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SENSORIAL LITTER': BUILDING REFLEXIVE TRUST THROUGH EXAMINING DIGITAL DETRITUS

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Introduction

This paper explores how digital media can be utilized to uncover researchers' emotional detritus, for the purpose of reflexively examining the ways in which researchers' own embodied experiences shape ethnographic knowledge production. In particular, I seek to advance reflexive inquiry into the 'too intense' experiences that can be shed or refuse/d by researchers' bodies during fieldwork. I first draw from phenomenological embodiment theories to put forward the idea of *sensorial litter* to conceptualize these too intense embodied experiences. I posit that when refuse/d from the body, too intense experiences are not lost, but rather manifest materially in digital media litter (e.g., anxiety filled texts, emails to supervisors, search histories). Locating three pieces of sensorial litter from my own ethnographic research, I then demonstrate the ways in which attention to this litter may add critical depth to a researcher's embodiment-based reflexive engagements.

I question – “how might examining so-coined sensorial litter help us build trust in our own reflexive practices during ethnographic research”?

Reflexivity in Ethnographic Research

Noted by Pink (2015), reflexivity is at the core of digital/sensory ethnography, because the researcher's own embodied experience is the lens through which ethnographic knowledge is produced. An embodied ethnographic approach requires the researcher to consider both: a) subjectivity – the ways in which embodied notions of environments, activities, experiences and knowledge are brought into research, and b) intersubjectivity – how the social interactions within a project are fully embodied and constitute events that shape the course of research (Pink, 2015).

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Challenges exist though in capturing embodied experiences through conventional reflexive methods, such as voice and field notes (Mazanderani, 2017). Furthermore, it can be particularly difficult for a researcher to not only capture intensely felt moments, but to engage in the self-reappraisal necessary to understand the impact of those moments on the research knowledge produced.

Intense Embodiment - Sensorial Litter

Responding to reflexivity-based challenges, I put forward *sensorial litter* to help articulate the ‘too intense’ moments that can occur during ethnographic fieldwork. I theoretically ground this concept in Allen-Collinson and Owton (2015)’s phenomenological scholarship on intense embodiment. As detailed by Allen-Collinson & Owton, intense embodiment describes moments when concentrated experiences of corporeality are triggered. I suggest, however, that that some corporeal experiences can be too intense for the body to embody and thus are refuse/d or shed by the body. For example, a researcher may experience fleeting, whirling anxious thoughts; spatial suspensions of disorientation; and voids from pushing away difficult feelings.

In line with Manalansan (2014), I posit that too intense experiences are not lost when shed from the body, but rather manifest materially as reclaimable ‘sensorial litter’. For example, reflexive examination of the digital media used during such moments might uncover anxiety filled texts, emails to supervisors, and notable search histories. Indeed, as suggested by Couldry (2012) and Pink et al. (2016) – who also de-centre media in media research recognizing that media are fully embedded in activities, technologies, materialities and feelings – corporeal realities are often augmented through virtual connections.

By focusing reflexive engagement on the often-ineffable aspects of fieldwork, sensorial litter provides a valuable opportunity for progressing ethnographic methods. During and through intense experiences, a researcher’s corporeal focus may shift and vary, introducing bodily information used in meaning-making processes (Poyntz & Hoechsmann, 2011). Examination of sensorial litter can thus add critical depth to the researchers’ reflexive engagements with their own embodiment.

The Value of Re-Claiming Litter

I examine three pieces of sensorial litter from my own doctoral research project to demonstrate the value in re-claiming this litter. My doctoral study is a sensory ethnography on my and trainee sexual educators’ participation in a sexual health educator certificate program.

Sensorial Litter #1: Apple Car Play

Although I had intended to conduct a series of group data collection sessions at a public site, it quickly became apparent that I would be conducting mainly individual sessions for the study to proceed. When negotiating these sessions, all the participants requested we meet in their own homes, which was something I had not prepared for in advance. Although I very rarely use a GPS device while driving, I found myself using Apple Car Play to provide me with directions every

time I visited the participants' homes (even though I was or became familiar with each location). I was very focused on avoiding getting 'lost'.

Reflecting on this, I was likely responding to the disorientation of unexpectedly spanning a public/private research boundary. I had originally conceived the project as taking place publicly, despite the personal nature of exploring participants' 'felt-sense' of sexual health educator training. I now, however, was tasked with understanding how to manage my knowledge of intimate details of participants lives: gaining in-depth understandings of socio/economic status realities, being privy to private conversations with kin, and engaging with the materiality of their homes. Reflexive Prompt: how does the spanning of private/public boundaries impact my perceptions of participants?

Sensorial Litter #2:

During data collection, I went through a difficult break-up with a romantic partner. This information was unintentionally and upsettingly shared within the educator course, when I became emotional during a morning "check-in" activity. At the end of the day, I found myself teary in the washroom, when three people happened to enter the space: two of my participants and a new friend. The situation settled with the two participants choosing to stay and talk to me, while the friend chose to hesitantly leave and later send a follow-up text. During our resulting talk, the participants also expressed that I could suspend the study, if desired.

This incident highlights the unique bonds researchers and participants form doing body-based work. Although less close as "friends", the participants felt comfortable entering a moment of extreme emotional vulnerability with me, while the other person chose not to, perhaps feeling like an intruder. This incident further highlights the complex ways that participants and researchers negotiate different layers of identity. Reflexive Prompt: in what ways do the bonds formed through body-based data collection shape the research findings?

Sensorial Litter #3:

About halfway through the data collection, I became extremely focused on my academic future, despite not being set about pursuing an academic career. I researched post-doctoral programs, created reference lists of journals and conferences, searched for specific teaching opportunities, and skyped my very supportive supervisor to discuss all of my findings. I was taken aback, however, when she reminded me that I needed to be focused on my data collection at that moment.

I was surprised by the supervisory re-direct, because from my perspective, I was focused on my data collection. I was trying to determine how to actualize the wide-ranging ideas emerging from the interdisciplinary project. While I re-focused on the specifics of my data collection, this orienting question remained at the back of my mind. Reflexive Prompt: how does working to fit within disciplinarian bounds shape the knowledge I produced out of this study?

Collectively, I note how sensorial litter can provide concrete entry points into the ways in which the researcher's sensing body is perpetually in flux, shaping and re-shaping throughout fieldwork. I also argue that sensorial litter can facilitate reflexive engagement that is many-sited, intertextual, resistant to holism, and perceptive ethnographic research's inevitable shortcomings.

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