



Doing violence: Some reflections on research, affects, and ethics

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ABSTRACT: This essay is about the embodied experience of writing a dissertation about Anders Behring Breivik and the terrorist attack in Norway on 22 July 2011. I will reflect upon what it was like to do research on material that recounts, with great detail, the life of a right-wing terrorist and the violence that he unleashed. My dissertation focuses on the ‘stories’ about Breivik, i.e. how his actions have been made sense of and how the violence of the terrorist attack has been narrated, but I also wrote a lot about how it felt to read and write about such a person and such an event. This *emotional data* became an important part of my research and in this essay I will elaborate further on the ethical and theoretical implications of this; the affective relationship between researcher and research material; and the practice of reading and the methodology of writing. I will argue that in order to analyze what a text *does*, it is not enough to deconstruct what it *says*. One also needs to deconstruct the relationship between text, the world it writes, and the feeling, reading body.

KEYWORDS: Research ethics, violence, emotions, methodology, Breivik

This essay is about the embodied experience of writing a dissertation. Or rather the embodied experience of writing my own dissertation in Gender Studies at a Swedish university, since such experiences must always be understood as local and partial (Haraway, 1991). I ended up with a difficult topic: how Anders Behring Breivik and the terrorist attack in Norway on 22 July 2011 had been explained and made sense of in a number of popular Norwegian books and Swedish news me-



dia articles.¹ In this essay, I will reflect upon what it was like to do research on a material that described so intimately the life of a right-wing terrorist, but that also told me about the lives of the victims and about the violence of the attack. I will focus primarily on the ethical implications of such research, and on the affective relationship between researcher and research material, and between the practice of reading and the methodology of writing.

A fellow scholar once said, at a seminar, that she carried her dissertation in her body, like a separate but integrated being that fed off her energy and thoughts – and off her very flesh. It made a ligament in her calf break; she was sitting in front of her computer for so many hours every day that when she finally stood up to walk away it just broke. Nothing ever broke in me, but I did, throughout the entire research and writing process, feel my dissertation in my body. I carried it, fed it, slept with it, loved it, hated it, cried and screamed at it. I think most Ph.D. students go through something like this but for me it became an essential part of my research. I started writing about it, this ‘emotional data’, as Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (1997) calls it. Perhaps not exactly about the ways in which the dissertation itself became a part of my body, but about how my material did; how it affected me, emotionally, bodily, to read about the violence that took place on that Friday afternoon. It became a part of my theoretical and methodological framework and a way to approach a violent and disconcerting material.

I started formulating my research project approximately six months after the terrorist attack. At this juncture, my intention was to analyze Breivik’s ideological convictions in relation to political developments in Norway and Europe. This changed, however, when I read Åsne Seierstad’s *One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway* (2015). I read it with the intention of learning more about Breivik – it was supposed to be background and not material – but there was something about it that didn’t sit right, that kept nagging my thoughts and my emotions. I came across other, similar, books, and I began to wonder about the stories they told, the performativity of their narratives, and about the discourse on Breivik that they took part in shaping. According to this discourse, Breivik was a ridiculous and failed loner, an outsider to the Norwegian society as well as to the norms of white, adult masculinity, norms which his body, presumably, *should* inhabit (Eriksson, 2016b). I found, in these books, narratives of an imagined national community (Anderson, 1983) and presumptions about ‘normal’, and normative,

gender identities, sexual practices, ways of living, and age-appropriate behaviors. And I found that the explanations offered for Breivik's violence were located not in society, politics, or ideology, but in his own personal failure with inhabiting these norms and with being a part of the imagined national community. Upon reading these books, my research focus began to alter, and instead of looking at Breivik, I started analyzing the stories about him, including the ways in which the violent events of 22 July 2011 were narrated.

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One of Us starts with a detailed depiction of young people being killed on Utøya Island. It describes bullets penetrating bodies, blood dripping and hands slowly slipping away, the calm steps of the terrorist, his smile and voice, the thoughts of a dying child, and people being shot as they attempt to swim to the mainland, to safety. These initial pages had a big affective impact on me, and I read the rest of the book in a state of mind – or ‘state of being’, as Claire Hemmings (2005, p. 551) would put it – produced by this reading experience. It was a state of sadness and anger that made me feel *for* the victims and their friends and families, and *against* the perpetrator. I cried for the dead ones, and I hated their murderer. But I also found myself being drawn into the life of the terrorist, through the intimate narration of his life, and I found myself, at times, identifying with some of the experiences described – social awkwardness, a sense of exclusion and being a ‘misfit’ in relation to societal and cultural norms, periods of loneliness and low self-esteem – a recognition that produced shame and self-doubt. I understood this shame not as an appropriate reaction to a moral transgression, but as an effect of the initial affective experience (Woodward, 2009). How could I simultaneously cry for the victims, hate the terrorist, and experience a sense of identification, a sense of ‘being like him’? This shame became a part of my ‘emotional data’ and thus turned from an affective experience into research material. I think this was a way for me to handle the experience rather than merely an epistemological and methodological decision. In turning it into something analyzable and theoretically anchored I could distance myself from the affect and from the reading encounter that produced it.

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We kill them in the woods, sun's humming
Simon has the knife; he's bleeding from the head
The deer so happy in the warmth of the heather
We kill them in the woods, such tingling joy

I took a while before the affective experience became 'emotional data', however. For a long time, I was stuck in it, and any attempt to critically analyze and deconstruct the stories failed because I could not get pass the affective state that the reading put me in. So instead of doing research in the 'proper', academic, sense of the word, I started writing poetry. These poems became a chapbook (Eriksson, 2016a) and thus a story in and of themselves about the terrorist attack. But I did not manage to fit them into my dissertation, except for the one above, about Simon.² I felt the pressure of 'academic writing', and while I eventually managed to write *theoretically* about the affective experiences of reading about violence, expressing these experiences poetically did not seem appropriate. Swedish scholar of literature, Annelie Bränström Öhman, calls this the 'academic mangle'; a narrow opening that the Ph.D. student has to squeeze through in order to pass into the academy (Bränström Öhman, 2007, p. 37–38).

But I also think it had something to do with my material. It had a way of making me feel powerless, exposed, and emotionally exhausted – like I could not bear to read another word; to feel another thing; to cry another time. The academic language offered a distance, a way to treat the stories with a sense of instrumentality and professionalism. Somehow it also seemed more respectful. While I was focusing on the ways in which the events had been narrated by others, by journalists, scholars, and authors, I was constantly aware of the fact that the books were, to some extent, based on interviews with survivors and families of the victims. I was afraid of using, or rather *misusing*, their memories and accounts for my own purposes, not that I could say exactly what these 'purposes' might have been. For some reason, however, writing poetry felt more like a misuse than the academic analysis did. The academic writing felt more legitimate and less like an appropriation. I can't say for sure where this feeling came from, but perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the poetry was much more intimately connected with the violence. It was an outlet for the encounter with this violence and a way to deal with the sorrow I felt for the victims rather than an analysis of national narratives

and gender norms. It was more personal, and thus made me more vulnerable. I knew that I would be able to take the critique that my academic text would inevitably face, a critique that all dissertations are exposed to, but I would not be able to bear a critical reading of my poetry; I would not be able to answer questions or defend it, because it was too close, too intimate, too intertwined with my body and my being.

This seems to part with many prominent feminist theorists and writers who see creative and poetic writing as a way to situate the always already embodied research process in a feeling, dreaming, leaking, and changing body, and to challenge the phallogocentrism of traditional academic writing (e.g. Braidotti, 2014; Cixous, 1991; Lykke, 2010). I do not disagree with these feminists, quite the opposite. But as a Ph.D. student, one is perhaps especially vulnerable, exposed not only to the scary and challenging experience of handling, or rather living with, a research material that might be disconcerting and difficult in many ways, but also to the pressures of this unknown territory called Academia, where one is constantly watched, assessed, and subjected to the powers of professors, supervisors, scholarships, and university politics (cf. Cvetkovich, 2012; Jönsson, 2007). In my case, it was not so much the critical eyes of the academy that scared – and disciplined – me, but the imagined eyes of wounded survivors and grieving families. I was writing poetry about the difficult experience of *reading* about the violence that they had experienced firsthand. What gave me the right? I have to leave this question unanswered because I do not know if I ever had such a right, or that it is even a matter of ‘right’. Like H  l  ne Cixous (1991), I had to write; the words were not sought after, they came upon me, or rather pushed their way out of me. On the other hand, I do not think that the terrorist attack of 22 July 2011 ‘belongs’ to anyone, or that one had to be there in order to write about it. But I do think that there are ethical considerations to be made, in poetic as well as academic writing, and to this I will turn now, in the essay’s final paragraphs.

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I’m convinced that the ways in which violence is written about and made sense of matter for what we (can) know about violence, how we (can) talk about it and thus what we can do to prevent it. That’s why narratives on violence must be explored

without the condemning goggles of a morality that sees all violence as inherently bad or evil. I have no desire to lecture on the horrors of violence or on its devastating consequences. Primarily because I believe that violence itself is neither good nor bad. It just is. As Jean Améry (2006) put it, violence itself has no morality; it's an objective act, 'a chain of physical events that can be described using the formalized language of the natural sciences'. Only those who have been subjected to violence, and in whose bodies the strikes and blows can still be felt, can give it a moral meaning (Améry, 2006). For those who have experienced it, violence will forever be a part of their lived reality, an immanent feature of their bodily assemblage. Therefore, the aim cannot, according to Améry, be to overcome the violent event, to leave it behind and to move on into a brighter future. This would be to relegate the victims and their experiences to a History with which 'we' have got nothing to do and to turn the continued suffering into an irrational resentment, as opposed to Améry's *ressentiment*, which asks for a political and personal embrace of the event and a recognition of its continuation in the bodies of both victims and perpetrators. The only way for the lacerated body to obtain redress is if the perpetrator becomes fully aware of the moral significance of the violent act. This, however, cannot be obtained through punishment or revenge but only through a reversal, or tearing up, of time where the past becomes a part of the present and a lived reality not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator (Améry, 2006).

I don't believe that detailed and grotesque depictions of violence can accomplish this. The narratives on violence in the books I analyzed fill no ethical function: they do not demand justice or rebel against the passing of time. At the very best, they aspire to entertain the reader by exposing as much flesh as possible. At the worst, they turn the event into a by History contained anomaly where the society in which this violence is made possible is left uninterrupted and unchallenged and where harmony, rather than critique and change, becomes the desirable outcome (Améry, 2006). In comparison, Svetlana Alexiyevich, in *War's unwomanly face* (1988), writes about violence in a way where the detailed descriptions of war are not moralizing but curious about what violence does to the human body, mind and soul. And where neither 'victim' nor 'perpetrator' are stable categories, but fluid and ambivalent ways of being-in-the-world. Not that such writing necessarily heals any wounds or tears up time. The morality that Améry is after is, after all, impossible to achieve (Ben-Shai, 2006). But for me, the poetry became a way to ex-

plore violence in ways that I did not feel comfortable doing in my dissertation, an exploration that was both liberating and terrifying, and while it certainly affected my academic writing, I never managed to fully let them collide.

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Reading and writing about violence is, to some extent, to be torn apart. This is not a healing exercise but it is not, for that matter, a destructive exercise. Negative affects can also be productive and place the subject in ‘a state of becoming’ (Hemmings, 2005, p. 551; see also Probyn, 2005). This may be thought of, as a play of words on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s ‘affirmative deconstruction’, as an *affective deconstruction*, where the text is not only being read, negotiated with or critiqued, but *felt* (Spivak, 1993, p. 145). To get at what the text does, then, it is not enough to deconstruct what it says. Rather, what needs to be deconstructed is the *relationship* between text, the world it writes, and the feeling body. I cannot do this and stay intact, if I was ever intact. As the text seeps into me, and becomes a part of my being, I will become *an-other* to who I was.

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Then the forest folded like a sack of skin
Into a muddy pile of splinters
No one ever heard such a sound / a sigh /
A wreck of raging thoughts of death
When it’s quiet it’s so quiet
Like an empty sack of skin

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Endnotes

¹ My material consisted of three books: Aage Borchgrevink’s *A Norwegian Tragedy: Anders Behring Breivik and the Massacre on Utøya*, Erika Fatland’s *Året utan sommar* [The year without summer], and Åsne Seierstad’s *One of Us: The Story of Anders Breivik and the Massacre in Norway*; a special issue of the Norwegian cultural magazine *Samtiden*; and

newspaper articles from *Dagens Nyheter*, *Aftonbladet*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, and *Sydsvenskan*.

² Simon was killed on Uøya and is one of the victims who appear in *One of Us*.

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