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Writing Yourself Into Existence

Unruly Poetry for Non-binary and Trans Scholars

Luca Karhu Tainio and Wibke Straube

Imagine a way of writing where we, as researchers and critical thinkers, are not afraid of either being personal or of the vulnerability and potential professional precarity that comes with it. Being transparent in academia with our non-binary or trans (or otherwise marginalized) self and discussing this openly in our scholarly work can come with risks – to our career, to our safety, and to what counts as academic writing. It is too easy to understand the personal as unscientific, to be dismissed as political, as identity politics. However, scientific writing, especially when focusing on marginalized experiences, is driven by a political aim. For many of us, academia has always been political. Be it trans, queer, crip, or racialized people, as minority scholars we would not be part of this institution if we had not learned to be political about our academic competencies. The same applies for cis female scholars. But this is a different story. For now, we want to practice with you bringing the personal into academic writing, taking inspiration from the practices of many scholars before us.

We suggest the exercise of the ›unruly poem‹. The aim is to draw out emotions and thoughts that you have not even consciously thought of in relation to your research subject (yet). The ultimate goal is to create a new text that will look like a poem. An unruly text that does not have to conform to any literary norms or expectations. One that offers a new complexity to your research and your own positioning toward it. You may make use of this text later in your writing – or maybe not. Do not think about usefulness for now. Just enjoy the process and find a pen and paper. You will want to set aside approximately 20 minutes for this exercise.

1) First, you need a prompt. For instance: Why am I writing about this topic? What is my topic? What does it have to do with me? What feelings do I have about this topic?
2) Then start with a flowing pen exercise. It is important you do this exercise with pen on paper. It goes as follows: Set the timer to five minutes. Start writing and

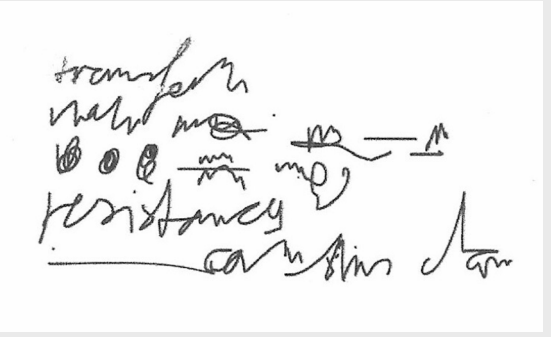
write for five minutes without stopping – do not lift the pen from the paper. Everything going through your mind finds its way through the pen to the paper, even if it is the shopping list. Just continue to write and refocus. Maybe you will write »I shouldn't do the shopping list now, I want to think about why I do the research I do… it makes me feel happy/angry/sad…, because…«. When the five minutes are up, you will have a very drafty stream-of-consciousness-like-text that may consist of half of your shopping list and half of perhaps surprisingly great ideas, feelings, concepts, and insights.

Fig. 1: An image of a pencil, sketched by Wibke who likes texts better when they have pictures.

Private image by the authors.

3) Underline all the sentences and words you find relevant, intriguing, and connected to your prompt.
4) Put these sentences and words into a new document, either on paper or digitally. Put them underneath each other, make line breaks – without attention paid to any rules. You have just created an unruly poem.

Fig. 2: An illustration of what an unruly poem might look like.



Private image by the authors.

5) If you like, edit the sentences slightly, add words or sentences. If you want, you can even include a quote from an article, a novel you read, or a song you like – for instance, placed at the end or in the middle, your choice.
6) For those of you who are doing this exercise in a classroom or at an activist or art space, you can now share the texts, read them together, with names or anonymously. You can discuss the writing through a concept or a question that has relevance to the group or to your research. Another exercise for the group could be to ask the other group members for a possible title for the unruly poem, maybe a title that also includes a concept. Or you can ask others to add one or two lines at the end of the poem. Continue to write, to think together through this new emergence of emotions and experiences in relation to something we would otherwise discuss purely through cases, examples, material, or theory.

Now you are part of your research in more complex ways than before. And you have successfully left the space of positivist, hegemonic knowledge production with all its exclusionary tactics. You have begun a journey into a different way of knowledge-production and academic writing, a new way of telling a story that invites embodiment and emotions into the guarded arena of rational thought.

Storytelling in (Trans)feminist Research

Throughout human history we have told stories: to teach, to warn, to entertain, to understand the world and culture around us and our place in it. Telling stories about the world is and always has been a shared way of making sense of the world. As trans and non-binary researchers in academia, we tell our stories in effort to carve out a space in a cis-heteronormative environment. Through stories we connect, mirror each other's experiences, resist, survive, and rejoice. Thinking with philosopher Judith Butler,[1] by following and repeating normative scripts of femininity or masculinity we become recognized as gendered subjects. In other words, through stories we emerge as intelligible beings. While we suggest a possibility of breaking those norms by writing through a trans optics, and thus creating a space for ourselves and others, Butler's notion of intelligibility through storytelling still seems apt for our thinking about situated research practices and their connections to trans embodiment. Stories do not merely describe the existing world, they are part of worlding it. As queer and communication studies scholar Tony E. Adams and performance studies scholar Stacy Holman Jones describe the potential of stories, we

> »tell […] stories because [we] believe they do something in the world to create a little knowledge, a little humanity, a little room to live and move in and around the constraints and heartbreaks of culture and categories, identities and ideologies.«[2]

Experimental and unruly practices of storytelling have always been a part of feminist and otherwise minoritarian scholarship drawing from various different intersectional positions. In this chapter we want to discuss the potential of storytelling and reflexive writing as a scientific practice, inspired by autoethnography and specifically trans autoethnography.

As authors identifying as trans (Luca) and non-binary (Wibke), our research finds a home in the field of Trans Studies. The roots of Trans(gender) Studies go back to biographic and autoethnographic writing. Field-forming texts such as *The Empire Strikes Back*[3] by Sandy Stone and *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*[4] by Susan Stryker have strongly foregrounded personal experience as well as explored the limits of academic writing. More recent contributions of situated trans writing that also include a strong intersectional perspective come from, for instance, Marquis Bey who explores Blackness and cisnormativity, among others in his article *The*

1 J. Butler (1991): Gender Trouble.

2 T.E. Adams/S. Homan Jones (2019): Telling Stories, p. 109.

3 S. Stone ([1992]2006): The Empire Strikes Back.

4 S. Stryker (1994): My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix.

Trans-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness*[5] or in his essay collection *Cistem Failure*[6]. With a focus on disability, we are very fond of trans poet and theorist Eli Clare's autoethnographic work, brought forward for instance in *Exile and Pride*[7]. Among those recent publications is also Ruth Pearce's seminal article *Methodology for the Marginalised*[8] which provides a focused discussion of autoethnography from a trans perspective; Pearce's approach also largely informs the present chapter. Trans Studies have therefore trained us in reflexivity, in doing research that acknowledges the embodied, lived, and emotional dimensions of engaging with our research material, analysis, and theoretical framing. But situated writing and positioning also have deep roots in feminist science writing. As feminist scholars, we particularly lean here on feminist philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway and her emphasis on the necessity of situated knowledges. She argues against the authoritarian »god trick« – the suggestion of »seeing everything from nowhere«[9] – and for a partial, embodied perspective. It is storytelling in feminist science writing that may allow us to attend to this partial vision, *optics* as Haraway calls it, and to create knowledge differently, about ourselves and the world.

For us, storytelling is also a practice of writing into existence trans and non-binary marginality in a cisnormative world that presently seems rather determined to will trans and non-binary people out of that existence. Considering modern Western history, trans and queer people have never been allowed to live or thrive, dismissed as monstrous, unnatural, and, later, mentally ill.[10] As marginalized scholars, we often experience the underlying feeling of not fitting into the academic space with its norms and discourses, not to speak of its patriarchal and colonial institutional history. We can illustrate this with the well-known metaphor of the chair, formulated by feminist and cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed: We can think of these institutional structures as an old armchair worn to the shape of the person most often sitting on it. For them it is the most comfortable place to sit, molded to perfectly embrace the shape and weight of their body. But for others, with different shapes, it feels uncomfortable, one's body not really fitting into the worn cushions.[11] This is how we notice our *unfitting* in the world: by stepping into the space molded into someone else's shape. Storytelling and other forms of situated writing are ways of reflecting on this experience of unfitting, of addressing and challenging the cemented shapes of academia.

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5 M. Bey (2017): The Trans*-ness of Blackness, the Blackness of Trans*-ness.

6 M. Bey (2022): Cistem Failure.

7 E. Clare (1999): Exile and Pride.

8 R. Pearce (2020): A Methodology for the Marginalised.

9 D. Haraway (1988): Situated Knowledges, p. 581. Further important reference points include b. hooks (1994): Teaching to Transgress; L. Feinberg (1999): Trans Liberation.

10 See e.g. J. Honkasalo (2019): In the Shadows of Eugenics; S. Stryker (2020): Foreword.

11 S. Ahmed (2014): The Cultural Politics of Emotion, pp. 147–148.

Exploring this reflexive awareness even further with regard to the actual process of writing, we are inspired by the book *The Thinking Hand*[12] by Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa. Pallasmaa traces the biological and cultural relevance of the human hand – how the hand holding the pen forms a bridge between the thinking mind and the emerging image or text. Pallasmaa is not writing specifically in a trans context, but his attention on the concrete act of writing carves out the embodied nature of doing research. We find this a poignant reminder of our bodies when sitting by our desks on our laptops, which might not really feel like a bodily exercise. For us, Pallasmaa goes beyond merely tracing one's thinking, but makes visible the material, embodied and concrete of how our research comes to be. And how we come to be (as) researchers.

The two metaphors of the worn armchair and the thinking hand point toward different levels of significance for embodiment and reflexivity in our writing. Ahmed helps us understand how certain bodies do not fit into the normatively molded world, while Pallasmaa helps us consider the concrete physical body in the moment of writing or doing research.

The Unruly Poem

The unruly poem we have suggested as an exercise is a specific form of writing ourselves into existence, into a text, and into the world that has not considered us. With the unruly poem, we encourage disrupting the norms of genre and gender as well as challenging the understanding of emotions as »unthought«[13]. We consider the poems as a trans practice, reflecting the unruliness of trans bodies that »[...] deviate from what is normal but also challenge the very concept of normality [...] they do not follow the rules, they defy how we understand the body to be, and challenge what we take to be livable, intelligible, or meaningful.«[14] Indeed, echoing Kathleen Stewart, all reflexive writing can be understood as telling stories about »bodies literally affecting one another: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought«[15].

Just as transness is itself a storying, a rearticulation, of the embodied subject, the unruly poem is a rearticulation of scientific thinking and writing. It not only breaks with conventional academic forms, but also with norms of affectivity and tempo in science writing, it makes space for emotional reflections as well as allows a new pace, a different rhythm of writing. The poetic flow of the unruly poem grants a different

12 J. Pallasmaa (2019): The Thinking Hand.

13 S. Ahmed (2014): The Cultural Politics of Emotion, p. 170.

14 E.M. Blum (2018): Beauvoir's Ambiguity and Unruly Bodies, p. 571.

15 K. Stewart (2007): Ordinary Affects, p. 128.

space of attunement, of bringing ourselves into reflexive and accountable proximity to our research objects, our questions, and ourselves.[16]

Our approach to the unruly poem is also inspired by cultural studies scholar Kathleen Stewart and what she has called »ordinary affects«[17]. Ordinary affects draw our attention to often ignored and denied aspects of research. Paaige Turner and Kristen Norwood describe these omitted aspects as the »racing of our hearts as we experience anxiety, elation, confusion, and humility« and critically point out the ways in which we »leave out how our bodies were questioned or unquestioned by ourselves and our participants«[18]. Our engagement with unruly poetry is furthermore indebted to sociologist Laurel Richardson's discussion of evocative feminist writing. Richardson claims that »writing touches us when we live, in our bodies.«[19] She sees writing as a methodology, a mode of inquiry, that helps us word the world.[20] Inspired by autoethnography, Richardson argues for *writing-stories* that create a space for critical reflexivity, for writing the self as part of the analytical practice. Unruly writing allows us to relate differently to our material, accounting for the fact that »we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences, and so on.«[21] We are writing ourselves into existence.

The Autoethnographic as Situated Writing

As the quote from Richardson shows, we understand the unruly poem as not least part of, and inspired by, autoethnographic traditions.[22] Born in the latter half of the 20th century out of a growing concern over master narratives and ideals of objective truths, autoethnography marked a move toward situatedness, self-reflexivity, and a critical questioning of »canonical ways of doing research«[23]. This move is also reflected in the terminological shift from ethnography toward *auto*ethnography. Citing Holman Jones and Harris, »[. . .] ethnographers reminded us of the necessity of understanding the individual in relation to culture and politics and bringing ethno-

16 See also Eva Königshofen's text on Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant's writing of 'hundreds' and queerfeminist activist writing in this volume.

17 K. Stewart (2007): Ordinary Affects.

18 P.K. Turner/K.M. Norwood (2013): Body of Research, p. 696.

19 L. Richardson (2000): Writing, p. 931.

20 Ibid., p. 923.

21 Ibid., p. 931.

22 See also the in-depth discussion on evocative autoethnography by Rose Beermann and Andrea Ploder in this volume.

23 T. Spry (2001): Performing Autoethnography.

graphic research and representation back to the body itself, to corporeality«[24]. Following this, autoethnographers placed the researcher and their experience as part of the research instead of looking outward claiming a supposedly neutral perspective on the experiences of others.

We are drawing specifically from formulations of queer autoethnography[25] as well as more recent conceptualizations of trans autoethnography.[26] Both queer theory and autoethnography share, in the words of Adams and Holman Jones, a commitment to »multiple forms of knowledge and representations, and research as an agent of change«[27]. This form of writing requires continuous critical reflexivity on the part of the researcher in order for an autoethnographic approach to remain an ethically and theoretically sound method of inquiry. Accordingly, we understand autoethnography as a constant reciprocal movement between theory, practice, and the self. On the one hand, the practice is guided by theoretical considerations as well as embodied and affective experiences. And on the other, theory can inform one's sense and understanding of one's own experience and embodiment – or at least create a language for understanding and verbalizing them to others and to oneself.

Writing ourselves into existence and perhaps, nodding back to Judith Butler, into recognizability, through an autoethnographic practice places our experiences as trans scholars and/or otherwise marginalized scholars among those of others. This also offers a way of making the boundaries and norms of our cultures visible through a marginalized viewpoint. It is a way of simultaneously writing *with* and *against*. The unruly poem, as one form of reflexive writing, captures our embodied and emotional connection to our inquiries.

Vulnerable Writing

To conclude this chapter, we want to return to the precarity that comes with the reflexive practice of an autoethnographic text – especially for texts coming from minority perspectives. Leaning on Pearce's *Methodology for the Marginalised*, there needs to be a consideration about the emotional closeness of one's research topics, and the extent to which one is willing to include details of their own life and embodiment. Pearce argues here for not only considering an ethical responsibility toward oneself,

24 S. Holman Jones/A.M. Harris (2019): Queering Autoethnography, p. 2.

25 Ibid.

26 See T. Odland/L. Tainio (2025): Introduction; J.H. Amm (2025): On Sticky Encounters; R. Pearce (2020): A Methodology for the Marginalised; L.O. Harju (2023): Vulnerability as Best Practice?.

27 T.E. Adams/S. Holman Jones (2019): Telling Stories, p. 108.

but for de-centralizing individual responsibility and seeing the significance of supportive scholarly community as an essential part of knowledge production.[28]

As we all live in different crossroads between marginalization and privilege, autoethnographic practices can be used to address both positionalities. As trans scholar O.L. Harju describes in their article *Vulnerability as Best Practice?: ›Minority‹ Autoethnography in Hostile Worlds*, autoethnography can provide those situated within the majority with a pathway to critically disengage from privilege by cultivating solidarity, while for marginalized scholars it offers a means of reclaiming excluded forms of knowledge, establishing legitimacy, and refusing what Harju calls »forced-upon vulnerability«[29]. For the latter, in these times of an anti-trans backlash and overall far-right mobilization, science writing through affectivity, situatedness, and transparency of one's own experiences and relations to one's research can be a form of resistance but not without risks.

Keeping these considerations in mind, we wish to offer a hopeful reflection on the potential of autoethnographic practices in this gloomy political landscape in the words of Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira:

> »Autoethnography can help us find our common humanity in the spaces between Us and Them, right? Autoethnography can help us trouble the simplistic fixed identities of the Other required for campaigns of hatred and exclusion. Autoethnography can help us connect the dots between the personal and the political in intentional and public ways. Autoethnography can help us bring knowledge of lived experience that is often too messy, contradictory, controversial, and unquantifiable for the dominant paradigm to deal with […].«[30]

With this we want to end our chapter with wondering and hope. Wondering if situated and reflexive writing, such as the unruly poem, can become a partisan autoethnography, one that can be hidden yet rebellious, open but still safe. One where our differences and similarities are reflected and our bodies, realities and lives told in the ways and with the words we decide. And hoping for a future for our scholarship, our fields, our ways of feminist science writing, of consistently being accountable and reflexive. For a future where marginalized voices are encouraged, supported, and amplified in academia. Until then, we hope you find freedom within the lines of the unruly poem.

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28 Ibid.

29 O.L. Harju (2023): Vulnerability as Best Practice?, p.38.

30 M. Diversi/C. Moreira (2019): Autoethnography as an Act of Resistance, p. 545.

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