometimes stage whole worlds: 'I don't abandon them' is an uncompromising beginning that insists on keeping ideas. However, this initial refusal is modified, qualified in the next moment; 'I don't abandon' fades into a more pragmatic, tactical approach. The student does not clearly say 'yes' or 'no' to ideas but adopts a reasonable position—waiting—the circumstances may change or the idea may mature.

Transcending black and white and evoking an indecisive and swirl-grey may seem like a mature thing to do. But this 'mature' position does not last either; at the end of the answer, there is a return to black and white, to a merciless logic: ideas are either executable or silly, stupid, abandonable. The student's answer uncovers the logic of a world squeezed into three short sentences. The last sentence of the student reminds us about the inherent dangers in our ways of processing ideas: 'Silly' and 'stupid' are infectious categorisations, as they tend to spread from ideas to the person that produced the ideas. With reference to Ehrenreich (2009) Halberstam writes: success happens to good people and failure is a "consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3). Condemning ideas often involves creating or denying individuals human value (Orr and Shreeve, 2017, p. 45) and "the logic that work can be unequivocally classified into 'passes' and 'fails' generally goes unquestioned" (Horton, 2020, p. 4). To process something with the required speed also involves the imminent danger of collateral damage, of creating sharp-edged, destructive energies.

Other students also said that they did not abandon their ideas, that they instead postponed them or archived them for later. To do so seems like a sensible and reasonable thing to do. Students (i.e. novices) are being rejected on a regular basis; they are not characterized as 'idiots' (Philo, 2016), but they are corrected, adjusted or normalised. They are therefore in acute need of creating a language and an attitude that makes it possible to survive the frequent discarding of ideas without themselves feeling discarded as well; they need to relate themselves to the infrastructures of failure in academia (Turner, 2020). Postponing and archiving may be attempts of glossing over reality and make inevitable defeat endurable. This language—'postponing', 'archiving' and other jargon—is something we learn and are encouraged to use to process ideas and become efficient. But it is at the same time the language we use when we try to rescue ourselves from rejection, pain, hurt.

The energies of failure can thus, darkly, be described as a feeling of hurt, suffering and loss, but they can also be starting points for something new. Winnicott uses the concept of potential space in his book *Playing and Reality*: "It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel like life is worth living". If we are left to relate to external realities ruled by compliance; if the world we live and work in succeeds in reducing the range of possible actions to that which can "be fitted in with or demanding adaptation", it will create "a sense of futility for the individual" (Winnicott, 2012, p. 65). However, the feeling of disintegration, of futility, (or failure) can also be openings for creative acts and new connections with the external world, says Winnicott (Rose, 2016, p.386, see also the idea of kindness as offered by Dorling, 2020). But this requires a holding environment like the one's mothers create and maintain when they hold their child. This is a potential space where it is safe to reach out, to fail and to reach out again: "The holding environment, whether it is relational or aesthetic, is a space that can tolerate the oscillation between illusion and disillusion, disintegration and integration" (Ibid. p.395).

We are all in danger of being dominated by that what is explained to us as external realities. Instead of breaking with these realities, we adjust to them by developing a language that lets us believe that it is up to us to decide which ideas to keep, which to abandon. To be sensitive, to pay attention to sentiments and ideas we tend to ignore, to pick them up, be curious about them, care for them, is perhaps a form of resistance to this state – but it can also form starting points for new kinds of practises, practises that open up for wider notions of what can be considered relevant for the production of ideas; practises that include the vague, the frayed, the messy, the "indistinct" ephemeral ... (Law, 2004, p.2). This means to set a higher value on the sorts of activities that have traditionally been considered as women's work, a messy sort of everyday aesthetics (DeSilvey et al., 2013; Saito, 2008). The "processual complexity of everyday materiality's relations and spaces" (Massy and Thift in Horton, 2008, p. 365) resembles a home rather than a modern production line; it is a space full of traces of life, inhabited bodies, not merely brains and eyes. John Cage said in an interview: "Recently I have become interested in the repetition of similar sounds that before I used to try to ignore, now I want to share them with you" (Miller, 15. October 2012). Cage shows us that being interested in the ignored, the abandoned is intriguing and inventive. In the text *As Found – a new design paradigm* the writers are pointing in the same direction and ask, "How can we refine our sensibility towards what is already there?" (Braae and Riesto, 2011, p. 8).

To be corrected in how to draw or sketch may seem harmless on its own, but it is only one of countless habitual corrections and instructions that continuously are inflicted on us. According to Henry A. Giroux citing Freire, educational institutions are hybridised spaces where everyday experiences are linked with the social gravity and material forces of institutional power (Giroux, 2010, p. 719, and also Turner, 2020 in this special issue). This means that what we do, our habitual corrections of ourselves and others, are not transparent to us. We are trapped, entangled in obscure webs, unable to distinguish between that which is forced upon us and that which is ours by right. "More

concretely, this incorporation takes place through the *displacements and body movements* organised by these social structures turned in to spatial structures and thereby *naturalized*.” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 126).

Drawing is valuable as an example because it is an activity intimately connected to the body. It can be whimsical or precise; it is an explorative extension of the eye, the senses and the imagination. Transferred implication; your hand, your body, your eyes and your imagination are not fast enough, not confident and not clean enough. You are too frayed, vague and tentative. The language that is used is uncannily familiar to us (naturalized); to use fast (effective), confident (not searching) lines somehow illustrates how an ideal of clarity (not mess) and smoothness (elegance) are considered more important than searching, tentative and open qualities in drawing (education) and in research. As we journey towards professionalism, we are transformed. Education, the exam, converts us into standardised professionals. It is a kind of spellcraft. We (educators) are teaching methods and procedures to follow; we are in possession of predefined knowledge and answers that we make students reproduce. Small, undramatic things repeated over and over again. The end goal is to eradicate the difference between teacher and student, make sure that we all end up sharing the same ideals, the tight, precise line, a joint understanding of what to abandon, what to keep. Living uncreatively is to be caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine (Winnicott, 2012, p. 65). For us to oppose this, or to disturb it, we can start noticing and valuing the modest, tentative, the vague, fumbling and sketchy lines that allow for process-like play. To care for the tentative is to celebrate the value of probing, searching and searching again (re-searching). How such practises can manifest themselves is still to be discovered, how they do must be (re)discovered over and over again, it is not something that can be regulated by manuals, fixed procedures or rules. However, what we can imagine is that noticing and including the modest, the probing, and not shying away from the ambiguity and pain will facilitate for broader and more (self) caring and opening processes of acting out creatively.

In the beginning of my project, I thought that I was doing research on something apart from myself. However, as the study proceeded, it quickly gravitated towards my own memories, when my younger self was led towards using the ideas of someone else instead of my own. This made me angry but also determined to be more attentive and caring towards my own ideas and more cautious when interacting with students. In fact, this research has made me recognize how my capacity to play has been curbed or even impaired. I am failing, and in dealing with this failure I might have to, as Winnicott's infant; “relive, fantasize, dream the integration of past, present, and future” (Winnicott, 2012, p. 10). To care for the abandoned is to “count what others don't” (Mountz, 2015, p. 1250). To care for one's failures is also to count what others don't. To count what others don't is to explore the hidden, the marginalised, the fragile, life.

2.2. Geir's Story: Not entirely unpleasant

I changed my hairstyle so many times now

I don't know what I look like

Talking Heads, *Life during wartime*.

Poetic, she said. The chair of the session, a session about the life inside and outside the museums, described my contribution, a presentation of ongoing fieldwork in a museum of contemporary art, as poetic. A feeling of defencelessness, *poetic*; an appraisal with ambiguous meaning here. I smiled, thanked her and returned to my seat in the seminar room. I did not yet realise that the feeling of irritation, directed against her, them, the situation, soon would shift, transform. First to seething accusations directed inwards, then, slowly, practically without me noticing it, into a sense of loss, before the feeling of it all, as soon as I was able to distract myself with other things, would dissolve into senseless obscurity in the body. There is no wonder that failures, or the

sense of them, often appear or re-appear in shapes that resemble popular imaginations of how ghosts operate. Ghosts are often unwanted; they appear, disappear, re-appear, haunt on, do not abide by the rules of death proper. Some of them are said to be several hundred years old. They move around by coming back (Wylie, 2007, p. 172).

She was probably right. There has often been something wrong in my texts and presentations; traces of the idiosyncratic and washed out remains of eager amateurism, a quirky tone. Not always entirely unpleasant. Earlier, the excesses were apparent for all; my voice, lines and words have often been left shivering under the weight of elements that I wasn't capable of handling. I have matured, broken myself in; what is left is a white noise rising from an obscure mix of saddened compliance and complicit ambitions the professional life demands of us all — a hint of the deviant. As a research novice, I was, as we all once were, thrown into a language that was already perfected. In *Kafka, towards a minor literature*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) write about major and minor languages. The major language is the official language of something, the proper language of producing legitimate statements about different things in the world. The minor languages are illegitimate variations over the legitimate languages, deviations from them. Sometimes they subvert the major, at other times bend the major to become even more dominating. Our voices often roam between the major and the minor, life makes us stray, we attempt to dodge that which is imposed on us, but genre forces us to choose, instructs us to eradicate traces of the deviant.

“Write like a dog digging a hole,” write Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 42); to do this, you have to “find your underdeveloped point, your dialect, your dessert.” (my translation) The professional language has always seemed more developed than me. The dog and the dessert; the alluring promises about finding and using one's dialect seemed impossible or as another strange fashionable notion for sugar-coating the major, transforming it into fake minor, a more subtle major. However, it may be that the dog is not so far away, it is just that I cannot stand the dog, my dog, the sight and smell of this dog is unbearable to me.

We grow old already as children; we learn how to suppress, transcend, and endure. Confusion, disappointment and grief transformed into small acts of violence; outwards, inwards; branch, stick, sword, cutting off the hair of a favourite doll. I seldom break down; my body is capable of absorbing almost all of what is happening to me; it disperses off the effects into the flesh, bones and the organs. The complete, instant and automatic dispersion secures my capacity to operate, to function, protects me from falling, dissolving, becoming visible beyond my direction. I level myself by using the energies of failure as ballast.

We are told that experience is the high road to learning. However, there is always too much going on; to make an experience out of events, we have to reduce the complexity of them, carve out the relevant, and toss away the rest. We move between closed sites, “each with its own laws: first of all the family, then school (‘you're not at home, you know’), then the barracks (‘you're not at school, you know’), then the factory, hospital from time to time, maybe prison, the model site of confinement.” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 3). To be an experienced researcher is to possess the ability to make sense of things by using the rules of the site. I am always lagging or coming in too early; still mingling with crows in the trees outside, soaring over half-forgotten memories or gone altogether. It is as I am unable to make proper experiences out of anything, cannot surrender to experience, will not surrender to the licenced art of experiencing.

I started to read:

“Once, the museums were perhaps slow places, places for something else. Slowness is hardly enough in the age of the experience economy: we do not longer suddenly realise, with astonishment, or fear, that we have experienced something, we know where to obtain experiences.” (A picture from a “selfie-friendly exhibition”, Yayoi Kusama)

And I finished by reading:

“The sounds of the museum are the sound of the world that is passing through the museum. There is maybe no inside, no outside; everything is connections, relationships. Even the exclusion, especially the exclusion.”

I finished, kept standing still, waiting.

“Your presentation was very poetic.”

When I think of it now, I think that her comment was a reality check. I was on a slippery slope, on the verge of ignoring that ideas are both irrelevant and wild outside their proper domains. The heart is one thing for the poet, another for the physician. I was heading towards amateurism, began to resemble Vibeke’s student whose way of drawing “was frayed, vague, tentative”. Vague, tentative lines may be poetic, but they must be cleaned and tightened up if they are to become functional. “The hardest part is getting the hands to obey. Lines and strokes in drawings are, like voices, ways of walking, fingerprints, individual, singular, unique.”, writes Vibeke. To reverse our tendencies towards the frayed and tentative, we need to surrender to comprehensive interventions, like education, series of repeated measures, thousands upon thousands of adjustments. Seen as isolated, single actions, they may seem small, insignificant even, but put together, the effect of them is devastating, makes us abandon. Later on, we remember what we abandoned with an embarrassed smile; I was another back then.

“The proper voice is no voice at all.” (Charmaz and Mitchell, 1996, p. 286) I know this, I have often tried to sound like someone other than me, be a kind of a ventriloquist’s dummy. I have tried to educate myself into a point where I thought I could see everything without being anyone particular, like an omniscient ghost, or God (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). The “I” in science should not be more than a pronoun hidden in the shadows or preferably left out altogether. The “I” should be random, accidental; it should not matter who the “I” is. The “I” can be anyone. Is meant to be anyone. With the same or the equal qualifications, anyone identical. I was on the verge of thinking of myself as a researcher, a hopeful and energetic feeling of blending in, of finally being able to leave the failed “I” of the past behind, entering the world of the abandoned “I”, the one and true ghost of science proper.

“... the subject does not constitute an ontological unity but is a composite of a multitude of moveable ideas”, writes Spindler (Spindler, 2013, p. 131, my translation). Much of what I do seems beyond my control, it is more like what I do is doing me. I often end up on the fringes of where I am supposed to be, or just outside it, as if I have misunderstood the directions the contexts keep offering to me. I do not recognise my own trespassing before someone tells me about it, which is too late. It is like I, without thinking – like a slowly acquired habit? - have begun to move secretly along the less guarded, duskier parts of the world, like movers of contraband or shy people. However, my peers notice how lost I am without much delay; you been to another place they say with friendly interest. I am snapped into the proper place; I evacuate my ground, try to find my way into the pages.

I have always tended to swallow my defeats, a kind of obedience I guess — I have become an interior of waste, abandoned ideas, lost inclinations. A dense, dark geography, caves, tunnels; a banal geography, therefore a secret geography. It is a bodily affair; I don’t tell anyone, no bodies allowed here, no shivering, no loitering, no bodies allowed here. Choking on my swallowing, I am constantly haunted by the ghosts of my failures, by what I have abandoned. They keep on returning, I am not able to spot them, but I can feel them, watching me, watching over me. Why don’t you confess to us, they whisper.

2.3. Lars’ Story: Purification

Science is about truth! Saying what is true, what needs to be said. To change things, to fix things. Probably even to fix people? At least to fix society. This is the impulse that propelled me into university. But, the university is also academia. So the failing begins (anew, of course,

school was different but the same). The codes are obstacles. Sometimes they are walls, plain and simple – I know about walls, I stood on one, on the night of the ninth of November. You know where you are with walls. But sometimes the codes are like whiplashes, coming from behind, wrapping around my ankles, making me stumble. Or the lashes are just plain hurting, cutting into my back, into my cheeks. These are worse; they can make me keep to the given route, submit to trotting along, not edging out, not sitting down, not looking sideward. The worst codes, though, are those that feel smooth, those that I can master easily, that make me slick and strong.

The codes arrange the field, they belong to the sphere of the strategic, as de Certeau puts it. But they are not everything. They form space, but they don’t rule time. There is the realm of tactics, there can be openings, paths can be found and, trodden often enough, and by many, they might even solidify. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 35–39).

And what would be more solid than the truth, I wonder? She needs to be my ally; I always tended to imagine allies. Like Wonder Woman crossing her braces, shielding me from the bullets fired from the trenches. To have and to keep such allies, one needs to take some risks, I think in my brighter moments. How could I even consider contributing my share to changing the world for the better if I am not honest – since honesty is one of the fundamental aspects of truth? Should it not disarm scepticism, or, even better because playing on the right register, should it not create validity? So, when I submit my first paper to a journal, I take a risk, I am open, I describe the context in which I worked on it originally – a graduate student’s term paper, written in a spirit of both engagement and discontentment with the field of conversation analysis anno 1999. But a couple of years later, I am armed with what I perceived as ‘high theory’ (Katz, 2017), I feel equipped for challenging how science and openness and boundaries work. Because I had learned that much about the codes. I was trying to bring my friends in (Latour, 1987, p. 33) to stave off potential criticism. I was ready for success, for starting a career of publishing in top journals, after sending it to the journal.

The editor didn’t even bother to send it out for review—a student’s paper. A lesson learned. Honesty is not honoured; I got it. So, I submit again, but keep my mouth shut this time. Paper accepted, but more than that, I never again got a paper accepted with so little need for revision and in such a highly ranked journal. Another lesson learned? I guess so. And many times over. The sore didn’t disappear, though. It still is there, some kind of energy working away in all of us. It doesn’t feel productive—most of the time. But sometimes, I can muster up some anger. This isn’t right. This isn’t how it should be. This needs to be changed. I listen to the track *Discontentment is Our Engine* by Plan B; punk rock from Berlin in 1989. But, I also remember the advice that I received during civil service – received from a very kind superior after I went through a hurtful experience and, telling him about this experience, I concluded that I probably should toughen up. But he provided an unexpected response: he said I shouldn’t. So, I try to transform the energies, try to be open again, in other areas, now using more sophisticated language. Maybe I cannot be honest and blunt and at the same time here in academia. I need to clothe the crude and uncomfortable part of being honest in elegant words, in elaborate arguments, in addition to supporting them by big names. It feels as if I need to hide my blue-eyed but somewhat brutish past as a small-town kid from an uneducated background. A kid who was confounding superhero stories with literature to the bemusement of the schoolteacher he admired.

I need to purify my words; I need to purify my research (Latour, 1993, p. 46), to cut away the bumps, to cover up my failures and smoothen the story. Honesty doesn’t work for everyone. But I can try to smuggle something through the cracks, try to give readers access to the complexities of real taste. Is this resistance through adaptation? Or just a little lie that I use to calm the anger and the sadness and the questions below a cover of connoisseurship?

A few years ago, my position shifted. In the periphery, I became a professor, a representative of the centre. A strategist, someone who can channel energies. I now teach others how to become an academic.

Eventually, someone that I appreciate quotes me, telling me I taught them an important lesson: to focus on ‘publishing the smallest publishable unit’. And I stopped dead in my tracks. I really said that. Who did I think I am? I am failing myself.

3. Geographies of failure (conclusion)

Where do we meet failure? Where is it placed? What distances are established between us, others and our failures? In this article, we argue that the geographies of failure are shifting and mobile. How we treat failure depends on where we are, and experiences of failure can create very different trajectories in the personal and academic landscapes. Abandoned ideas, which may never even reach the threshold of failure in the outside world, remain hidden away. Some of them shift into a spectral mode of existence, where they can rest and be invisible most of the time. Until they rise to haunt us in our dreams, in the liminal areas between being awake falling asleep (Rose, 2006), in a late-night confession to a friend or colleague – or in an encounter which triggers the ideas’ relevance and summons the potentialities that we supposedly left behind.

There are many energies in failure, in shame and hurt. They consume us from within if we try to contain them within our bodies, if we are content to make them a matter for our interior. The question is then how much these energies can be channelled without purifying them too much, without making them too smooth and thus letting go of what they can offer? We need these energies of failure to transgress. They need to be kept intact – even though this scares us – their painfulness and ugliness ignores both time and space. We need to create spaces of production that allow for the messy to develop, a time-space where the energies of failure can clutter up, seep through cracks, gather in puddles, be cared for and collected to maintain, create or change. Even if we try to turn our failures into resistance, we also need to care for them, not disregard them as mere occasions for learning, transformation or resistance. They are not transcendent or merely fluid energies; this metaphor is too limited, too soft at times. They can also etch themselves deeply into our subjectivities, our corporal being, into the academic landscape that we inhabit. We cannot wish them away or eradicate them in one revolutionary stroke. We cannot transform the scars into muscles or beauty spots; they need to remain scars; they are quite right as scars.

Is there any potential for resistance in writing successfully about failure? Maybe there isn’t any – our stories might just end up being yet another contribution to the twisted and lucrative world of academic publishing. We don’t know yet. However, we do hope that mentioning that which we rarely speak of, our failures and vulnerability can ease the feeling of loneliness in others. None of us knows anyone that has not felt the shame in failing, in having to abandon something that they believed in.

And we do believe that mentioning the sometimes destructive, toxic even, atmospheres in science, publishing and education can help create or maintain the impulse towards resistance in many of us, or support us in giving our attempts to resist a direction, as set forth in a more militant manner by Clare (2019).

To mention something can be to care for it. One of the worst things that can happen to us and our ideas is not to be mentioned, to be ignored, not noticed. This we have experienced, all of us if we dare to remember; the loneliness in not being noticed, mentioned. It is like being denied being; like dying, unbearable.

We conclude in a stance of wanting to continue to open up for, to care for, and include the messy, the vague, the hurtful and other events and emotions we tend to abandon or dismiss. To continue to do so even if it means us losing our way, making a detour, leaving the known, entering the wild and the messy or embracing risky inspirations from people that dare to open up for “different aesthetic standards for ordering or disordering space” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 10). A starting point for such a move may be to insist on the value of including the excess, of valuing frayed or crooked lines, the old, mended, the disorderly, the ignored and

abandoned; our own voices, tentative, failing, trying, hoping.

To acknowledge the abandoned, the failure, to keep mentioning it, can provide us with gentler emotional geographies, but perhaps also more imaginative geographies, geographies that offer us the space we need to continue to think, feel, make and care. To do so is in our opinion to open up for generating different practices, practices that are highly needed in our current climate of conformity, constant evaluation and streamlined efficiency.

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