When does research end?  
The emotional labour of researching abjection

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Abstract
In this article, I ask the question: when does research end? I am motivated to engage with this question because I still labour over my doctoral research that I completed a few years ago. Feelings of guilt, shame, and above all, abjection, continue to haunt my subject position of researcher and academic. I seek to trouble the idea that research has clear beginning, middle, and end points, and I reflect on the politics, labour and emotion involved in conducting research, particularly when it involves understandings and experiences of violence. I expose how theoretical and pragmatic decisions, as well as incidents and accidents, leave mnemonic traces on our bodies. I demonstrate how personal, theoretical and methodological decisions are complexly intertwined in research, and I argue that it is incumbent upon researchers to think through what they research, why they do it, its effects, and consequences – for researcher, researched, and society.

Keywords
Research, abjection, emotional labour, research methodology, violence

Introduction

The time is out of joint

– Hamlet.

Research literature is replete with advice on how researchers should engage with their research populations. This advice can be contradictory and/or constitute people in many different ways, some of which may run counter to the political and theoretical persuasions of the researcher. So too, much of this advice implicitly presumes the researcher is an objective agent who remains unaffected by research. While there is an enormous body of resources that focus on protecting participants from harm (Connor et al., 2017; Drake, 2014), there is very little focus on how these issues affect researchers. The issue, then, of ‘researching the researcher’ (Campbell, 2002) remains relatively unexplored and taken-for-granted (see also the articles in this Special Issue). In this article, I seek to address this lacuna by asking the question: when does research end? I am motivated to engage with this question because I still labour over my doctoral research that I completed a few years ago. Feelings of guilt, shame, and above all, abjection, continue to haunt my subject position of researcher and academic. I seek to trouble the idea that research has clear beginning, middle, and end points, and I reflect on the politics, labour and emotion involved in conducting research, particularly when it involves understandings and experiences of violence. I expose how theoretical and pragmatic decisions, as well as incidents and accidents, leave mnemonic traces on our bodies (Butler, 1997). I demonstrate how personal, theoretical and methodological decisions are complexly intertwined in research, and I argue that it is incumbent upon researchers to think through what they research, why they do it, its effects, and consequences – for researcher, researched, and society.

In the discussion that follows, I start by contextualising my question: when does research end? I then introduce the background of my research project; this discussion
is important in framing how the personal and theoretical decisions I made at the time created a set of conditions in which the project has continued to haunt me. I use three pieces of text contained within the research project to index my associations with the research, particularly in relation to the emotional labour that continues. The article can be contextualised within broader personal reflections about the nature and politics of research, knowledge-production and shame. My aim is to demonstrate how our positionalities, histories, methodological and theoretical choices, as well as our engagement with participants and the stories they tell us, shape how we engage with what unfolds before us, and continues to do so, time and again.

On ‘when does research end?’

In asking the question – when does research end? – I am calling attention to the ways in which the research process never has smooth nor absolute end points. While many scholars distribute the allocation of research processes between research design, ethics, fieldwork, analysis, writing and publication, I contest that this is a rather superficial understanding of research processes. While Feldman et al. (2003) conceptualise the fieldwork process as getting in, getting data, and getting out, I suggest these are far from discrete categories. Specifically, I conceptualise these processes as relational, intertwined, reiterative and laden with labour. Each decision and experience within the chain of research impacts upon what follows next. While there is an array of literature on protecting researchers (see Bloor et al., 2010; Chatham-Carpenter, 2010; Jensen and Laurie, 2016), I suggest that not enough of this research focuses on the harms encountered after a project is typically constituted to have reached its ‘end point’. Indeed, given the harms, memories and experiences that continue to linger with the researcher, I suggest that the research is still not finished; in Hamlet’s words, ‘the time is out of joint’. Research is continually being reconceptualised, retheorised, rewritten andreshaped, and is, as such, ongoing work and labour (that is too often done in isolation) (see also Fohring, 2020; Moran and Asquith, 2020 – in this Special Issue).

Part of my conceptualisation may be understood as hauntological in nature. Popularised by Derrida (1994), hauntology is a portmanteau of haunting and ontology that signifies the temporal and ontological ‘figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive’ (Davis, 2005: 373). This ghost is ‘a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world’ (Davis, 2005: 373), a memory inflected by experience and history. In this article, I am interested in events during the research process and memories developed since, and I introduce old research text and contemporary reflections to anchor the ways in which experience, labour, memory, work and research never end, potentially haunting the researcher, unflaggingly. Of course, these memories may be conceptualised as possibilities rather than factualities, recognising that

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My memories, then, can be understood as fictional rather than factual, yet simultaneously un/real. As Moore (1994: 36) writes, ‘personal history becomes philosophy, and though built on fact, memory becomes fantasy, important fantasy, and ultimately the mythology by which we make our choices and live our lives’. In this article, I am interested in the ways in which memories, perhaps real and/or imagined, continue to linger with me in my subject position of researcher. What I provide is an ambiguous, partial, unreliable and fictional articulation of the ways in which memories work and rework themselves in the lives of researcher/er. I am also interested in the ways in which methodological and theoretical decisions in research impact upon the researcher’s association with that research. I wonder how experiences and memories are carried by researchers, and understanding hauntology as a concern with a crisis of space and time (Fisher, 2012), I engage in a reflexive exercise that brings together the past and the present of memory, labour, and emotion. Before introducing these memories, I introduce the study that continues to haunt me.

Background to the study – researching abjection

In July 2014, I started a doctoral project investigating violence against disabled people. Originally aligning myself within a structuralist/criminological/violence/hate crime paradigm, I conducted life history research with 13 people labelled ‘intellectually disabled’. They told me horrifying stories of violence that had been inflicted upon them. Throughout the course of the research, several uncertainties developed that impacted upon the project. These uncertainties emerged both from pragmatic issues such as methodological dilemmas, and the revision of my own theoretical trajectory. Specifically, my introduction to queer theory significantly transformed the project. Approaching it for personal and political reasons, I became forced to confront my own queer subjectivity, abnormality and infuriation with normative standards. Goodley (2014) notes how ‘normative standards have the potential to feed some pretty fucked up responses to that which is deemed to be abnormal’ (p. 159). These ideas bled into my research, and I became compelled to confront my own non-normative and abnormal life as well as the disabled participants in the research.

Dealing with matters of subjectification in my work led me to the concept of abjection. Previously I had only ever known the concept as an adjective (abject poverty, for example), but subsequently learnt it was loaded with theoretical
impact and power. Paralleling my readings of abjection were the interviews that I was conducting with my research participants. I learned that my conceptual focus on violence was becoming too reductive as the participant’s stories pushed me towards questions of pathologisation, able/normality, dis/ability, dis/avowal, and so on. My imperative in the research became to abandon the paradigm of violence and move to a theorisation of abjection. But what is abjection?

Abjection, which etymologically means ‘to cast out’, refers to the conditions in which subjects are rendered unintelligible according to regulatory norms, and it has increasingly been used to comprehend the oppression of various minority groups. Among other domains, the concept has been deployed in psychoanalysis, feminism, and post-structuralism, and I was informed by all three in my research project. For most of my theorising, I was informed by Julia Kristeva (1982), Judith Butler (1990, 1993, in Meijer and Prins, 1998), Anne McClintock (1995) and David Halperin (2007). For Kristeva (1982), abjection is a crisis of the self where one violently casts off or expunges that which threatens subjective integrity/identity. Abjection is a psychic and bodily reaction to threats of the subject’s borders, and functions to preserve the subject (Kristeva, 1982). The abject is a source of horror; it is neither subject nor object, and it is simultaneously repulsive and fascinating (Kristeva, 1982). Kristeva (1982) cites multiple examples that precipitate ‘a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out’, such as a corpse, blood, vomit, shit, menses, and so on (p. 2). In my project I added to this list: disability.

Butler (1993) extends abjection beyond a psychoanalytic frame and suggests that it is a discursive (rather than psychic) function that renders bodies unintelligible in political terms. Butler (1993) writes that the exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects’, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (p. 3)

Butler (1993) conceives that subjects are formed through exclusion/inclusion, and the abject emerges as the site ‘against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life’ (p. 3). For Butler (1993), then, the materialisation of an intelligible body/subject depends upon the simultaneous production of its antithesis: an unintelligible, abject body.

Butler (1993) suggests that abject bodies are ‘delegitimated bodies [that] fail to count as “bodies”’, and that they are the ‘constitutive outside’ and ‘nonnarrativizable’ (p. 15, 3, 188). As I understand it, Butler (1993) socialises Kristeva’s (1982) theory to consider the ways in which regulatory norms shape the political mattering and materialisation of bodies. According to Butler’s (1993) discursive theorisation, the abject body can be considered a material construct of difference that is not discursively legitimate — it is literally all body and materiality without meaning. For Butler (1993), abjection refers to the process by which certain populations are excluded and rendered unintelligible as subjects because they fail to adhere to constructed normative ideals.

Rather than outline McClintock’s (1995) conceptualisation in this section, the forthcoming story outlines her approach. Suffice to say, McClintock (1995) understands abjection to have seven dimensions: abject objects, abject states, abject zones, agents of abjection, socially abjected groups, psychic processes of abjection and political processes of abjection. I also flag that I further develop my theorisation of abjection throughout this article as the stories are introduced (and I turn to Halperin’s (2007) approach later in this article). The stories I introduce help provide some context to the ways in which research, methodology and theory become intertwined and personal, and continue to impact upon researchers well beyond its ‘completion point’. Succinctly, researchers do not sit in ivory towers objectively plying their trade; applying theory to experience in devoid and abstract ways. Theory and research is personal and political, and should be understood as such.

**Story one – abjecting the other**

Warren and I met at a self-advocacy group for disabled people — an abject zone. Prior to the interview, he asked me to get a sandwich out of his bag. In addition to the label ‘intellectual disability’, Warren also has cerebral palsy. He spends most of life in a wheelchair (an abject object), and according to ableist norms, has slurred speech, poor mobility, and dribbles. I retrieved the chicken and lettuce sandwich from his bag, unwrapped it and placed it next to his hands. As Warren picked it up and started to eat it, chicken and lettuce fell from the sandwich, as well as from his mouth. He chewed with his mouth wide open, and I watched as he masticated the food. Food dribbled down his chin. In these moments, the sandwich, for me, transformed into an abject object. I found it repulsive, and I gagged; twice. My gag was a psychic process of abjection; it was unconscious and unintentional, and I became an agent of abjection by abjectifying Warren to preserve my own bodily integrity. If Warren had noticed my response — and I am not sure that he did — he may have felt abjected, rejected, disgusting. I felt a profound sense of shame with this encounter, and I laboured over the event and the feelings it evoked for weeks without telling anybody. My shame was an abject state. (Thorneycroft, forthcoming)

I saw in McClintock’s (1995) work the possibility of conjoining Kristeva’s (1982) psychic account of abjection with Butler’s (1993) more social, philosophical, and political account. In articulating this theorisation, I drew upon the above narrative to illustrate a multi-dimensional account of abjection. In so doing, I exposed to the reader my own act of
abjection against Warren. It is a memory that I still think about; perhaps it haunts me. While some colleagues have expressed reservations to me about this narrative – in that it makes them feel uncomfortable – I have chosen to work with, not against, that uncomfortableness. I think it is an important narrative because my reflection of this encounter made me understand how abjection is shared and relational. Not only was I theorising abjection, I came to embody that theorising by feeling it myself. While feminist scholars often talk about the personal as political, this memory demonstrated to me the ways in which theory is lived and embodied. I came to not only understand abjection as a theoretical concept, but as a lived social process (Tyler, 2013).

The memory also haunts me given I am a researcher studying abjection. How can I decry the abjection of others while engaging in abjection myself? How can I reconcile the difference between trying to understand experiences of abjection yet perpetuate it unto others? Am I a hypocrite? Alas, this will be a memory that will continue to haunt me for years to come. In any case, in illustrating the relationality between experience, theory and theorising, method(ology) and labour, I am reminded of Von Benzon’s (2017) observation that mistakes or failures may prove illuminating for researchers. Von Benzon (2017) writes,

> when research processes go to plan, embedded relationships of power may be invisible. When expectations are conflicting, or processes disrupted, previously unnoticed, or unspoken, hierarchies may be illuminated. As such, reflection on these embedded relationships may be sufficient to turn these ‘unfortunate’ events into useful learning experiences. (p. 1041)

One mistake with Warren forced me to think through the ways in which abjection can be resisted, to think through the terms of cultural intelligibility, and to imagine disability differently. Of course, I was already engaging in such endeavours, but this moment brought theory and politics, theorising and analysis, together like a gut-punch. One memory initiated a set of circumstances in which the theory and politics of the research project became more pronounced, and more personal. I became forced to consider my own privilege, positionalities and prejudices. While this memory made me mindful of the ways in which abjection may be committed, Story Two showed me how we may take it up within ourselves and spread it unto others.

**Story two – catching abjection**

The first interview with Deb affected me greatly, such that my diary entry simultaneously says so little yet conveys a great deal. My lack of voice and ability to process what Deb told me found its way into my diary entry. Upon reflection, my interaction with Deb raises an important question: is abjection contagious? If we accept that abjection, in its etymological sense, means to ‘cast out’, Deb may be expelling on to me her own abjection. I am interested in an intersubjective exchange of the psychic and the embodied dimensions of abjection, such that I experienced them as my own. To preserve her own subjectivity, she needs to recount her stories to others, perhaps to me. And what did I do with this abjection? I took it up, accepting her abjection inside me. I then called my mother at the airport; perhaps moving the abjection onwards to her. In this sense, abjection is shared and relational, both a singular and collective experience, and perhaps partly voluntary and capable of resistance (Halperin, 2007). As I spoke to my mother, I drank beer in the airport lounge, wanting my brain to turn numb. Abjection makes us vulnerable, so it is important we have the interdependency to turn to others (or perhaps anything). The distributed, compounding, and iterative nature of the practices of abjection require mechanisms to eschew its power. (Thorneycroft, forthcoming)

This passage reflects on my feelings after my first interview with Deb. In this interview, Deb recounted to me a prolonged history of sexual and physical violence, and I just could not cope with it. But again, the anecdote also conveys the merging of theory and experience, analysis and politics, labour and emotion. I was interested in the ways in which abjection is experienced by disabled people, yet I found myself taking it up, and perhaps even spreading it to my mother. Perhaps it is poignant that Kristeva’s (1982) theorisation of the abject has been understood as a response to Lacan’s (1977) mirror stage. Whereas Lacan (1977) conceives the arrival of subjectivity at the time an infant sees themselves in the mirror (or some other reflective object), Kristeva (1982) believes this is happening earlier when the infant is drawing a distinction between I and (m)other. This matricidal moment is the first instance of abjection, yet it is not a unitary event but a process that is repeatedly enacted to preserve integrity/identity (Kristeva 1982). Kristeva (1982) contends that each abjection is a re-enactment of the very first time it is committed, and here I am, years later, perhaps spreading it to my mother. This understanding also meant that I was not an objective analyser of data, but a person who was impacted by the stories that were shared. Rather than simply conceptualise this as ‘vicarious trauma’ – which is so often the case in (this type of) research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Kiyimba and O’Reilly, 2015) – my engagement with abjection as a theoretical tool in this project provided me the circumstances to associate myself with it, and use personal experiences to extend its theorisation. Rather than use a theory to explore experiential phenomena that my participants recounted, I was able to consider the ways in which the theory dis/aligned with my own experiential self and other (disabled) people. Thus, in a context in which much literature maligns the researcher as all seeing and all knowing, I was able to insert myself into the research (perhaps self-indulgently?) to engage in questions as to how abjection works for different bodies in different ways and in different contexts.

The encounter with Deb and its aftermath showed me that abjection is shared, contagious, and relational. While this memory was useful in helping theorise abjection, it also exposed to me the ways in which abjection haunts us.
Kristeva (1982) says that abjection haunts the subject ‘unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang’ (p. 9). Understanding abjection in this relational sense has consequences, for it obliges subjects to recognise their inter-relationality and interdependence to each other. A question: what are the effects of allowing abjection inside us?

**Story three – embracing abjection?**

_HIV_. Why was I self-destructive? Like McRuer (2006: 57), I too engaged in practices where ‘HIV was unquestionably on the other side of the condom’. I went even further, abandoning the condom completely. What was I doing? Was my work with abjection seducing me? Was I, as Halperin (2007: 91) proposes, tempting HIV infection ‘as a scary but inspired expression of antisocial solidarity with . . . [my] sick and dead comrades in ignominy’? Or maybe I was just looking for a roadblock between me and a completed PhD thesis. The prospect of becoming HIV positive offered a justification, albeit extreme, to give up on my work. Maybe abjection became my dirty secret. (Thorneycroft, forthcoming)

In understanding the participant’s experiences of violence through the lens of abjection, I was simultaneously speculating about the ways in which abjection might be resisted and/or reimagined. Finding Halperin’s (2007) text, _What Do Gay Men Want?_, during the project’s latter stages greatly freed my thinking on these speculations. Halperin (2007) suggests that abjection could be embraced in the face of social oppression. He takes Warner’s (1995: 35) claim that, for gay men, ‘[a]bjection continues to be our dirty secret’, and examines what that might look like; for Halperin (2007) abjection for gay men is

what it means to have someone’s dick up our butts or to have someone come in our mouths. We need to admit our pleasure in being the lowest of the low, in being bad, in being outlaws, in betraying both our own values and those of the people around us. (p. 65)²

Halperin (2007) suggests there may be a ‘transgressive appeal’ in being abject (p. 65). Commingling this period, I was also agonising in the ways in which research might be inherently violent (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2012; Swain et al., 1998). Swain et al. (1998) speculate that ‘research that gives voice to the experiences of abuse can itself be abusive’ (p. 22). Thus, it was in this context that the above passage was written. In understanding abjection as a collective and relational practice, I became compelled to expose my own vulnerability, abjection and precarity. I became conscious of the ethics and politics of asking others about their experiences of violence/abjection, and so I put forth several contemplations, emotions and experiences about myself that sought to address abjection as a collective experience as well as engage in an ethics of research practice. I could not reconcile invisibilising my own abjection while foregrounding that of the people who shared their life histories with me, especially when I was trying to engage in our collective vulnerability.

On another level, the story above also demonstrates the ways in which I allowed the theoretical tool of abjection to come inside me. Abjection is not just a theoretical tool confined to textbooks and journal articles; it denotes an experience that I could not escape. It constitutes my life (as an abject queer body) and that of the people who shared their stories with me. Where so many theories are deployed to ‘make sense’ of social practice, here was a tool that I felt embodied and was/is within me, the first theory that really ‘made sense’. hooks’ (1991) comments about the liberatory nature of theory really resonate when I think of abjection:

I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (p. 1)

Theory is supposed to help us explain and/or understand phenomena, yet I think too many scholars deploy the theories they simply like, or re-deploy the same theory again and again in their work because they know it. Theory is more important than that. When I think of the brick that I carry around in my head and in my heart, the theory of the abject is the closest I have ever approached that best matches that feeling. To be sure, it is also important to recognise that I was not using abjection as an objective and totalising account of disabled people’s experiences (or that of my own), but as an intellectual tool that enabled me to reconsider dominant narratives about disability (and queerness) that pervade the field. There is a time where abjection may lose its grip on explaining these experiences, and I will be ready for that time (I hope). And while abjection constitutes me and many others – perhaps even some reading this text may catch my abjection – I am nevertheless always looking for ways in which it might be resisted and/or reimagined.

**Abjection, hauntology and emotion**

I have tried to untangle and interrogate the emotional labour involved in research and theory. Blakeley (2007: 61) writes that ‘the emotionality of researching difficult and sensitive topics is a private issue for most researchers’, and I have engaged in a performative politics that seeks to make the private public. Too many researchers labour privately about their research experiences, and theorising is too often deployed from the researcher and put onto other people. Yet, there can be ‘[n]o intimacy without reciprocity’ (Oakley, 1981: 49), and it is incumbent upon researchers to avail themselves to mutual negotiations and engagements with meaning-making, intimacy and theorising. Researchers must avoid becoming ‘armchair academics’, placing ideas on top of people without emotional engagement. In this sense, emotion should not be
confined to the domain of psychology, but a vital social process that recognises our shared vulnerabilities and precarities. Lather (1991) writes,

‘[t]he present turmoil in the human sciences frees us to construct new designs based on alternative tenets and epistemological commitments. My goal is to move research in many different and, indeed, contradictory directions in the hope that more interesting and useful ways of knowing will emerge. Rather than establish a new orthodoxy, we need to experiment, document and share our efforts . . .’ (p. 69)

I suggest that an engagement in emotion is central to this, and my personal engagement with abjection made this more pronounced, and indeed, hauntological. Too much research is presented as ‘unbiased’ and ‘objective’, as if research magically writes itself without the participation of a human agent. I want to learn from researchers, I want to hear their stories and their experiences – as Denzin (1989) acknowledges, the researcher’s ‘own experiences provide the most important sources of data for their theories’ (p. 61).

Theory is personal, and it impacts upon the researched just as much as it does on the researcher. Imagine, for a second, that I did not theorise abjection in the research project but simply stuck with the original concept of violence. Imagine if I couldn’t be bothered learning something new and difficult, and I just stuck with inserting violence on top of narratives that didn’t quite fit – like square pegs in round holes. How would I make sense of their narratives? How could I understand their stories? How would I tell them to resist the violence, or even in the case of abjection, to embrace it? I wouldn’t be able to take it up, nor would I be able to disperse it. How would the research then affect me? Perhaps a lot, and perhaps not even a little.

Yet, unfortunately, perhaps there is an extent to which we should allow such emotions inside us. It is one thing to be a detached researcher, and it is quite another to be overly involved, too intense, and inadvertently complicit in compounding injury. Perhaps researchers may need to engage in a little distanced empathy in the interests of self-preservation, yet paradoxically, this style of approach constitutes my final feelings of shame, guilt and abjection related to my research project. Specifically, to preserve my own health and well-being, it became time for me to stop contacting my research participants. Hanna’s (2019) feelings are similar to my own:

I felt drained by the process of analysis, often feeling unable to ‘shake off’ the moods . . . [It felt] as if I had been underwater and was now trying to resurface back into reality and my own life and disentangle . . . descriptions from my own feelings. (p. 530)

Like Hanna, the interviews with my participants came to consume my life. I could not separate the pain I was feeling in the interviews with the way I was living my everyday life.

The interviews and attendant emotions consumed me. After a few months’ post-interviews, I decided not to contact any participants, and only engage with them if they ever contacted me. This decision haunts me. I feel guilt, shame and abjection. I say to myself that it is now too late to make contact with them again, that it would be ‘too awkward’. Is this a lie? It is a lie. How, then, can I call myself an ethical researcher? I can handle abjection, but only so much. Contacting them may consume me all over again.

Yet simultaneously, they may not be contacting me because they need to preserve their own selves. If we understand abjection as relational, perhaps they gave me their abjection in the interviews and that’s all they were after. In my final interview with another participant, Roger, I asked him if there was anything else about him that a reader might like to know. He responded, ‘I think the only thing they might find missing is: “why didn’t that person get the support he needed?”’. Roger knows that the world is fucked up and unfair, and knows that he experienced too much trauma and violation. Perhaps he just wants us to sit with that knowledge.

Returning to ‘when does research end?’

Can an approach that is based on the critique of ideology itself become ideological? The answer is that of course it can . . . What can save critical theory from being used in this way is the insistence on reflectivity, the insistence that this theory of knowledge be applied to those propounding or using the theory. (Bredo and Feinberg, 1982: 439)

As (activist) scholars and researchers in the social sciences, we aim to fight against the injustices in the world. Whether it be small or large, our topics are intended to find something out, and to do something better. Succinctly, we might aim to make the world a little better. Central to this research process is reflexivity and critique. Researchers must be conscious of the decisions that we make, and how these decisions impact upon people, politics and knowledge. Researchers need to critique themselves and others, ever mindful that conventional forms of research may restrict alternative ways of being, knowing and doing. Inserting ourselves into the research process allows us to embody the methods, theories and decisions we deploy, giving us a lived experience of what these decisions and theories feel like (if, at least, for ourselves). This might give us some understanding as to how our research might be harmful, and to help us to find ways to avoid this. Therefore, in being forever reflexive and critical, our research can never end. Researchers must constantly reflect and critique, again and again. And if we know that research never ends, we might be more deliberate and cautious about the research we embark upon, knowing that, perhaps, it will haunt us.

I hope I have not been too defeatist and/or pessimistic in this article. It was not my intention to highlight the dangers or harms of research. To be sure, research can be dangerous, but it can
also be rewarding and beneficial. Contrary to much assertions, however, we can only ever really say that research is emancipatory, participatory and/or non-maleficent after, not before, it has been completed. Yet, I have argued that research never ends, so we must continually reflect on the ethics and politics of the research we do. While the research project continues to haunt me, I do not want the reader to conflate haunting with negativity or damage. Some memories make me cringe and feel ashamed, yet others fill me with happiness and pride. Such is the complexity of our lives and the messy nature of the research topics we select; messy approaches lead to messy outcomes. As Law (2004: 2) writes, ‘simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent. The very attempt to be clear simply increases the mess’. Perhaps we need to embrace the mess, with reflexivity and critique, yet we should be ever mindful that it may come back to haunt us.

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Notes

1. While the citation in this work is identified as forthcoming, the pieces of text were written originally in unpublished work in 2017. The citation lists ‘forthcoming’ because the text is soon to be published in a monograph; another example of the ways in which work, theorising and labour are used, re-used, re-worked, shaped and twisted.

2. This is an interesting description because these acts also describe heterosexual/heteronormative sexual practices. I wonder: are these practices really so outlawed when they are part and parcel of heteronormative relationships? I take Halperin’s (2007) description to mean that they become abject when one imagines homosexual actors. Or, more particularly, Halperin (2007) is writing in the context of the transgressive appeal of ‘risky sex’ (that is, the potential of HIV transmission).

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