CHAPTER 2

Senses of Discomfort: Negotiating Feminist Methods, Theory and Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Leila: My memories of the Convento are suffused with a mellow golden light. I think it was the sunsets, the way they filled the bowl of the sky with rich, deep colour. The light was one thing, the water another—brown and warm at the shores, dark and clear in the centre of the lake, holding shards of light in hollowed wavelets. Both held us in our bodies, individual but in shared awareness.

Karijn: I also remember the sun, in many colours, facets and shapes. Warming our faces, creating beautiful sunsets, turning the sky pink. A rose-tinted glow over our own “feminist community”, holding us

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together over food, wine, swims and conversations around feminist methodologies.

Over five days, the Convento felt like a place and time apart—a container for our shared thinking, shared sensations, sentiments and everyday habits. Each day, our individual paths traced lines across the landscape: out of our separate bedrooms in the morning, together for breakfast and gathered in circle for talks and workshops, breaking up again in the afternoon to walk down the hill for a swim in the lake, or into cloistered corners of the garden, under a persimmon tree or a shaded spot on the scratchy, parched lawn. Our trajectories converged there from disparate corners of the world: The Netherlands, France, Mexico, the UK, Spain. We brought our individual experiences to bear on shared ideas of feminist methodologies, knotting strands of thought and feeling to construct an understanding of feminist research as a collective and ever-shifting endeavour. At the Convento we began weaving patterns that hold us still, our threads following us as we write, together-apart, in our pandemic bubbles.¹

The two of us came together during this time at the Convento, recognizing our shared concern with what we broadly call the “more-than-human” and its place in feminist thought. Multispecies and more-than-human studies share with feminism (feminist science studies more specifically) a concern with power and difference, a drive to “blur the boundaries of human and nonhuman to disrupt hierarchies” (Ives, 2019: 1) and expose how the ranking and ordering operations of capitalist science oppress women, people of colour, gender non-conforming people and other-than-human beings. Together, feminist and more-than-human thought “celebrate the political and theoretical possibilities of foregrounding more-than-human worlds and human–nonhuman relations” while recognizing the ways in which the violent legacy of settler colonialism and capitalist expansion is written onto the land and the bodies of those deemed “less-than-human” (Ives, 2019: 2).²

¹Our feminist methodologies workshop took place at the Convento in Bolsena, Italy in August of 2019. Tending the seeds of ideas germinated there, we (Karijn and Leila) wrote this chapter between early 2020 and the spring of 2021.

²In this chapter, we use both “other-than-human” and “more-than-human”. We recognise the unwieldiness of these terms as well as the ways they may reinscribe the very dualisms we hope to undo by naming humans as the centre against which the other is

Methodologically, more-than-human thought engages the other-than-human, both biotic and abiotic, as active participants in everyday life and the research process and environment. In so doing, more-than-human thinking points to the importance of the sensory, affective and embodied as sources of information, and foregrounds the other-than-human as an active collaborator in the research process, rather than inert matter acted upon and understood by the researcher (Coleman et al., 2019; Wazana-Tompkins, 2016). This chapter finds tentative connections between more-than-human thinking and feminist methodologies, adding to the broad sweep of conversations begun at the Convento and picked up in this book, asking questions like: how do we relate to and with others we engage with in our research, whether human or other-than-human, and how do we understand “researcher” as just one piece of our multifaceted identities? How can fields of thought such as relationality, more-than-human thinking, queer theory and ecology help think such issues through (Barad, 2007; Hird & Giffney, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Sundberg, 2014; Watts, 2013)? These were some of the questions that inspired, moved and encouraged us to write this chapter, both in our situated environments and interconnected with beings around us, while writing together virtually. In this chapter, therefore, we build upon feminist understandings of relationality and the more-than-human in order to make sense of and speak back to our experiences of doing field research, and how these have shaped our experiences with and understandings of feminist methodologies.³

defined. However, we also use these terms to indicate the academic lineage of multi-species studies, or “anthropology beyond humanity” (Ingold, 2013) in which they are defined, which holds that the human is always constituted by its relationship to other non-conspecifics (Haraway, 2003; Sagan, 2011), personhood is not limited to humans (Degnen, 2018; Kohn, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1998), and that the environment and its inhabitants are active participants in shaping the research process (Country et al., 2015).

³Here we follow ethnographic understandings of fieldwork that can be broadly defined as an interpretive method, focused on understanding collective, negotiated processes of meaning-making through investigating human action and discourse, social processes and institutional structures (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). Ethnography is often posited as uniquely suited to feminist research because its “contextual, experiential approach to knowledge eschews the false dualisms of positivism”, creating a more egalitarian relationship between researcher and subject while problematizing the separation between known and felt, personal and academic (Stacey, 1988: 21).

By highlighting the potential insights that can be gained from more-than-human approaches in the context of feminist methodologies, we aim to speak back to critiques of the overly theoretical nature of more-than-human approaches, showing how they can be put into practice. In particular, we focus on (more-than-human) relationality through embodied, interactive and processual research in order to destabilize the notion of method as a tool used by a disembodied researcher observing an inert or external world—a central concern of feminist research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). Together we attest to the feminist merit of methodologies in which the unit of inquiry is not a discrete being (human or other-than), but the shifting and co-constitutive relations between them. In so doing, the chapter does not aim to resolve the ongoing quarrel between feminist postmodernist and empiricist epistemologies that want to either undo categories or “give voice” (van der Tuin, 2014: 33), but shows precisely how a processual, relational approach allows for unwarranted surprises that might ultimately undo the very assumptions and categories underpinning our research.

We structure this chapter around several themes we held in common in our research experiences: using the sensory as a source of information and the importance of embodied knowledge; taking a stand against rigid, rational/objective knowledge-making; being open to surprise, uncertainty and failure; valuing process over product and exploring a multi-directional sense of positionality. We argue that bringing these schools of thought and our own affective embodiments to bear on our work has the potential to “queer” feminist methodologies, potentially making other types of relating—between human and other-than, between researcher and “subject”, between colleagues and peers- possible. The words that follow are structured as a dialogue between us as the two authors. By speaking in the first person, linking our names and voices to our academic pursuits and concerns, we hope to put into practice the feminist concern with strong objectivity (Harding, 1992), showing how the personal and scholarly always overlap and intertwine.

STARTING POINTS: UNSETTLING THE ORIGINS OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN THINKING

Throughout our fieldwork and writing periods, we have both felt uneasy in our engagements with more-than-human thinking: which texts are we reading, what authors are we citing? And in so doing, which bodies

of knowledge do we embed ourselves and our work in? As we engage with, respectively, interspecies ethnography of farmers and their seed crops (Leila), and the relations of environmental organizers with their activist praxis (Karijn), how do we make more explicitly, and potentially “feminist” choices in this regard?

L: I’m wondering how you came to be interested in what we call the “more-than-human”? What initial experiences sparked your interest, and what thinkers/academics have you thought with since then?

K: I think that has to do with my own academic background and journey, as a lot of “feminist new materialism” was for example used in my Gender Studies Master’s Programme that I did a few years ago. This was also the time that I developed my research interest towards intersections between feminism and environmentalism, feminist political ecology, as well as broader feminist thought on environmental conflict and relations. Reading, for example, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Rosi Braidotti helped me to contextualize gendered and otherwise charged power relations in wider patriarchal, colonial, Euro-centric and capitalist structures and traditions, the hierarchical binary between “humans” and “nature” as one among many. Only during some of my more recent research experience did I come to contextualize such thinking in much more long-standing traditions of cosmology, ontology and indigeneity (Blaser, 2014; de la Cadena, 2010; Sundberg, 2014; Watts, 2013).

L: I had a similar experience and reading Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Anna Tsing and others as well, weaving them into my thesis work and other writings. I was working on this chapter in the thick of the summer of 2020 in the US, as protests over racial justice pushed me to recognize how white supremacy is baked into the ways in which we police, house, feed, govern and even think and feel. In this context, I began to look differently at works I was using to flesh out my own writing.

Where Western intellectual traditions still shy away, for example, from seeing plants as agential selves and continue to present “environment” as a bounded, separate entity subordinated to or in need of protection from humans, many Indigenous traditions view plants and non-humans as relatives, as actors in their own right and in concert with humans. Vanessa Watts explains “place-thought” in Anishnaabe and/or Haudenosaunee cosmologies: “our cosmological frameworks are not an abstraction but rather a literal and animate extension of Sky Woman’s and First Woman’s thoughts” (2013: 22). What we (white Westerners) call “habitats” or

“ecosystems” are understood as societies, structured by interspecies agreements and ethics, in which non-humans are active members who “directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society” (Watts, 2013: 22).

K: Exactly. Where well-known, Western and white academics are lauded for challenging the anthropocentrism of social scientific and philosophical thought; for suggesting that non-human beings and even things have agency, many Indigenous cosmologies start from a framework that never made such a sharp distinction between human and more-than-human vitality in the first place. Throughout both my fieldwork experiences and writing periods, I felt uneasy in my engagements with more-than-human thinking: which texts was I reading, what authors was I citing? And in so doing, which forms of knowledge was I taking for granted, putting forward and which ones was I potentially implicitly erasing? I am wondering if you have any insights after writing this chapter together: how do we make more explicitly, and potentially “feminist” choices in this regard? How can epistemological justice figure into feminist methodologies and feminist practice as a whole?

L: First, I think it is important to voice our discomfort with what we view as our intellectual lineage; the scholars and academics whose work we cite most in our writings, whose thoughts we continue to think with. White, western scholars, ourselves included, are often guilty of “cherry picking parts of Indigenous thought that appeal to them without engaging directly in (or unambiguously acknowledging) the political situation, agency and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars”, thereby becoming “complicit in colonial violence” (Todd, 2016). But at the same time, changing a few citations doesn’t feel like enough in the face of such wrongdoing.

K: It is and it isn’t enough; it’s one step among many. Feminist methodologies can and need to move beyond practices “in the field”—they should extend to our analysis, our writing. The politics of citation are huge in the academic world, and as feminist scholars working in more-than-human worlds, we must commit to centring voices that are marginalized and actively silenced in academic spaces: Indigenous, non-Western and decolonial intellectual and spiritual traditions; BIPOC and queer, trans, non-binary and two-spirit voices (TallBear, 2014; Todd, 2016; Watts, 2013).

L: I agree. And not only because these voices are marginalized but because the theorizing, the ideas themselves are rich and deep and world

changing. These ideas animate the core of more-than-human, relational and multispecies thought. We must acknowledge the ways in which much multispecies work in the academy today is rooted in non-Western intellectual traditions while effacing those very origins by centring white voices. These supposedly “new” approaches appropriate ideas of non-human agency, liveliness and non-dualistic thinking from the very traditions that are subjected to physical and epistemological violence by Western nation-states and the academies they support. I think it’s also critical to recognize what is lost in translating oral tradition to written text, and Indigenous languages to English. Because colonialism sought to fracture and remake the relationships between Indigenous peoples, other living creatures and the territories within which they all situate themselves, decolonization must take an interspecies approach. The work and words of colonized peoples themselves must guide this process (Belcourt, 2014; Montford & Taylor, 2020).

K: Absolutely. I also want to highlight that this is a thread we picked up together in the process of writing, an opening note to this chapter that hopefully sets its tone. Rather than moving away from our feelings of unease and discomfort around our own intellectual lineages and the ideas and identities we attach ourselves to, we want to sit with this discomfort, to see what we can learn from it and how. Rather than shying away from using these lines of thought, we thus embrace our discomforts and think through what our engagements with relationality and the more-than-human teach us as we write this chapter.

FIELDWORK: PROCESS, SURPRISES AND (THE QUEER ART OF) FAILURE

K: In our efforts to unpack more-than-human thinking and how such thinking has affected our sense and experience of feminist methodology, I am quite curious about your experiences and ideas around more-than-human and multispecies ethnography. Is this something you started out with, or that you changed or turned to as you were in the field?

L: I knew from the outset that I wanted to centre plants in my ethnographic work. Being a farmer myself, I felt there was no other way to approach agriculture and seed saving: it is fundamentally a multispecies affair, albeit one that too often places humans as protagonists and actors. I even began my fieldwork period wondering how I could manage to interview a cabbage plant. I had taken my ethnographic methods course,

read everything I could get my hands on about multispecies ethnography and concluded that the cultivated Brassicaceae were my botanical family of focus and that I would observe and interview them, centring their “voice” and experience in my research, as well as those of the farmers who cultivate them.

As my fieldwork got underway, it quickly became clear that there was no strict formula for what a multispecies ethnography would look like, and the pace of production farming in the summer season couldn’t accommodate hours observing and listening to cabbage plants. Even as my ideas of what my ethnographic field work would look like shifted, my emphasis on working with farmers in the field, engaging in and helping with their everyday tasks never wavered. I came to think of my work as interspecies ethnography, an immersive and sensorially rich research practice in which the unit of analysis is a socio-ecologically specific relationship between human and other-than-human. By allowing both human farmer and crop plant interlocutors to speak back to my methodology, my research became an opportunity to instead examine these relationships, building an understanding of how humans and plants cultivate one another, becoming both subjects and objects to each other in intra-action (Barad, 2003; Haraway, 2008).⁴ By centring the unique capacities of plants in both methodology and analysis, I wanted to demonstrate how feminist research may deepen its problematization of anthropocentrism and dualistic, hierarchical thinking by incorporating “the embodied knowledge, the sensory capacities, the temporalities of other species” (Livingston & Puar, 2011: 10). I think making a commitment to including non-human voices and perspectives in feminist research might also entail a further rethinking of our methodologies.

Just as feminist new materialism posits a turn away from the discursive and linguistic towards the “real”, the vital, the fleshy, I propose that our methods turn away from a focus on the verbal speech of humans towards the subtle but lively communicative modes of other beings, and how humans may understand, record and respond to them. This meant engaging in repetitive manual labour alongside farmers and other farmworkers: planting, harvesting seed, weeding. Farm work is material engagement with non-conspecifics, often meaning conforming our human work to the dictates and rhythms of plant and animal co-workers.

⁴See Rezvani, 2019.

Moving in the pace of the farming season, which is sometimes fast, sometimes slow, often linked to weather, plant growth and day length, gave me a vantage point from which to critique the breakneck pace of academic life, the punishing schedules and focus on “productivity” we know all too well, in which care for self and others fall away in the face of deadlines. Feminist academics and scholars have long critiqued how the neoliberal paradigm values output rather than depth, disciplinary boundaries and competition rather than collaboration, and those departments that can pull in big grants rather than the fringes (where the most radical ideas often originate) (Caretta et al., 2018; Mountz et al., 2015). How to alter the pace of life (and research) to that of a photosynthetic being or a human whose life is more closely linked to the seasons and the land? How to bring ideas about the power of plants to affect political change into the decidedly anthropocentric realms of development and critical agrarian studies (the disciplinary context in which I did my Master’s)?

When I returned to my home university after my summer in the field, I fell into an anxious tailspin: everyone around me was comparing the number of interviews, hours of transcription, coding methods, tables and charts. The general sentiment among other Master’s students was that more hours of transcribed interviews, more complicated coding, and more charts and tables meant better research. I had little to show besides pages of scribbled notes and journal entries, hundreds of photographs, a few long recordings and seed packets, lovingly hand-labelled and dated; less in the way of quantifiable data and much in the way of embodied learning. As a researcher a bit further along in your “career”, I wonder if you have had similar experiences? Did you have to face resistance or misunderstanding?

K: The anxiety you describe upon your return is, I think, such a big part of this type of research. Though usually I think it is something that is common before one undertakes field research, when you worry about how everything will go and whether you are prepared “enough”. Which is also a myth: if we have to wait around for the moment that we feel ready and perfectly prepared, the fieldwork itself may still surprise us and present us with the unexpected. This is something I experienced during my own field research, when I felt I had done everything I could to prepare, on paper anyway. I had printed flyers describing my research to hand out to environmental activists and organizers whom I wanted to interview, I had forms with questions for the interviews and how they would follow each other. But of course, as soon as I entered my different field sites

and my fieldwork began, my nerves took over. I had to improvise, “go with the flow” of the events and encounters I stumbled upon, the flyers untouched in my backpack. I still thought that such preparations were not useless, but their purpose was one of making me *feel* prepared rather than actually preparing me for the experience of doing research, of engaging with others.

And then, as you describe, in the phase where you want to make sense of your data, it can hit you again: how do we go about this process? What counts as data and what is “too trivial” or too personal or emotional to make it into your “data”? Especially when your peers may not take seriously or understand the type of research you have undertaken, and it may not, in your case, be easy to turn back to your interlocutors. Although my own fieldwork and research focused on human research participants, environmental activists and organizers, I recognize these anxieties you describe. I was concerned with whether I had enough interviews, and what they all meant. Somehow these notions of what research is, what a researcher does, and what kind of findings one should have after being in the field are quite rigid and structure our fieldwork expectations to this day. But reflecting on such anxieties with more-than-human thinking and approaches in mind can actually help us, as it allows for a more plural notion of the researcher and their environments and contexts. I think it is important that we reflect on and acknowledge that such anxieties remain very rooted in the idea that a researcher can exist independently of the “field work”, independently from the “data”, whereas I think we would both agree that it is the researchers themselves, in their dynamic and situated encounters, that brings the data into being. Only in practice we realize that ethnographic research is never a “linear accumulation of more and more insight” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007: 5). That fieldwork is a hugely messy process is key here: it shows how our research is never a linear journey, but a process in which we continuously have to improvise and trust our gut (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007: 54). This also means we need to be open not only to surprise, but also failure. If anything, we may need to learn how to embrace what Jack Halberstam calls the “queer art of failure”: although things might not go as wished or planned, experiences of “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam, 2011: 2). Ultimately, Halberstam argues, we may want “more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers” (Halberstam, 2011, 10). If we

embrace process, surprise and failure, alternative ways of knowing can become visible. I think it is precisely this non-linearity, the not-knowing, the unplannable, that more-than-human and relational thinking can help us become better equipped to understand, and more open to the plurality of relationships and identities we may hold throughout this process.

I feel that in my own process of working with “my data” and how to interpret it, I was too fixed on ideas of how to order my interview outcomes, how they could either confirm or reject my hypotheses. Instead, my empirical material ended up confusing me and did not neatly fit into existing literature or ideas at all. This was something that I experienced as contradictory at first, but then could make better sense of, aided by relational and more-than-human modes of thinking, which challenge binary categorizations in favour of plural views, values and worlds (Blaser, 2014; Watts, 2013); For my Ph.D.⁵ I was studying environmental practices at the individual level, and critiques of such practices as being a form of individualized responsibility or neoliberal co-optation, and wanted to gain a better understanding of how those working on environmental and climate justice perceive and negotiate such practices. While interviews with these organizers largely confirmed these critiques, there was also something else going on that I could not quite make sense of. Although organizers were highly critical of individual practices in the first instance, deeming them ineffective, “small-scale”, forms of neoliberal co-optation and privileged, their accounts also reflected something else. Not only did they reflect that they took part in such practices themselves, they also pointed to the limitations of fully dismissing such practices as privileged and individual only: doing so closes us off to how environmental practices of varied kinds are perceived and travel across locales.

Relational and more-than-human thinking allowed me to make sense of this. To give an example, in “overdeveloped” contexts, environmentally conscious household practices are often associated with particular diets, such as veganism and vegetarianism. My engagement with Indigenous activists and their allies puts some of these practices into question as inherently reinforcing distinctions and hierarchies between humans and animals, and animals and plants. Activists that I interviewed from India, also stressed that veganism and vegetarianism as portrayed in the Global

⁵I did my PhD at Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, United Kingdom, where I wrote my thesis entitled “Making sense of personal environmental action: A relational reframing through the study of activists’ experiences” (2021).

North does not travel well to other contexts. One interviewee described that in her rural context being environmentally conscious is not about “expensive green products in special stores”, and that we need to recognize a plurality of ways in which subjects may engage in environmental practices, and with what is perceived as “the environment” in and of itself. Thinking of our (environmental) practices in terms of relational engagements involves us becoming aware of how our lives and practices are embedded in, connected to, affected by and affecting others and environments. In the end, my empirical material reflects that those activities that appear as individual or individualistic are in fact always connected to wider networks of others (van den Berg, 2021). This idea, that individuals and their practices (environmental or otherwise) are embedded in webs of relations means that such practices necessarily have “consequences for ourselves and our kin”, and that, vice versa, our connections with others “transform our personal life” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 147), a conviction I think that not only applies to my analysis of “individual” environmental practices, but also extends to the doing of fieldwork. More-than-human and relational thinking thus became a part of my methodology as they helped me make sense of some of the contradictions and the messiness that came out of my fieldwork.

L: Exactly. The messiness and unpredictability can be so generative—it reminds me of one afternoon I spent working with a young farmer and his mule Danech in hilling green beans. The farmer taught me how to call out the orders so Danech would walk the row in a straight line at the correct speed and turn right at the end. He emphasized confidence—a steady hand and loud voice were crucial. I had never worked with a draft animal before and I was uncertain, but we hilled the beans with few problems besides a few munched plants. As I was leading Danech back to his enclosure after the field was hilled, he stopped short, looking at me and refusing to budge. I tugged his lead, calling “Allez! Allez!”. His farmer turned to me and said simply: you have to wait until he decides to move—it could be ten minutes; it could be an hour (thankfully it was the former). Pausing for a moment with Danech, I looked up to notice the lengthening late afternoon shadows, the farmers in the next field over harvest broccoli with a giant conveyor belt-tractor, the rich brown soil studded with potatoes leftover from an earlier harvest. Adjusting to the rhythms of other-than-human creatures opens space for different “arts of noticing” (Tsing, 2015), removing humans from the centre of knowledge-making—an endeavour that is critical to feminist studies of

science and more-than-human thinking alike. I was prompted to pay attention to Danech's rhythm and pace of work by his closest human ally, the young farmer. Through this experience of working alongside each other, farmer, Danech and I, I was given insight into their particular form of collaborative, interspecies labour. The research collective working out of Bawaka Country in Australia reminds me that this process of working collaboratively with the landscape in which we find ourselves researching, this process of "decentering human author-ity", is one always guided by care and affective engagement with one's surroundings (Country et al., 2015).

Remembering working with Danech, I'm reminded of the call to "go with the thicket of subjugated knowledge that sprouts like weeds among the disciplinary forms of knowledge, threatening always to overwhelm the cultivation and pruning of the intellect with mad plant life" (Halberstam, 2011: 9). While Halberstam is here referring to those "naïve" or "subjugated" knowledges that exist in the interstices of traditional academic disciplines, I wonder also if the land-based knowledge of farmers, the sensibilities of draft animals and crop plants can provide other sources of information to counter objective anthropocentric modes of thinking.

Writing about our experiences of and with fieldwork together, in relation to feminist methodologies and the more-than-human, has also become a source of comfort. Discussing our experiences and concerns and finding commonalities led us to realize that we were not "failing" when we encountered roadblocks or "data" that did not quite fit or made sense. This is truly a benefit of working collaboratively and finding feminist comrades within the academy.

NEGOTIATING PLURAL IDENTITIES IN AND BEYOND "THE FIELD"

L: Many of our conversations within the collective formed at Bolsena revolved around negotiating the various identities and positions we hold: researcher, activist, friend, ally. Holding these various identities together, navigating tensions and openings, is a shared concern in feminist thinking. I wonder if you had experiences working with activists and organizers that allowed you to step outside of your role as "academic" in a way that enriched your understanding of fieldwork or altered your position as a researcher.

K: Hm, that is such a good question. I have been thinking a lot about activist/organizer positions and identities in relation to that of “researcher”, as I have at different points identified with both. Going to events where a lot of political organizing and activist communities are present, but being there in the position of researcher was something that I felt quite anxious about beforehand. So it is funny to think about how my own thinking on these positions in some ways has shifted. I feel that earlier on in my journey as researcher, I really felt that I could be both—a scholar-activist or activist-researcher. But more and more I realized that despite such identification, you may be perceived very rigidly into one category or the other, and it is usually those in the academic “camp”, or those at least somewhat connected to academic institutions who give themselves that label. I do not know about you, but at least I have not come across anyone whose primary occupation was activist, organizer or farmer, but who then also engaged in research and actively used such a hybrid label.

For me, through my fieldwork, I came to realize that it is also important to acknowledge that to label or introduce myself as “scholar-activist” I put myself in a certain category, because it is an idea I would like to have of myself, or it is perhaps because I feel guilty for not “doing enough” on “the activist” front. So during my fieldwork I felt it was actually much more ethically sound and honest to be up front with those I was interviewing, I was open about how I saw my plurality of identities, but made very clear that I was there in the position of researcher, in the sense that I had a purpose and needed to gather “data”. I think that this helped a lot, and in the end also allowed to blur the distinctions a little between these subject positions. That may sound contradictory, but I think through being clear about my intentions and motivations for engaging with people it became easier to build bonds of trust and exchange on an equal level. By making clear what my position and intentions were, there was room to configure these relations differently: to together explore common grounds and shared understandings of and approaches to environmental challenges and well-being. Through my fieldwork I think that both my understanding of theory and practice, of activism and of research have become more dynamic. When you depart from the relational understanding that “we’re all in this together”, I felt that the distinctions that I tried to enforce in order to come across as honest and transparent, in fact blurred.

L: I think both of us feel very deeply what Kim TallBear calls the “feminist ethical imperative to study a community in whose projects [we] could be invested” (2014: NP). As a farmer, I felt I was studying the practices of those I was working with not as an outsider, but as one inhabiting and invested in the same world, the same daily practices and the same political goals. Being able to care for and be invested in these farmers’ work “compromised” my ability to stand by objectively and “report”, something TallBear calls “standing with in the act of inquiry” (2014). I am wondering if and how you experienced this in your work, and how you negotiated the roles of being at once a researcher and wanting to learn from and strengthen the political project of your interlocutors? What were challenges you had to navigate in this position?

K: Yes, I feel very similar. I think this relates to ideas on situating oneself as well as traditional notions of objectivity. What are the implications of studying those one sympathizes with and how does this affect not only our investment but also the outcomes of our study? If we recall the work of feminist STS scholars such as Donna Haraway, such an implication in our work, what we study, why and how, is inevitable. I also do not think we should shy away from the subjects we are invested in because we may come too close or are too embedded. As I reflect above, the negotiation of this investment as well as my positioning as “researcher” was not something I “did” and resolved before I entered the field, but it constituted an important process throughout, and was also different depending on every field encounter I had. One way to negotiate this, for me, was to be open, not just about my aims or intentions as a researcher, but to reflect my own motivations for doing this research, and to discuss how my research could also be of interest to them. This reflects a central concern of feminist methodologies: challenging the hierarchy between researcher and researched and the one-way extraction of knowledge that characterizes colonial research paradigms. But beyond challenging this hierarchy, working and participating in plural and more-than-human worlds importantly challenges also the binary positioning of subject-object, possessor of gaze and gazed-upon, which holds even within feminist critiques. Could you elaborate on how your work with plants and farmers helped you locate yourself within these multi-directional and shifting lines of relationship?

L: I can think of one day spent on a farm in Morbihan, a province in central Brittany:

In her characteristically terse fashion, S, the farmer, told me to go harvest lettuce seed in the hoophouse, then disappeared to prepare the salad mix and tomatoes for delivery to the organic grocery store that afternoon. I stepped into the largest hoophouse, which contained a wild profusion of plants that, to the untrained eye, resembled a weedy, untamed jungle. Closer inspection revealed the complexity and biodiversity one might expect of an uncultivated meadow or forest edge: tiny Mexican gherkins like mouse watermelons strung up on a trellis, also occupied by a bean plant long past its prime, with dried yellow pods to be harvested for seed. Volunteers from a previous seeding of basil took advantage of the ring of moisture created by drip irrigation, sprouting up next to a new squash plant. A row of tomatoes occupied one side: some fruits tiny and orange, some deep purple-blue, some red and bulbous. A strong old grape vine looped over the metal frame, shading the tall, leggy bolted lettuce plants I was to harvest for seed. I headed there, stopping to eat a few fat, sweet raspberries from a well-established bush on the way. A plastic bucket was secured around my neck on a loop of string, leaving both hands free. I squatted low, the lettuce flowers now at eye level. My focus narrowed, finding a single flower, judging its dryness and likely number of seeds by its size, shape, colour and feeling between my fingers. Gently taking the bottom of the flower between two fingers, I grabbed the white tufted top of the dried bloom (think of a dry and closed dandelion flower but much, much smaller) with the other hand, tugging to free the seeds. I knocked the seeds into the bucket, keeping out as much fluff as possible. The plants towered above me, I sat in their cool green shade. I felt dwarfed and lingered with gratitude in this reversal of perspective. I still don't know how long I kept at the lettuce seeds: S was occupied elsewhere, the neighbour's cows munched grass in the field, the other neighbour's pigs munched soy feed in their long, enclosed barn. The sun wheeled; the wind was low. The minute radius of my focus was a single lettuce plant: in the course of its life, this one plant had again become potentially thousands, just by bolting up, going to flower and setting seed. I was now collecting those thousands of tiny potential lettuce lives, pinching and dropping them into a bucket. I had never felt so still and focused, and never accomplished so "little" in the space of so many hours: when I left the greenhouse a thin film of miniscule lettuce seed barely covered the bottom of the bucket.

On most farms, plants are never allowed to reach the point in their life cycle at which they set seed: they are harvested well before, shipped off and sold to a supermarket or (more rarely) directly to the consumer. S made a point of saving her own seed for dozens of species of vegetables. For her, the added labour was a pleasure in itself, and represented

a contribution both to global agrobiodiversity and a stand against corporate control of the seed supply. One evening, S's wife, T, explained why she also valued seed saving: she saw it as cultivating a multi-generational family of plants; the seeds as children carrying memory of land and place into future seasons. Working and speaking with S and T, as well as their queer, multispecies extended family of vegetables, showed me how plants challenge our notions of the bounded, self-contained individual: a lettuce plant is singular and itself, but also vehicle for future generations (in interaction with pollinators, who help make fruit and seeds), and also a source of human nourishment in the form of food. This is where the abstraction often found in more-than-human thinking and feminist science studies touched down for me: I often read critiques of how Enlightenment thinking spawned individualism and informed the capitalist rational actor (as propertied, able-bodied, white male). There, with a palm full of lettuce seeds, I experienced a tangible critique of that idea.

If I had not observed and participated in the relationship between S, T and their plant community, labouring alongside them both, I would not have gathered this insight. This is the core of an interspecies ethnographic inquiry—an exploration of the relationship between two types of beings who are both subject and object to each other, joined in a call-and-response that alters genotype, phenotype, environment, livelihood, politics and ontology over human and plant generations. As Haraway explains in her exploration of human–dog co-becoming: “the relationships are the smallest possible patterns for analysis, the partners and actors are their still-ongoing products. It is all extremely prosaic, relentlessly mundane, and exactly how worlds come into being” (Haraway, 2008: 25–26). These real-life examples showed me the importance of letting fieldwork unfold in an unhurried and unplanned manner, of opening myself to the lessons and messages from plant interlocutors as well as human ones.

K: My fieldwork also afforded opportunities for rethinking the individual. As I reflected above, my empirical findings did not neatly confirm or reject my hypotheses, but ended up blurring binaries between self/other, human/environment and individual and collective. Thinking differently about the relations between these presumed categories, not only affects the ways in which environmental challenges and practices are conceptualized, but in particular relational thinking and more-than-human encounters can bring about “confronting, difficult and uncomfortable challenges to the ways subjects and ‘selves’ come into being, are

mobilized, and act in the world” (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015, 48). To be alive and act in the world then, involves a process of “learning to be affected” (Latour, 2004; Roelvink & Gibson-Graham, 2009). Within this frame, both my fieldwork encounters themselves, as well as the environmental practices at hand that I was studying, became performative outcomes of the interdependencies between environments, humans and more-than-human beings.

Ultimately, this also affected my own sense of self and how I came to reflect on supposedly “individual” “environmental” practices as these categories were called into question through my research. I started to consider myself and my practices of research, care and activism as mutually constitutive and embedded in plural webs of relations. As I reflected in my research diary during our week in Bolsena:

As I am writing this, in a convent in rural Italy, I think about what relationality means for my research in practical terms and what it might look like for myself. As I resist the urge to scratch the mosquito bites that have accumulated on my legs I am reminded by others how these bites are feeding insects and, down the line, help the local bats thrive. This is one way in which relationality might help shift my perspective (and encourage me to embrace the mosquitoes). Perhaps more importantly, during this week, we have discussed how “feminism” is never individual, always a collective effort in conversation with others. I think as I am up here in the library space of the convent, how this researching and writing is somehow collectivized, a relational undertaking: not only am I influenced and embedded in the work of others and the perspectives of my interviewees, this week literally my “individual” writing hours are book-ended by collective meals, workshops and walks. Not only am I taking up space or embedding myself in the local ecosystems, alongside mosquitoes and bats, I am also taking up the collective engagement of writing, thinking and research, recognizing that no ideas exist in isolation.

As such, by sitting with and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of the contradictions that my fieldwork brought about, rather than seeking clarity, I was able to shift my thinking and remain open to alternative possibilities.

This negotiation of different identities and positionalities is something inevitable to fieldwork, to embodying being a “feminist researcher” or taking on feminist methodologies, but certainly not limited to that. I think it is a process exemplary of how we negotiate and embody different

identities through our lives, and acknowledge how this affects the ways in which we enter research spaces and worlds. Most clearly, feminist intersectionality has brought this to the fore: how we always inhabit entangled elements of gender, race, class, sexuality, location and ability (Crenshaw, 1991; Puar, 2012). Queer theory, activism and thinking, however, feels particularly apt to me in articulating a fluidity of identities, and a negotiation of binary categorizations that can become a source of discomfort in and of itself. Here I refer to queer as both an adjective and a verb, signifying “the continual unhinging of certainties and the systematic disturbing of the familiar” (Hird & Giffney, 2008: 4). In this way embodying queer identities, informing ourselves through queer politics and theory is helpful in making sense of our identities as researchers in a “field”, and in negotiating feminist methodologies and feminist spaces more widely. Queer theory for me connects the personal with the political, as well as the personal and the “academic”. How I have come to think of myself, and more widely of my sense of self as something fluid and non-linear through the term queer, inevitably affects how I take on positionalities of researcher or feminist, as well as a combination of the two. Still, feeling or being exposed/outed as queer in some spaces can lead to strong feelings of discomfort: to stand out, to question binary positionings and assumptions, outside of but also within feminist spaces. This confirms, as Sara Ahmed (2014) describes, the unconscious comfort and ease that accompany positionalities of normativity. However, when discomfort is experienced, even when it cannot be clearly articulated, something else happens, existing narratives and assumptions—regarding gender or sexuality, but also extending to “being a researcher” or “doing fieldwork”—can shift or be disrupted. I think both of us, throughout the writing of this chapter, have experienced how when discomfort is felt and expressed the status quo is no longer taken for granted—this can in turn become a great source of comfort. How do your own experiences with the more-than-human and with doing (feminist, fieldwork) research relate to your sense of identity and queerness?

L: As a queer and non-binary person whose research does not deal explicitly with either women or gender, I’ve always felt somewhat out of place in feminist spaces—as if I had to explain or justify my presence. This discomfort sometimes made me feel hyper-visible, sometimes as if I wasn’t really there or had nothing to offer. Working outside, with plants, is one form of refuge I’ve found, a way to access comfort: Ahmed tells us that “comfort is about an encounter between more than one body; the

promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (2014). The dissolution of boundaries between my body and my surroundings, where rational thought tends to dissipate and I can tune into what other-than-human kin are saying and doing: this is a space of comfort, where I don’t have to explain my presence, my gender, my relation to womanhood or feminism. I can find this comfort most often with plant friends and allies, a realization that has led me to farming and to queer/feminist/multispecies studies.

For me, linking queer ecology and feminist thinking through the more-than-human also feels like finding a refuge. Both lines of theory teach us how “nature organizes and is organized by complex power relations” including sexuality and gender (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005: 6), pointing out how acts of division that categorize and demarcate the natural world also included male–female, developed–underdeveloped, civilized–savage etc. A queer perspective (on nature) sees the violence in this boundary-making and seeks to undo it. By centring (our) queer experiences, we may de-link nature/biology/evolutionary fitness of the species and heterosexuality, rebuilding natural spaces as ones that are and have always been inhabited by queer (human and non-human) bodies (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005). This delinking and undoing can be a source of comfort—by questioning the foundational categories we are conditioned to accept, by asserting that queer bodies have a place and are “natural” in their own right, by allowing us to hold in tension our various identities, which shift in meaning in the different spaces we occupy.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have shared aspects of our individual and shared experiences of doing fieldwork, engaging with the more-than-human, our intellectual lineages and responsibilities, and working with/through feminist methodologies. Experiences such as these, that focus on the affective, and our personal embodiment of “researcher”, “feminist”, “individual” or “farmer” often do not make it into academic texts or curricula. Rather than providing neat narratives or recommendations of how to engage with or “do” feminist methodologies, our experiences reflect the messiness and open-endedness of such an endeavour: a process riddled with anxiety, discomfort and failure. In this sense, our chapter cannot offer

slick and precise suggestions, but instead reflects how discomfort is not only part of the process, but can also be generative.

In writing this chapter together we have reflected the generativity of discomfort, recognizing how to take advantage of that “subtle sense that something usually clear, predictable, and scripted is being disrupted and opened up to negotiation” (Murray & Kalayji, 2018: 19). How can we as queer feminist thinkers use discomfort and its range of affects to start to imagine new ways of relating within spaces of (feminist) knowledge-making, to use it in order to experience “pleasure and excitement about a world opening up” (Ahmed, 2014)? How can we seek out and create spaces of refuge and comfort in which to recuperate, with more-than-human and queer kin? How can we parse the different forms of unease we feel—in fieldwork, in embodying being a “researcher” and our politics of citation, in academic or activist spaces—learning when to recognize that we lack the emotional resources to take on feeling out of place or discomforted? We hope to outline queer feminist methodologies as a “necessarily contradictory practice”, a practice of “doing imperfectly with a view to someday doing better but inevitably never quite right [...] which aims to hold the past in one hand and the future in the other, living the same realities we endeavour to undo” (Murray & Kalayji, 2018: 17). This sort of prefiguration is what queer and feminist thinkers and organizers have always excelled at and the legacy we hope to build on and extend.

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