

## Writing In/ter/rup/tions

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### Interruption 1:

*I'm in a grade 3 classroom - my fieldwork 'site'. I am trying to write about something that just happened, when Amy, an eight-year-old girl deemed too mature for her age by her teacher, comes over and peers over my shoulder. "Is this your diary?" she asks me. The word "diary" makes me chuckle, and I say, "yea, I guess it kind of is." "What do you write in there?" she probes. I tell her I write about what happens during the day, so I don't forget. Trying to move the attention away from myself and my notebook, I ask her if she also has a diary. "Yes," she tells me, "it's at home." "Am I in your diary?" she probes again. "Yes, probably," I say, to which she responds with a smile, "I'm going to be famous." She begins to read aloud what I have written on the page, standing closely behind me. As she reads, I feel a growing sense of embarrassment and slight surge of panic swelling up in my body. In an attempt to take her attention away from what else might be written on the page, I begin to write: "Amy reads my journal and is reading it now behind me," and we both laugh.*

In the current neoliberal context of higher education in which one's productivity is constantly being measured via research output metrics, it would not be a far stretch to say that interruptions to one's writing are far from desired. As researchers and writers, we dream of carving out that perfect slice of heaven in which time is limitless, the space is completely our own, and we can be free from the multiple distractions that constitute so much of our daily lives. In order to develop the craft of writing, scholars (especially emerging scholars) are encouraged to devote daily, serious and uninterrupted time to writing. In her most recent book, *Air & Light & Time and Space*, Helen Sword (2017) interviewed hundreds of established academics across a number of disciplines in order to find out the secrets to their success. One of the key elements, Sword found, was in relation to one's 'behavioural habits', which ultimately boiled down to finding the time (ideally daily) to write. Such advice is echoed by doctoral supervisors, many of whom expect their students to write consistently and productively (i.e., evidenced by publications) throughout their doctoral educations. The haunting expression, "publish or perish" impresses itself on the bodies of doctoral students, evoking long bouts of writer's block, anxiety, shame,

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and self-doubt. If interruptions to writing are antithetical to productivity, then interruptions should be avoided by any means possible (see: D'Hoest and Lewis, 2015).

And yet...

Writing is never truly done in isolation, and words written on a page do not belong to only those who write. The act of writing is not something we can possess or control, it is always porous and affects us and others in ways that we cannot always anticipate. Even when we try to write alone, without interruptions, other people enter our landscape of thought - theorists, poets, artists. The people in our research also 'speak back', poke new holes in our thinking, and question our intentions in regards to what it is that we think we know (and what it is that we hope to do with this knowing). Amy's question – "Am I in your diary?" – interrupted not only the writing of my fieldnotes, but also my own practice of writing fieldnotes in the classroom to begin with, a practice that I had up until that point embraced as a way of documenting "what happens" in a classroom. Amy's interruption prompted me to also ask not only what happens, but *who* happens, who is present, and how (and what) remains absent? My own bodily presence in the classroom was surely also an interruption that broke up the normal flow of things - an additional adult body in the classroom writing is rightly cause for at least some suspicion! Interruptions that happen *to us* while writing, like in the example with Amy above, serve as reminders that bodies and affects are very much present in writing. The intensity of writing interruptions, which are beyond our control, sometimes bring with them enough force to bring bodies together, produce shame and embarrassment or perhaps even a sense of pride upon seeing oneself written into a text.

### **Interruption 2:**

*It's 3 AM. I lie awake thinking about that stubborn paragraph that needs major re-writing, that manuscript I need to finish by next week, that paper I started long ago, but never finished. Oh yes, **that** paper. I imagine it now - stuffed in between receipts and old notebooks in my desk drawer. I could come back to that paper, I should, I must. So much time spent on it, so much energy thinking, reading, writing. Suddenly, panic sets in. Forget **that** paper. I have a dissertation to write! It's been several months since I completed my fieldwork, and what do I have to show for it? I promised a chapter by January, and it's now September... and...and...*

*It's now 3:30. Ideas swirl in my mind, wild and frantic like a hurricane, uprooting trees and sweeping up everything in sight - cars, rooftops, cows. My heart beats faster and faster, and I begin to sweat. I keep coming back to certain data, certain encounters that resist being known, resist any kind of 'sense'. These data encounters are hard to grasp, they are slippery, intangible yet I feel their potency on every inch of my being. What to do with these data encounters? How to think and write about them? **With** them? How can I resist writing them as if I know them? What is this thing, this beast of a dissertation I am trying to write, anyway? I look over at the clock in the bedroom. Almost 4 am now. I turn over, and cover my head with the blanket, heart still pounding. It's almost 4 in the morning, and I have writing on my mind. Again.*

It's funny how writing can become intense, even when we're *not* writing. Lately, writing has been interrupting my sleep, keeping me up at night, taunting and haunting me. Perhaps this is not

surprising or uncommon; we live after all, in a “fatigue society” a term coined by the German cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han (2010). As D’Hoest and Lewis (2015) explain, the

subjects of this new society are constantly pushed to achieve goals and tasks, thus they are expected to be faster and more productive than ever before. The typical disease of this society of achievement is fatigue. Indeed, the fatigue society is so pervasive that even the last bastion of rest - sleep itself - is now under threat by the colonizing forces that emphasize productivity, efficiency, and constant self-monitoring (p. 49).

These middle-of-the night sweats also reveal the bodily materiality to writing and writing interruptions. I’ve been feeling tired for a few months - my most recent blood test indicates an iron deficiency which I have struggled with since childhood, so that’s no surprise. I Google “mental fog” and also come up with another possible deficiency - Omega 3 - which can also cause poor memory, fatigue and (gasp!) heart disease. I wonder if this potential deficiency is responsible for my frequent lapses in focus, especially when I sit down to write. I begin taking iron and Omega 3’s regularly, in the hopes that maybe these tiny capsules will help me get into the “flow” that is so highly spoken about among creative folks (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Writing, David Abram (2010) observes, “is a curious endeavor, swerving from moments of splendid delirium into others of stunned puzzlement, and from there into stretches of calm, focused craft” (p. 10). I very much desire these stretches of calm, focused craft, yet as much as I try to fix my “deficiencies”, the body always seems to want to follow a different path, it has its own agenda, it speaks back, and refuses stubbornly to be tamed.

### **Interruption 3:**

*Sherry and Kay are waiting in the lunch area located in the basement of the school to be interviewed. Their teacher has asked them to bring a notebook with them so they can doodle or draw while they wait. When I’ve finished interviewing another pair of students, I call them over to have a seat at the long lunch table.*

**PS:** What has your life been like so far in Grade 3? How do you like it? You don’t have to write about it, you can just tell me. [*Silence as they both write in their journal*]. Yea, you don’t have to write about it.

**Sherry:** I wanna do it.

**PS:** Okay. So have you been enjoying... —

**Sherry:** How do you spell your name?

**PS:** P... A...—

**Sherry:** Wait, how do you spell *grade*?

**PS:** Grade?

**Sherry:** G...R...A...D...E [she spells it out herself]

**PS:** Yea, so how has your life been in Grade 3 so far?

**Sherry:** Wait, how do you spell your name? P —

**PS:** Do you like being in Grade 3?

**Sherry:** Oh! I know how to spell your name. P...A...U...[starts writing my name in her notebook]

**PS:** I... [see she is done]. Good...—

**Sherry:** Oh, I forgot 3!

**PS:** Yea. (laughter) [*moment of silence*]. So what do you think, have you been enjoying it? The last 3 months....?

The above interview excerpt contains many interruptions, the most obvious being Sherry interrupting my questions, and me interrupting her desire to write in her notebook. And while this interview is not about writing explicitly, it has provoked me into thinking about how interruptions can become generative forces for the *practice(s)* of writing. Writing interruptions happen to anyone who writes, and for writers who think with/in spaces of post-qualitative inquiry, they can also become something to play and experiment with in order to resist and/or escape writing and thinking as usual. Writing interruptions can become modes of experimentation, which, rather than trying to contain silences and complexities through a steady, uninterrupted flowing stream of writing, pick up on their affect and transgression of more positivist methods. Writing interruptions can *interrupt* modes of writing within social science research in ways that open up new possibilities of writing and ‘doing’ qualitative research (see: Bridges-Rhoads, 2015; McCoy, 2012). For example, the act of writing interruptions can help break up the all too familiar form found in many qualitative research articles - introduction, methodology, theory, implications and limitations, etc., and in turn, invite a different kind of movement through the text, giving readers a chance to “stop, breathe, and remove oneself from the ordered narrative” as Koro-Ljungberg (2012) suggests in relation to writing in intervals (p. 809).

In revisiting this awkward interview repeatedly (and yes, it is one of those data events that interrupts my sleep at night), I see now that the interruptions to my questions were pertinent in highlighting my numerous slip-ups as a novice researcher. However, despite the discomfort this interview causes me even several months later, it begs me to consider how writing interruptions (both the kind that happen to us, and those we write as a kind of methodological exercise), can provide a much needed breathing space in which we take a step back from what we think we are doing when we ‘do’ and write up qualitative research (see: St. Pierre, 2016).

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