Embracing the Mess in Feminist Research: Insights From Posthumanism

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Abstract

Qualitative approaches present challenges to the neat and orderly histories of research. Within this shifting climate, feminist researchers have blurred the boundaries of rigorous research, by bringing the personal into their methods and drawing attention to the liveliness of research methods. We build on this liveliness in this article to develop the conceptual framework of mess. We define messy methods as sensorial, relational, and posthuman in their resistance to binaries and predetermined notions of objectivity. We engage this framework as an excavating tool to explore three vignettes from the authors' separate research on family violence, doxxing, and climate change. Through these explorations, we challenge understandings of the relations between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human actors, and argue that mess calls us into the "contingent tableau" of embodied feminist research praxis. This article also presents implications and challenges for qualitative research more broadly by calling for a messy movement.

Introduction

Many different approaches to methods and methodologies exist under the broad umbrella term *qualitative research*, each with its own traditions and framings. Research that is qualitative, and also explicitly feminist, expands our understanding of what counts as rigorous research. These approaches bring to the fore issues of subjectivity, interdependency, and relationality. As social science researchers, these are issues that we grapple with in our own projects. Whether considering the ethical implications associated with undertaking research projects during a global pandemic, escaping the impact of natural disasters on our personal lives, or carving out spaces to safely interview women with children, our research has rarely gone to plan. Although these moments of ambiguity are sometimes uncomfortable, we suggest that critically reflecting upon them generates further insights into questions of relationality and subjectivity. In exploring these messy moments, we grapple with these important questions to more clearly understand the research process as spatially and temporally diverse. By engaging with the spatial, temporal, and affective contexts in which our research is undertaken and produced, we attune to the more-than-human actors, environments, and objects that influence our research. By attending to posthumanism, we argue that mess provides insight into how researchers, subjects, and knowledge coalesce in the contexts in which they are situated. As we show in this article, this engagement with

relationality presents important implications for feminist researchers.

In this paper, we develop mess as a conceptual framework and practical tool. Engaging mess in this way enables us as feminist researchers to hold onto these moments of ambiguity and bring ourselves clearly into the frame. Mess in qualitative feminist research is unorderly, complex, and relational, resisting clear categorizations and distinctions. This article explores how the messiness of feminist research "jolts" us—like driving over a pothole (see Phadke, 2020)—bringing us into complex and blurry understandings of how research is situated across space, place, and time. Our exploration of mess builds on the work of other critical feminist and posthumanist scholars, who question how research can account for blurred boundaries between private lives and public spaces, politics and personal experiences. We argue that engaging mess as a conceptual tool brings these questions *into* the research process itself. In exploring mess as a generative framework, we draw on posthumanist and

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vibrant materialist accountings of the lively and sensorial engagements between human actors, environments, objects, and technologies (Bennett, 2010). We show how this liveliness alerts us to different ways of knowing, resisting, and caring for participants, each other, and ourselves. Attunement to mess enables us to bring these reflections directly into the analysis.

After a brief literature review, the next section highlights the various ways that messy entanglements are explored in critical feminist scholarship to date. We then explore three vignettes on family violence, doxxing, and climate change,[1] highlighting the generative potential of mess as a conceptual tool across a variety of disciplinary contexts and specializations. We conclude this article with three key provocations that pull together insights from these diverse reflections and end with a call to action to embrace mess in academic research.

Mess as Method in Feminist Research

How Mess Emerges in Feminist Research

Feminist research of all kinds has challenged neat distinctions, binaries, and categorizations (see Belknap & Grant, 2021; MacKinnon, 1989; Phadke, 2020; Smart, 2002). In shifting away from objective research design and scientism, feminist research has been accompanied by complexities, nuances, creativity, and arguably mess (Anastas, 2012). While feminist methods take many forms, we examine approaches that encourage subjectivity and solidarity between feminist researchers, participants, and research environments. We argue that these approaches attune us to the generative potential of mess.

Many feminist researchers position themselves *within* the research. This positioning allows for attunement with research participants, in addition to what Maree Burns (2003, p. 230) describes as, "how the interviewer's own embodied subjectivity interacts with that of the respondent in the mutual construction of meanings/bodies." Examples of "locating the self" in feminist methods include co-designed research workshops (Korsmeyer et al., 2022), critical participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2019), long-form interviewing such as asynchronous email interviews (Linabary & Hamel, 2017), and other creative methodologies like craftivism (Clarke, 2016). These common threads of finding solidarity through subjectivity echo what Gail Weiss (1999, p. 5) terms the "mutuality" of embodiment, where "the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other humans and non-human bodies." For researchers in pursuit of an "objective" and "pure" "truth," this entanglement of embodiment between researchers, participants, and nonhuman bodies might very well be termed messy. Yet this work demonstrates how an interpersonal approach to research generates mutuality, respect, and creativity. Such an approach centers on the lived experiences of those we work *with*, not research *on*. These relations are not necessarily fixed, discrete, or "controllable"—but they generate important insights and solidarities between feminist researchers and the people, communities, and environments that they work in coalition with.

In encouraging subjectivity, feminist methodologies challenge claims of "neutrality" in research. Feminist researchers have shown how knowledge, and its generation, are inseparable from social structures and power relations (Linabary et al., 2021). Furthermore, feminist scholars have highlighted the need for ethical research to interrogate power dynamics that are inherent to intersectional identities. The blurring of binary understandings of gender and sexuality, and counter-hegemonic framings of relationships and families, have been explored as a generative mess in queer studies (Browne & Nash, 2010; Dadas, 2016). We also note the pioneering work forged by disability justice scholars, where messy entanglements between crip-resistance, desire, and agency play out against the medical violence of able-bodied health "care" systems (Nishida, 2022). This interrogation of power dynamics entails valuing knowledges produced inside as well as outside of academia, working to challenge injustices (Collins, 2002). Feminist scholars also highlight the need for reflexive practices to challenge such pervasive dynamics. Reflexivity requires ongoing self-critique and should apply to all stages of research design and action (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012). Attunement to reflexivity as something that is integral to doing feminist research also requires a commitment to intersectionality.

Intersectionality explores how people are differently located on various axes of power and how these structures of power co-constitute people's lived experiences. For example, Victoria Lavis (2010) points out how our research identities shift in different contexts. They change when we are in contact with different people, across time, within the various spaces we are in, and through the objects we interact with. Intersectionality has a deep intellectual history arising from black feminism (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; May, 2012; Nash, 2016, 2019). Jennifer Nash (2019, p. 24) critiques framings of intersectionality as a neat additive to "white feminism" that operates in "apolitical ways to usher a few bodies into exclusive institutions." Instead, intersectionality that is rooted in black feminism is inherently political and so can begin to "authorize marginalized voices and de-centre the experiences/interests of privileged groups" (Rice et al., 2019, p. 412). An intersectional feminist approach challenges traditional forms of research, thus facilitating self-reflexivity and, importantly, a recognition of whiteness. Such an approach challenges, and indeed makes messy, feminist

claims to universalism. Feminist research that is intersectional must also commit to reflexivity and all the uncomfortable elements that come with it.

Another impact of the blurred boundaries of feminist research is the ramifications for researchers themselves. Early feminist scholars urgently argued that "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969/2006, p. 3), a framing that plays out at the level of the feminist researchers themselves. Feminist researchers are often politically engaged with the research topic at hand and use research methods that lean into subjectivity, rather than away from it. The private life of the feminist researcher is not easily separated from what, and indeed "whom," they are researching, and as Oakley (1981) argues, personal involvement is something we should strive for. This blurring of personal and professional lives is yet another insight from early feminist scholars (e.g., Hanisch, 1969/2006), which supports our "messy" approach.

Elizabeth Ettorre (2017) disrupts the distinction between researcher/researched when she explores autoethnography *as a* feminist method. Ettorre's (2017, p. 2) personal becomes deeply political through the "transformative power of 'writing the self,'" a method she engages to challenge power inequalities. For Shilpa Phadke (2020), her personal connection to activism is central to her research. Importantly, in examining the role of friendship in feminist activism, she explores this connection as one "that is messy and often full of potholes, much like the streets in which women want to wander, but also just as exciting" (Phadke, 2020, p. 293). Building on Phadke's metaphor, the messiness of feminist research means engaging with the potholes not just as roadblocks but as generative jolts that draw our awareness to the mess within research. In this article we engage directly with mess as something untidy, jolty, and unpaved, using posthumanist and vibrant materialist perspectives to do so. Rather than trying to cover up these '"messy" boundaries, Westmarland and Bows (2018, p. 57) suggest that leaning into these nuances (such as the multiple identities of researchers, practitioners, or activists) ultimately encourages a greater level of reflexivity, and should play a direct role in the data analysis and research findings. This melding is important, as it challenges the veneer of research as objectively conducted by an impartial observer. Yet it also raises important questions and complexities that we examine later on through our vignettes.

There is no one definition of feminism, but for us, feminist research is a way of engaging ethically. It is trans-inclusive, it is intersectional, and centers on lived experiences. In addition, we think of feminist research as political, centering social change, and encouraging reciprocity with community. It is also a way of finding connection and solidarity with other feminist researchers within the sometimes toxic academic space.

How Can Mess Be Used in a Generative Way?

As demonstrated in the last section, mess has been addressed in feminist methods under a variety of names. In this paper, we build on the mess within feminist methods by exploring more-than-human relationships between actors, environments, objects, and other intangible properties within research. We do so by thinking through mess using posthumanist and vibrantly material framings. *Posthumanism* critiques the "primacy" of humans in the anthropocene as new climate, techno, social, and political futures are ushered in. Rosi Braidotti (2019, p. 11) calls for "the human. . .to be assessed as materially embedded and embodied, differential, affective and relational" to the environments, objects, species, and forces that comprise the world. It is through this relational understanding that awareness of "new human-non-human linkages" emerges (Braidotti, 2019, p. 13). These "linkages" between human, nonhuman, and more-than-human actants call in what Jane Bennett (2010) terms the "liveliness" of matter in her work on *vibrant materialism*. Building off new materialist framings of agential realism, Bennett's (2010, p. 13) vibrant materialism suggests that "if matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimised, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated." "Liveliness," or the forming of relationality in and through the mess, gives us a framework for engaging with the nonhuman and more-than-human as "enmeshed in a dense network of relations" (Bennett, 2010, p. 13). It is these relations that we are drawn to exploring in our vignettes.

Posthumanist and vibrant materialist perspectives have a long-standing affinity with feminist research, originating from a poststructural rejection of the "masculinist universalism" of scientific empiricism (Braidotti, 2015, p. 676; Haraway, 2008). Feminist, posthumanist, and vibrantly material scholarship offer vocabularies to interpret and interrogate the knowledge production of our own research in complex, rich, and messy terms. Leaning into the generative potential of mess also disrupts epistemic claims of authority. As Bennett (2010, p. xv) notes, "if we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss much of it."

Posthumanist and feminist new materialist scholars draw attention to the surprising, unpredictable, and complex nature of research (Braidotti, 2015; Gunaratnam & Hamilton, 2017; Haraway, 2008). For example, Mariam Motamedi Fraser (2012, p. 88) reflects on the process of archival research and notes that:

All the "participants" in the research process—the archival documents and objects, the forces which act on them (such as the law), and on which they act, the researchers/readers/archivists who work with them—are constituted by and transformed through their relations with each other.

She argues that

being attentive means not just being in *a* relation to materials; it is also about learning, in part from the materials, what *kind* of relation we are in. How do I open this letter? How does this letter open me? (Fraser, 2012, p. 88, emphasis in original).

This evocative description challenges us to examine not only how we influence the research, but how the research—and how nonhuman actors—influence us. Peta Hinton and Treusch (2015, p. 3) urge us to center "what participates in knowledge-making practices (not only who)." Moving beyond a simplistic view of human agency and nonhuman objects makes qualitative feminist research less defined, harder to narrow down in scope, and more difficult to carry out in practice. Nonetheless, in this paper, we propose various ways that this added complexity can contribute to a livelier engagement with relationality. Furthermore, Braidotti (2015, p. 691) reminds us that "the posthuman is not postpolitical. The posthuman condition does not mark the end of political agency, but a recasting of it in the direction of relational ontology." Engaging a posthuman approach involves paying attention to complex relationalities and is central to exposing mess within qualitative and feminist research.

Methodological Approach

In this article, we engage posthumanism and vibrant materialism as excavating vocabularies to spark reflexivity in our three vignettes. In so doing, we develop mess as a conceptual tool. Through these vignettes, we show how a posthumanist accounting of mess can attune us to the relations that comprise it. For Bennett (2010, p. 5), mess is akin to a "contingent tableau," where human and nonhuman actors co-constitute assemblages of relationality. Among other posthumanist framings, we take up the "contingent tableau" as a framing device to account for our relationality to our research subjects, our research environments, and the many nonhuman or more-than-human actors that co-constitute mess in these moments. Our vignettes consider how the agency of objects, environments, and things is multidirectional and runs "alongside and within humans," setting the table for a porous relational exchange between nonhuman and human actors (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). Time, space, and place are thus configured in "multiple. . .simultaneous, ambivalent, fragmented [and] ephemeral" ways throughout our vignettes, forming a kaleidoscope of messy human and nonhuman agencies and relations (Bignall & Braidotti, 2019, p. 9). This motif of "alongside and within" is a particularly useful framing device in our vignettes, as it conceptualizes mess not as something to square off, consolidate, or "tidy up," but as a blurring of categorization that lends itself to new insights. In the following vignettes, we each revisit moments of mess from our research projects and consider how the "contingent tableau" of posthumanist and vibrantly material relations encourages reflexivity.

Samantha: Stories, Screams, Squishes, and Sirens

Interviews provide a glimpse into how people, spaces, things, and other forces like the law become part of the research process itself. In this vignette, I explore what is generated by an attunement to the mess that lingers across transcripts, fieldwork notes, memories, and emotions. I reflect on the interviews I conducted with women with a precarious migration status (a temporary visa or no visa) and lived experience of the intersections between immigration law and family violence. Through this process of reflection, I gain greater insight into the diffuse impact of immigration law, the role of resistance in motherhood, and challenge a researcher's "right to know."

Before starting the interviews, I had assumed the interview space would be a private one, separate from the issues we were speaking about. I was expecting a neatly packaged and defined experience, instead, the interviews were sensorial and lively. All the women I spoke to had children, and many brought their young babies to the interview. While we spoke, their babies were often crying and playing with objects in the room. In one interview with Sandra,[2] her baby was grabbing the recording device, playing with a loud fire engine toy truck, and smashing other items into the ground. At one point a whole squished banana appeared on the floor, seemingly out of nowhere. This interview felt chaotic as Sandra's responsibilities as a mother were evocatively squished into the moment of her sharing her story with me. I left this interview with a feeling of anxiety. I anxiously tried to avoid potential "potholes" (Phadke, 2020) by making sure the recording device was not tampered with, the baby was entertained, and the mother had control over how she shared her story. Later, as I transcribed the interview recording, it was interlaced with sirens, smashes, and bangs. Through the recording, I was transported across time and space, brought back into that moment. In reflecting on the liveliness of this space, I am left wondering what this "contingent tableau" produces (Bennett, 2010, p. 5). By examining the space as one punctuated by stories, screams, squishes, and sirens, I am attuned to its wider effects.

In examining the messy posthuman relations embedded within these interviews, the women's commitments become

clear. They had obligations that they could not simply put aside ahead of the interview. In the case of the participants with young children, these obligations were particularly pronounced because they rarely had access to child care. All the women I spoke to, who brought their children with them, were either on a temporary visa or without any visa at all. These women did not have access to a child care subsidy. In addition, many did not have family in Australia and had separated from partners who were abusive. No one could look after their children while they participated in the interview. The lively presence of children shows how immigration law acted upon the women I spoke to, even in the interview room (Fraser, 2012). Put another way, the law broke through the interview's seemingly private walls and showed me that the harms enacted through immigration law are not easily contained. These are harms that are pervasive across the immigration system (O'Donnell, 2022).

Sitting with the relational mess of the interview space also challenged my assumption that interviews are only a conversation between the researcher and the participant. The anxiety I felt in those moments suggests that I perceived children as a roadblock to research. Instead, the children's lively presence challenged easy separations between women and their motherhood. Several women were breastfeeding, or feeding their baby with a bottle, while they shared their stories. Their practices of care disrupted the seemingly sanitized research space while feeding created an affective experience of calm for the mother and child. I was also able to smile at and engage with the babies, to build rapport and trust with the participants. On one occasion, a baby farted after they drank some milk from a bottle. The mother and I looked at each other and laughed, the noise jolting us out of the intensity of that moment. In that instance, the mother, child, and I all existed within a shared moment that disrupted the heaviness of the subject matter and permeated the room with a sense of ease.

Through the assemblage of babies, bottles, and emotions, the sanitized interview came to life. I glimpsed the women's private lives as mothers, and the love and care they had for their children. The strength and resistance of the women I spoke to was palpable. The vibrant space created through the presence of children critically spoke to the participants' public acts of resistance. Many of the women I spoke to were fighting for custody of their children and relocation to their home countries or fighting to remain in Australia to care for their children, despite their limited access to state support and services. In exploring how the women brought their whole selves to the interview space, their strength, motherhood, and care wrapped up to provide insight into how they resisted a violent system. An attunement to mess centered what was originally not in focus. Mess subverted my expectations, and understanding interviews as a tapestry of experiences highlighted women's

strength. Through sensing and feeling, I could more clearly see these women's strategies of resistance.

My feelings of discomfort also attuned me to the limits and complexities of research. I conducted an interview with Rosalina, a woman of color from a Global South country who was waiting for a protection visa outcome. During our conversation, her descriptions and body language indicated that there were parts of her story that she chose not to share. At one point, after trying to describe something that had happened to her in her country of origin, she told me "*I don't know how to explain to you. You won't understand.*" At that moment I was jolted back into my body. I had felt a certain degree of comfort going into the interview. I spoke to Rosalina in a room at the women's refuge where she was living, a private space that I could enter for a short moment, a space I could choose to leave. For Rosalina, this interview space was also her home and reprieve from interpersonal and systemic violence. She explained to me that, until she could access an ongoing income, she could not afford longer-term housing. I was also oriented by the objects I brought with me (Ahmed, 2007), a recording device and a folder with plain language statements and consent forms. Through these objects, the hierarchical position of "researcher" was stamped onto our conversation from the outset. My positionality as a white researcher with citizenship was also inscribed through the "orientation" of my body and its shaping "in time and space. . .[and] by this contact with objects" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 7). In response to these orientations, Rosalina explicitly told me that there were things I would not understand and that she would not share.

Posthuman mess draws attention to the "who" *and* "what" that work to create and produce knowledge (Hinton & Treusch, 2015). Both my body, Rosalina's discomfort in sharing aspects of her story with me, the space we were in, and the objects I was oriented in relation to, influenced our conversation. The private lives, and concealed stories, of myself and the participants were inseparable from the interviews. Rosalina chose what she felt safe sharing with me at that moment. Attunement to mess, and its sometimes discomforting qualities, emphasizes that there is no one tidy "truth" to uncover. Nor as researchers should we assume the right to know everything, or indeed to know anything at all. Through acknowledgment of an interview as one part of the messy tableau of research, we can understand the ways in which we influence the research and are also irrevocably changed by it.

Briony: The Messy Agency of Technology

Technologies have a messy agency of their own, inviting in unseen potholes, disruptions, and obstacles within research, particularly in mediating the public and private divides that

crop up in feminist research. Anonymity is afforded different possibilities and disruptions through technologic mediums. This "dance of agency" between possibility and disruption is a prime example of a mess, particularly in its simultaneity and co-production (Pickering, 2012, p. 317). As such, the messy agency of technology does not present a problem to solve. Instead, the messy possibilities of technology both affirm and disrupt what is private and public, setting out new tableaus for feminist research. Below, I reflect on the harms of doxxing, a form of data disclosure in which personal and identifying information is released without consent (Anderson and Wood, 2021). I discuss interviews conducted over Zoom with Carol and Jana, who experienced forms of targeted doxxing by having intimate photos and videos shared without consent and workplace harassment.

During my interview with Carol, the video-conferencing technology of Zoom both provided for and betrayed anonymity in an example of the messy agency of technology. Carol wanted to participate in the study in total anonymity, using a "burner" email address during correspondence leading up to the interview. When she joined the Zoom call for the interview, her real name was displayed, a relic from her ordinary use of the platform. Carol quickly left the Zoom call and rejoined a few minutes later, having changed her name to a pseudonym in her profile settings. We discussed this mistake when she rejoined the call, and she stressed her desire to participate with complete anonymity, which I affirmed by referring to her by her chosen pseudonym throughout the interview. Carol was happy to continue with the interview, but the "betrayal" of disclosure through Zoom—a technology that ran counter to her desire to be totally anonymous—illustrates the porous dance between confidentiality, disclosure, and the distinction between private and public spaces online. This moment provided a powerful reminder about the tensions between cultivating safe, private spaces for participant disclosures which must always be meted against the demands and challenges of representing those disclosures in public research.

Taking a vibrantly material approach to understand the "contingent tableau" of human and nonhuman actors, the technological affordances of Zoom *resisted* Carol's desire to remain totally anonymous, presenting a "pothole" for Carol and myself to overcome. Returning to Phadke's (2020) framing of the "pothole," this moment jolted me into awareness of the agency of Zoom. This agency both mitigated anxiety about anonymity—by providing the cloak of anonymity via the option to participate without video and with a pseudonym—but also produced it. Carol's agency to participate in research on her own terms was neither orderly nor tidy. Bennett (2010, pp. 21, 28) elsewhere describes the entanglements of human and nonhuman (in this case, technologic) agencies as a "confederation," where the "looseness and slipperiness" of intermingled agencies makes it difficult to determine which is which.

In other interviews, the messy agency of Zoom—and other technological factors like unstable internet connections and faulty audio settings—brought a "slippery" quality to the space. Participants would begin telling their stories in clear terms, only to "slip away" as a jolty WiFi connection disrupted the flow of their words. Another "slippery" moment arose when Jana had no access to a microphone, and typed her responses into the chat box. Rather than dismissing these moments as "unusable" or "problems," the interaction of human agency with the invitational agencies of technology unearthed new ways of "being" in the interview (see Wood et al, 2023). Jana commented that she had more control over the framing of her remarks by typing them into the chat (see Linabary & Hamel, 2017 on the power of email interview methodologies). Similarly, asking participants to repeat themselves when the audio was disrupted due to WiFi disruptions yielded more expansive responses, as participants had a chance to reflect on what they had initially said and make edits to clarify their points of view. Zoom facilitated many "imperfect" research moments, where the same affordances could preserve anonymity, just as readily as they could disrupt it. But Carol, Jana, and I found strategies to work alongside the messiness of technologic agency, returning to feminist practices of respect and reciprocity.

Reciprocity has long been underscored as a pinnacle of feminist research praxis, breaking down hierarchies between researcher and participants (Burns, 2003; Korsmeyer et al., 2022; Oakley, 1981). While reciprocity in feminist research can take the form of friendship (Lundberg et al., in press), I was also reminded that this conversation was not one between friends but mired within hierarchy—Carol sought anonymity from me as well as the broader findings of the research project. As a victim of privacy abuse, a key way that I embodied reciprocity to Carol was by *performing* respect for her right to be anonymous. A friendly exchange might have centered on the intimate use of first names. For Carol, this would have constituted the very privacy abuse that she was asked to reflect on in the interview. Using her pseudonym during the interview was not only a sign of respect for her wishes but a material way of demonstrating reciprocity by refusing to speak her real name in the recording of the interview.

Fraser's (2012, p. 88) provocation of "how do I open this letter, how does this letter open me?" captures the tension between opportunity and the risk of harm that is inherent within research. Just as the Zoom interview presented Carol with the opportunity to share her experience on *her* terms, in the timezone of *her* choice, and without requiring *her* to move location, the private space of the interview was imperfect. Technologies often resist the aspirations of research design, always bringing with them their own unruly forms of agency. Even in bringing in reciprocity as a gesture of respect within the interview dynamic, I was still playing

"catch up" to the initial transgression. The reflexivity that this moment required "opened" me as the researcher to consider that a feminist research praxis could not "solve" or "resolve" these tensions between the privacy of participants and the public demands of research. Instead, foregrounding curiosity about the messy agencies at play "opened" up a generative attunement to the tensions between participant confidentiality and the demands of public research outputs.

In thinking about Carol's interview, I have shifted from describing it as a "blunder" or a "mistake" to a "dance." My relations to the research were challenged as it became clear that my role is not to control or "design out" mess, but to facilitate a meaningful engagement with it when it crops up. Thinking about the messy agencies of humans and technologies as being entangled, like a waltz or a cha cha, situates the co-constitution of messy outcomes as a process "within and alongside" the researcher and the researched (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). However imperfect, the technological affordance of Zoom provided Carol with anonymity and changed the possibilities of what she could disclose. Zoom also provided me with the opportunity to connect with Carol when we were half a world away from each other. This affordance does not create unproblematic opportunities; for example, the privilege I occupy as a white academic in the West cannot be dismantled by a singular opportunity of connection. Indeed, Braidotti (2019, p. 96) cautions that new digital technologies of connection also invite extractive "bio-political practice[s] of gathering crucial information about humans and non-human agents." Posthuman feminist researchers must grapple with new power dynamics of dipping in and out of digitally mediated spaces, and the implications this has for potential harms, risks, and violence in interviews. Nonetheless, anonymity was central to the development of trust between Carol and myself as the researcher, a process which was initially undermined by the intrusion of Zoom in identifying her real name, but presented new strategies to explore reciprocity and reflexivity. Even in moments of technological "mess," a feminist praxis of reciprocity and respect can help to jostle through the potholes along the way.

Kajsa: Inundated Expectations

When I started thinking about the messiness of research for this paper, my mind went to a particular moment during my research into harm in the city, climate change, and fire. In late 2022, my home in Maribyrnong, a middle-ring suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, was affected by a flash flooding event. The flood affected about 250 homes in the suburb, and was the worst flood in close to 50 years (Bucci, 2022). While humans and cats left the scene, the muddy water penetrated everything inside our home that had been left below hip level. Turbid water seeped into the cushions of my couch, the mattress of my bed, and destroyed the fridge and the television. In other words, it ruined all the objects that formed part of my everyday life. From one day to another, I was without a home.

I am acutely aware of the consequences of climate change and severe weather events for people in Australia and around the world. Despite this, I was unprepared for the impacts that the flooding could have on my own life. Except for the most dedicated auto-ethnographers, we usually seek to maintain a certain degree of separation between our personal and professional lives. This separation is sometimes quite subtle. However, in this jolting moment—an encounter between weather, topography, and urban design—my topic of research penetrated the most intimate parts of my life. I was abruptly reminded of the relationality between myself and my research through its invasion of my home. This moment represented a spatial and temporal shift, from an event "out there" that we "must urgently deal with," to an event "right here" requiring my full attention.

This anecdote also demonstrates the ways our lives, including our research, are lived in embodied ways. Often distinctions between our research and private lives are blurred, and our research topics and participants' affective experiences "stick" to us. This stickiness, following Ahmed's (2013, p. 89) work on disgust, results from the boundaries between ourselves and objects (here research) being transgressed. As Ahmed (2013, p. 7) calls attention to in her work, emotions "are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects." This framing applies to actual objects but also imagined ones and memories, or invisible forces such as climate change. It would therefore be a mistake to assume our emotions can be separated from the objects of our research and vice versa. Our emotive states shape objects and, in turn, our understanding of them. Emotions, often assumed to form part of the private realm, are hence tied up with our research and inform our political practices. Emotions and their relations with objects, environments, experiences, and research are both alongside and within us at all times.

Yasmin Gunaratnam and Carrie Hamilton (2017, p. 4) draw our attention to how the sensory and "sensual experiences of fieldwork," experiences, and memories impact the process of research. I build on this framing and explore how the sensorial and emotive experiences of our everyday lives come to reconceptualize our research approaches and practices, and perhaps most importantly, our understanding of the research topic itself. The research process remains undefined and unpredictable, ever-changing along with the transformations of our private and professional lives. Our emotions, private lives, and sometimes even our homes are implicated in our work. In other words, "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969/2006, p. 3).

In the moment of the flood, I had become the object of research as much as the researcher, far removed from any claims of the researcher as an objective observer. Moreover,

messiness here is a story about complicity. As a climate change scholar, I am seeking to call out a system and an everyday way of life, while both my feet are deeply anchored in the same system of oppression; oppressing human and beyond-human species through quotidian extractions. Are we just participating and reproducing the same acts we condemn? Although I call myself a researcher, I am still both a victim and a perpetrator of climate change (see Lundberg 2022a, 2022b). Furthermore, I am a white Swedish scholar working on Aboriginal stolen lands which means that I am benefiting from a settler colonial system and Aboriginal peoples' loss of lands. The implications of this are damning; I am guilty of participating in an oppressive colonial capitalist system while attempting to call attention to its harms. That I call messy!

Our intersectional reflexivities must deeply engage with these contradictions between our lives, positionalities, the power we hold, and our research. We need to engage with the fact that academia is founded on and maintained by the colonial state (see Watego, 2021). Significantly, therefore, in conducting research I cannot avoid that mess, pretend that I am above accusation or that my life is separate from our changing climate and colonial practices. Following Fraser (2012), we must explore the porous relations between ourselves and the objects of our research; we are both transformed and transform the world through engagement with elements of our research. In the words of Bennett (2010, p. 5), we must pay attention to the "contingent tableau" of human and nonhuman assemblages that we and our research form part of. More broadly, as academic scholars, our research does not sit apart from the work we engage with, nor are academic institutions separate from colonial capitalism and the destruction of nature. We exist within, sustain and benefit from, these structures in ways that affirm them. Increased accountability, exploration, and engagement with mess requires the exposure of these uncomfortable and often contradictory dynamics.

By embracing the mess, the topic of climate change and harms can best be explored not as an objective reality separate from ourselves, our emotive everyday lives, and the beyond-human world we form part of, but as integrated and indistinct. Categories between human and beyond-human (actual and metaphorical/imagined), objects and agentic forces acting upon us (such as extreme weather events) are untidy and in flux. While we can only aspire to account for some of this convolution, it is only by embracing the mess that we can start to understand the more complex relations that make up our interspecies world.

Furthermore, the interconnectedness between ourselves and the more-than-human world poses a range of methodological dilemmas. For example, Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2014, pp. 59, 61) writes that posthuman epistemology involves new responsibilities associated with the anthropocene and forces us "to consider again the connection between ontology and epistemology." This position raises questions about what it means to learn about the world in relational and open-ended ways and to what extent we are able to supersede the anthropocentric gaze. This might even, as St. Pierre (2016) notes, require a rethinking of empiricism altogether, as it brings the Descartes' separation between the mind and the outside world into question. What are the implications of this for our ability to empirically learn about the world through our engagement with it? How can we attune to this new ontological reality of climate change within our own research? Although the posthuman turn might bring about more methodological questions than answers, we propose that we can begin to seek those answers within the mess, that which is complex and untidy, and does not necessarily fit into predetermined frames of reference.

Conclusion

Although we do not want to limit the use of mess as a conceptual framework, there are three key provocations that we put forward in relation to what mess does for us, and can do for others. First, mess is not a problem that we should seek to avoid: it *is* the research. It is by engaging with mess that we learn about the unexpected and what we do not know. Second, attunement to what is complex and unexpected in mess also sparks a reflexivity that leads us to further shed the illusion of structured research projects, where objective or distant researchers, and the objects of their research, are separated ideals. Instead, it helps us come into more sincere forms of relation, community, and care—key aspects of the contingent tableau of feminist, qualitative, and posthuman praxis. Third, mess shows us how research moves with us, through time and across space. As we reflect on and sit with our research, we see how it lingers. This lingering enables a generative space within which we can conduct research in a way that continuously engages with important ethical dilemmas. Instead of erasing these complexities, we engage with these questions directly. As we have shown through our vignettes, however, mess will look and feel differently for different people.

Acknowledging difference also recognizes that feminist research itself is inherently messy—and yet, as researchers, we are often directed to present our findings in neat and packaged ways. We are encouraged to hide the blurriness and complexities from public view. Mess, we argue, is an unavoidable part of feminist research. Being attuned to the sensorial liveliness of research means being attuned to the ways in which we ourselves, as researchers, are not separable from the research that we do. Drawing attention to how these complexities play out is critical to doing research that is more ethical and rigorous, without hiding behind the

fantasy of objectivity. Attending to the agency of all actants, objects, things, and environments opens up new axes and places where commitments to social change can take place. Mess brings important framings that support critical feminist and intersectional scholarship. Our conceptual framing helps us to understand that our participation in research is not confined to a discrete interview or research moment. We carry the stories of our research into our lives, homes, and futures.

We encourage fellow researchers to explore the liveliness within your own projects and to recognize how your lives are inseparable from this contingent tableau. This recognition will require a break with long-standing traditions of structured, impartial, and replicable research and, hence, will be met by resistance in many spaces. Importantly though, embracing mess does not mean less rigorous research. Instead, this research is rigorous in that it is thoroughly and carefully considered, intersectional, and reflexive. Through this article, we hope to start a messy movement within feminist and broader research paradigms, to build connections with researchers interested in shaking up what is valued as research within traditional institutions and disciplines.

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Notes

1. The vignettes outlined in this article are drawn from the authors' independent research projects.
2. All participant's names in this paper have been pseudonymized.

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