

Affectual intensities: Writing with resonance as feminist methodology

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This paper advances current debates about feminist methodologies in geography by attending to affectual intensities and their resonance. Affectual intensities emerge through encounters between different bodies and objects, and are deeply power-laden, enabling, disabling, transforming, and restricting geographic research. We attend to three moments of resonance that surfaced in Elisabeth Militz's field research on nationalism in Azerbaijan. In each, we show how attending to affectual intensities reveals much about the work of power in nationalism and in the constitution of geographic knowledge about it. The paper calls for an affectual methodology, a process of critical writing, reflection, and rewriting about moments of resonance between different bodies and objects in the field, and as we analyse, present, and write up our data. This is a layered, dialogic, and collaborative writing strategy that, we argue, enables us to write through and with affect. In particular, our work contributes a nuanced and multi-layered approach to uncover often-neglected power structures of predominantly white and heteronormative geographic research practice.

KEYWORDS

affect, autoethnography, Azerbaijan, feminist geography, nationalism, postcolonial research position

1 | POWER AND EMOTIONS IN FEMINIST GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH PRACTICES

Feminist geographers have long interrogated power in research encounters, arguing that “attention to emotions in research has the potential to reinvigorate feminist practices of reflexivity” (Laliberté & Schurr, 2016, p. 73). Ahmed's (2014) idea of “stickiness” or McKittrick's (2006) work on “bodymemory” (see also Crawford, 2018b) conceptualise how research encounters are always emotion-laden *and* imbued with power, reproducing and legitimating social hierarchy. We, as researchers, must recognise and critically reflect on the long histories of power relations in our, seemingly innate, gut feelings. Yet, how to navigate this terrain methodologically?

In this paper we build on Noxolo's call to “‘write’ the body *both* as a social, political and economic location *and* as a sensory agent” (2009, p. 63; emphasis in original). We suggest a methodological intervention that centres layered, dialogic, and collaborative writing. We describe this as an *affectual* methodology by fusing the *affective* with the *emotional* (see also Tolia-Kelly, 2006). In so doing, our intervention forms part of a wider conceptual move to bridge intellectual divides between geographies of affect, informed by non-representational theory and feminist emotional geographies (see for example, Colls, 2012; Schurr, 2014). With Noxolo, Ahmed, and others, we understand an affectual methodology as the outcome of “how we come into contact with objects and others” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 208). Thus, how we produce, handle,

communicate, and read research always already affects us and our research. We argue that engaging with and reflecting on affectual intensities in our writing – the sensual registering of encounters between different bodies and objects – discloses powerful entitlements and silences available to some researching and researched bodies, and not to others.

Our affectual methodology has two epistemological foundations and objectives: first, it refuses a notion of affectual connection outside of power. As such, our affectual writing aims to trigger *resonance* in the reader that reveals neglected power mechanisms embedded in the research phenomena. This is also true of us, as researchers. Thus, and second, our methodology recognises that intersectional bodily histories (Mollett & Faria, 2018) mean different bodies have access to and experience research encounters differently. Our affectual methodology thus situates us within research encounters in ways that prompt rigorous transparency about our positionality and privileges.

Central to our writing strategy is the use of vignettes to write affectually and in a way that evokes and then destabilises resonance. Momentarily immersing the reader in the research, vignettes increase the reader's affectual capacities, stimulating sensual knowledge and experiences through our “description in words” (Dowling, Lloyd, & Suchet-Pearson, 2017, p. 786). Vignettes, and our response(s) to them, thus have the capacity to resonate with the reader, to produce embodied knowledge through the textual encounter. While other scholars have engaged in affectual storytelling as method (Stewart, 2007), we distinguish our affectual writing by positioning ourselves within the vignettes, and by responding collectively to them. In doing so, affectual writing becomes an intersectional geographic practice: “the interlocking violence of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism constitute a spatial formation” (Mollett & Faria, 2018, p. 566), which our postcolonial bodily positions reveal.

Our examples of affectual writing come from research on one particularly potent and affectual expression of power – that of nationalism. Two autoethnographic scripts from Elisabeth's field research in Azerbaijan are used to demonstrate how we can make the affectual work of nationalism visible. Here, affectual intensities accompanying her research evoke felt experiences of difference and reproduce longstanding and entrenched racial and heteronormative power relations. In our third vignette on scholarship on nationalism, we collectively interrogate our affectual reactions as researchers.

2 | PRODUCING AND DESTABILISING RESONANCE THROUGH AFFECTUAL WRITING

The online *Oxford Dictionary* (2019) defines resonance as “the power to evoke enduring images, memories, and emotions.” Bodily positionalities, the multiplicity of emotional orientations and bodies' different capacities to affect and to be affected (see Mohammad & Sidaway, 2012; Tolia-Kelly, 2006) qualify experiences of resonance as “it is in the intensity of bodily responses to worlds that we make judgments about worlds; and those judgments are directive” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 209).

Collective affectual writing is a tool to recall affectual intensities and to inspire resonance between researching, researched, and reading bodies. We understand collective affectual writing as a way of describing intensities of mutual swinging – in comforting and discomforting senses. If we produce texts that make the reader feel what we feel – or not – the reader will develop – also through disagreement – a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena we try to explain. In turn, interrogating our own affectual reactions across the process of knowledge production reveals the limits of reflexivity and the fraught conditions of knowledge production. “When something ... resonates with a living body,” write Hayes-Conroy and Montoya, “that body feels and *knows* it” (2017, p. 148; emphasis in original).

The aim of collective affectual writing is then “to resonate rather than validate” (Vannini, 2015, p. 15). It proposes not that we write *about* affect, but *through* and *with* affect. Collective affectual writing intends, first, to evoke affectual encounters in the research process through our writing; second, to generate resonance between different bodies and objects through our writing; and third, through this resonance to uncover hidden and perpetuating power relations constituting geographic knowledge production.

Moments of encounter are crucial methodological entry points if we are to understand ways in which affectual intensities make researching, researched, and reading bodies feel “in place/out of place” (Cresswell, 1996). We understand encounters as a “specific genre of contact” (Wilson, 2017, p. 452) and suggest affectual writing as a form to register and reflect on events that are “noteworthy” (2017, p. 464) as they are affectually intense. It is, however, challenging to work with resonance methodologically, because circulating emotions powerfully work to reinforce discriminatory readings of bodies (Ahmed, 2014; Falola & Ohueri, 2017). Analysing the emotional strains of engaging in covert research with antagonistic organisations, Maguire, McCartan, Nash, and Browne (2019) present an instructive example. While “the desire to return society to heteronormative ideals” (2019, p. 301) connects and empowers heteroactivists during anti-LGBT events, the same desire displaces LGBT researchers and allies. Indeed, the denial of LGBT identities renders them invisible, putting LGBT researchers and allies “back into the closet” (2019, p. 302) of LGBT oppression.

We respond to the challenge to evoke, grasp, and reflect on resonance in conducting, producing, and reading research in two steps: first, by translating our focus on affectual intensities and embodied experiences of coming-into-contact during the *research process*. Then, by *representing* and *unsettling* it.

2.1 | Note 1: Desire

A moment depicted in Elisabeth's research notes¹ and her reflections on these notes provide an instructive example. During fieldwork with middle-class families in Baku, Azerbaijan, in September 2014, she explored ways in which everyday spaces and practices – dancing, mourning, or grooming, for example, enable national feelings (Militz, 2017; Militz & Schurr, 2016). In the layering of writing and reflection, she writes:

I am sitting next to Roza at the kitchen table drinking tea. Roza – in her early twenties, six years younger than myself – touches my arm and sighs, ‘Your skin is so beautiful! It has the colour of peach.’ I’m bemused. My skin is beautiful? Its colour is peach? ‘Your skin isn’t peach coloured? Don’t we share the same skin colour?’ I ask her, feeling both slightly awkward and flattered. Roza places her arm next to mine. ‘No! Yours is peach; mine is yellow,’ she firmly concludes, frowning at her bare arm. Reflection: I (Elisabeth) write these words as part of my daily fieldwork labour. Observing, recalling, and, in this case, largely dismissing racial and ethnic difference, I begin the process of analysing my data. As the value attached to and desire for whiteness is not part of the story I will tell about Azerbaijani nationalism, I overlook the meaning of this situation. The irritation about Roza’s comparison sticks with me, but I am ignorant of its significance. In my analysis, I follow the usual narrative about Azerbaijan, often described as ‘a multilayered hybrid of Soviet, Muslim, Azeri, Iranian and Turkic’ (Heyat, 2002, p. 2). I miss their racialised hierarchies. My training as a geographer in Switzerland and Germany elided questions of racialised and ethnicised injustices. Even as the work progressed into a completed manuscript, my white privilege is never a central concern for me. The white spaces of academia cushion me from the emotional and intellectual labour to question my seemingly innocent whiteness. Yet, in writing about this moment some years later, carefully narrating its feel, sitting with it, sharing it with my co-authors, and looking with fresh eyes on this quotidian situation, I start to see the power of racialised imaginaries in Roza’s desire. Her desire is exemplary for Azerbaijan’s geopolitical attempts to whiten itself after independence in 1991. Expressing aspirations for an EU membership by joining the European Neighbourhood Policy in the early 2000s, for example, or inviting European fashion retailers to take up space in urban centres (Najafizadeh, 2012) percolate into the work of nationalism in Azerbaijan. I have realised my ‘whiteness ... as a structural advantage’ (Faria & Mollett, 2016, p. 81) only after the fieldwork. In so doing, I leave not only my bodily and verbal response to Roza but also any other power relation and my white privilege in encounters in Azerbaijan untouched and unquestioned.

For us, autoethnography is a feminist practice. As Crawford puts it: “[autoethnography] is reflexive, centers the self, and requires an intimate relationship between researcher and research” (2018a, p. 1398). It pushes us to develop an awareness of our fleshly and emotional entanglements in research processes (see also Holman Jones & Adams, 2010). Autoethnography aims at resonance: “You want your readers to feel something and/or to do something” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 58). “To make [readers] feel deep in their guts and their bones” (2016, p. 63) holds the potential to make the emotions and positions constituting research encounters and knowledge production more explicit. For us, these feelings serve to unravel the powerful mechanisms at work in the phenomena researched – such as, in our case, nationalism.

Indeed, the recognition of power in work on and with affect is vital. Power relations, violences, and privileges imbue research processes. The negotiations of different bodies’ intersectional identities in moments of encounter dis/enable opportunities for different people to work on certain questions and to access specific field sites and communities. Key becomes the intersectional interrogation and problematisation of, for example, access to specific research sites. Elisabeth’s personal family networks in Azerbaijan have been, in part, only possible through her being identified as a white Western European, heterosexual, young, able-bodied, straight-sized, and university-educated woman.

Affectual intensities constituting research encounters shape scholars’ emotional experiences of being in their respective field as well as conducting and/or reading research. Emotions constituting research encounters thus also produce and reinforce inequalities and exploitation. Our affectual methodology intends to understand these mechanisms that incite and shape what gets in touch through research processes and what does not, and how, and addresses the political, social, and academic implications of affectual intensities along the research process.

2.2 | Note 2: Love

Elisabeth recalls, and reflects on, the following moment at the beginning of her second stretch of fieldwork on national feelings in Azerbaijan, in summer 2013. Family members picked her up from the airport in Baku and took her directly to their home. Entering the flat,

Nasiya Khala holds my palms in a firm, but comforting grip. Her 50-year-old hands bear visible signs of years of labouring in the household and for her family. She looks at me with loving eyes, smiling. I feel welcomed, part of her family. One year ago was the last time Nasiya Khala and I met. She inquires about my parents, my sisters. Yes, all are well. They send their regards. Her gaze presses on me. 'When will you marry, *qizim* [my daughter]?' Her voice is soft. I look away, avoiding her gaze. Marriage has become my weak point doing research in Azerbaijan. Being childfree and having never been married make me feel inadequate and anxious to disappoint the people I love and work with here. 'I don't know,' I say, feeling awkward. 'Maybe, never,' I reassure myself in my thoughts. I dare to meet Nasiya Khala's eyes again. Her look signals both concern and a tenacious certainty that my heteronormative life will turn out alright. Reflection: Here again, I (Elisabeth) write to recall, confuse, and evoke feeling/s. I seek to trigger productive resonance through capturing the emotional ambiguity of the moment. Love brings Nasiya Khala and me together, creating a deep reciprocity of feeling and a sense of intimate belonging. Shame drives my inability to meet my host mother's gaze. Long after the fieldwork, layered practices of writing, sharing the writing, and re-writing push me to consider what these emotions reveal. My host mother's expectations, and my failure to meet them, define not only my social position in Azerbaijan, but also a wider system of gender and sexual norms that work to construct ideal Azerbaijani nationhood. My evading gaze and other ways of concealing bodily sensations in research encounters mark in themselves affectual intensities and relations between different bodies. The presence of sexualised norms in the field (Kaspar & Landolt, 2016), the wish for recognition (Faria & Mollett, 2016) and credibility (Schurr & Abdo, 2016; Smith, 2016), shape research trajectories. Yet, despite Nasiya Khala's unspoken disapproval of me being unmarried, my relative privilege mitigates its impact on me. I remain free to choose never to marry back in Switzerland, a privilege an equally positioned Azeri woman in her late twenties is unlikely to share. Indeed, this moment of encounter, its autoethnographic narration, my sitting with the words, and my return to the resonance of love and shame reveal layered intersectional 'mobilities of whiteness' (Faria & Mollett, 2016, p. 89) in this assertion of the nation as a heteronormative ideal.

Rather than focusing alone on the research process of collecting, analysing, and representing data, our affectual methodology understands research as the involvement and evocation of moments, of dynamic experiences of irritation, joy, discomfort, surprise, or boredom. We need to grasp "body affectivit[ies] in relation to specific histor[ies]" (Dragojlovic, 2015, p. 329) and spatialities (Tolia-Kelly, 2006) to understand how geographers identify research relevance, deal with methodological questions, and present allegedly objective results. At the heart of our affectual methodology then are memories, memories that stick with us, that resonate, that move us towards or away from different bodies and places or questions and concepts. Centring these, our affectual methodology attends to the banal and felt experiences constituting and shaping socio-political phenomena such as nationalism.

2.3 | Note 3: Disgust

In our first two vignettes, we have pointed to the insights of autoethnographic writing for the analysis of nationalism. An autoethnographic analysis, however, can, and often does, fail to account for the emotional silences and reflective blind spots of the researcher (see for example, Fisher, 2015). Autoethnography often intends to challenge a reader's assumptions, but does not necessarily challenge the biases of the researcher. The method of collective affectual writing addresses some of the shortcomings of autoethnography through enabling a more politically inflected approach and analysis. Our last piece of collective affectual writing makes this clear.

'Oh no,' I am thinking, 'not yet another burning waste container!' I am sitting in the living room of my host family's flat, sketching notes into my notebook. The stink burns into my nose. I hate this smell of acid tang. I *hate* it. I hasten to the kitchen to close the window – to stop the odour from further penetrating this clean family space. As I have shut the window, I turn towards my host mother Elnara and her baby Leyla who are busy

with feeding and eating, respectively. ‘Do you smell the burned waste?’ I ask Elnara. She looks bewildered. ‘What? No, I don’t smell burned waste.’ I am confused. How can she *not* smell this sickening stench? It is everywhere! ‘But, isn’t there some weird odour in the air?’ I try again. She pauses for a moment. ‘I just burned *üzərlik*.² Her expression clears. ‘Do you smell it?’ she asks, suddenly very excited. ‘What?’ Now, I am confused. ‘Leyla wouldn’t eat. She refused to take anything and was just spitting out her food,’ Elnara sighs. ‘So, I burned some *üzərlik* on the stovetop.’ She smiles and continues, ‘when my sister and I were little and strangers on the street would praise our beauty, my mum would burn *üzərlik* when we got home. She would hold us close to the place where she burned it and then she would fan the fumes all over us. I just did the same with Leyla and she stopped spitting out her food.’ I feel both surprised and irritated. After a while, I have the courage to ask Elnara, ‘do you like the smell of burning rubbish?’ She throws me a blank look. ‘No! Of course not!’ Embarrassed – registering my faux pas the moment I had dared to ask – I hasten to explain myself. ‘I thought some people had set fire to a waste container on the street. I smelled burned waste. I think for me, burning *üzərlik* resembles the odour of burned waste.’ Reflection: Reflecting on this memory, a series of pictures flashed in my (Carolyn) mind’s eye: I often sit in tiny, cold rooms in shared flats and guesthouses in Ecuador, Mexico, or Georgia while doing fieldwork. When I come across the smell Elisabeth writes about, I realise that I don’t know this smell. Burned waste? It would make me feel sick, for sure. I’m picky when it comes to smell. I remember the smell of coriander that saturated our flat in Ecuador. My flatmate loved coriander. I hated it. It just made me feel sick. I know it is an essential part of Latin American cuisine, but, as much as I loved living and working in Ecuador, I could never force myself to like the smell of coriander. My (Caroline’s) reaction is different. I navigate Elisabeth’s memory with sympathy, but not the same kind of empathy Carolyn describes. For me, smell is racially potent. Difference smells, or is told it smells, or rather that it stinks. Familiar smells, loved smells rendered disgusting through the work of racial power. I am left with a feeling of discomfort, of pause, reading elements of orientalism in the vignette, but also of cautious openness.

Carolyn does not recognise the smell of burned waste, but the vignette recalls her own experience of nauseating smell. She shares her own disturbing memories of a home space suffused with olfactory disgust. Further removed, and differently positioned, Caroline experiences the vignette and its reflection differently, with unease. There is much to draw on here, but we intend to make one point: the commonalities between Elisabeth’s and Carolyn’s bodily experiences of hating a geographically *elsewhere*-located smell signals our postcolonial position. To affectually decolonise knowledge (Radcliffe, 2017) means to reflect on how postcolonial imaginaries of the colonial other, as lacking purity, cleanness, and hygiene, inform our encounters in the field despite our feminist attempts to overcome them (Stoler, 1995). In doing so we make ourselves vulnerable, but with a different and intersectional feminist future in mind (Falola & Ohueri, 2017; Mollett & Faria, 2018). We read and write, we *know*, from different places (Mahtani, 2014; McKittrick, 2006). Together, from these feelings and our critical engagement with them, we make something new.

Methodologically, the vignette and its affectual responses illustrate a way of engaging language and text to stimulate multi-sensorial resonance, through including thick description, direct speech, and narrated associations from several first- and third-person perspectives. Also, the ways different readers make sense of texts are ridden with preconditions. A text does things. Yet, the things a text triggers, such as memories, feelings, or place-based imaginations, are not predefined. The capacities of the text to resonate in different ways with differently positioned bodies demonstrate how affectual intensities unfold as embodied knowledge that is “deeply imbricated in power” (Noxolo, 2017, p. 318). When the text irritates, this resonance is, arguably, most forceful. Our collective affectual writing practice thus asks us to gather different experiences, to expose our biases, and to collectively unsettle and destabilise the power of resonance. Attention to multi-sensorial bodily knowledge beyond vision and language becomes a key tool to do this.

3 | TOWARDS COLLECTIVE AFFECTUAL WRITING

Writing with and about feeling/s and evoking resonance result in a deeper analysis of power. To retrace the power mechanisms of the phenomenon we study – as in our case nationalism – we mobilise vignettes. These vignettes describe in detail the banalities and particularities of bodies, objects, and places involved in research encounters and support the sense-making of body/object/place relations. Our examples have shown how socially and politically, but also temporally, differently positioned bodies resonate to encounters and their textual descriptions in different ways. They also reveal the multiplicity, and thus politics, of knowledge production, which, for a moment, renders visible those power structures that constitute our

research. Working with resonance means to collectively unsettle taken-for-granted sense-making and to allow room for new encounters, for instance, between reading bodies, words, and memories.

Our practice of affectual writing is necessarily collective. It requires that we attend together to embodied and situated experiences of resonance as we write, reflect, and share our reactions and responses. Writing from diverse perspectives reveals how different readers are oriented differently towards texts and moments. Reflecting on our feelings as we read and write, we begin to unmask the postcolonial involvement of our bodily histories in research encounters. Evoking resonance through writing and unsettling that writing reveals silenced power structures of predominantly white and heteronormative geographic research practice. It allows us to share experiences of vulnerability that, potentially, illustrate research encounters in a much more nuanced, multi-layered way.

Affectual writing becomes an opportunity of “un-learning our privilege as our loss” (Spivak, 1990, p. 9) and thus of questioning unconscious, seemingly natural and visceral colonial practices and experiences. “To do our homework” (Landry & MacLean, 1996, p. 14), in the sense of Spivak, through affectual writing, then means reflecting the colonial histories enabling research projects. Instead of discontinuing research as scholars from the Global North in the Global East or South out of a fear of reinforcing colonial power relations, we need “to take a certain risk” (Spivak, 1990, p. 62). We need to take the positions of our knowledge production seriously and to embrace the possibilities of being unwelcomed and judged if we are to learn from “those spaces most closed to our privileged view” (Landry & MacLean, 1996, p. 15).

Despite “the importance of developing methodologies which can expose the white background of academia” (Johnson, 2019, p. 3), it continues, though, to be particularly challenging for those scholars privileged by whiteness, heteronormativity, class, and ability. Challenging because it forces them to recognise and to address the power structures enabling and shaping their research encounters. Critical collective reflection, among diversely positioned researchers, is one vital way to push further the analysis of the structures of power and inequalities that continue to bias geographic knowledge production. To sum up, we argue that the destabilisation of seemingly innate gut feelings in research encounters is an affectual strategy to “ask the other question” that intersectional scholars insist on formulating:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’ (Matsuda, 1991, p. 1189)

Key to writing with resonance is thus a radical openness to destabilise. Writing through affect becomes politically transformative if experiences of relative privileges in research encounters are not only tackled and uncovered, but also, through the exposition of their deficiencies, centred.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the research, no research partners consented to their data being retained or shared.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All names have been changed.

² *Üzərlik* is a herb; withered yellowish-green twigs with little capsules.

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