

Getting lost in supervision: Re-imagining post-graduate teaching and learning as lessons in performativity and performance. Professor Alex Kendall and Dr Amanda French.

Abstract

This paper offers an account of an innovative approach to doctoral study and supervision, namely the performance of an ethno drama about our experiences of being a doctoral supervisor and supervisee. The origins of the performance lie in a frustration with increasingly predictable forms in the philosophy, content and assessment methods of post-graduate research and supervision in the educational disciplines (Lather, 2006, Ball, 2008). In the paper we discuss the idea that post-graduate study is about researchers writing themselves into being as researchers so that they become a character in that figured world of their research. This process we argue can be nurtured or hindered by different kinds of supervision practices. With regard to our own approach the paper explores how innovative post-graduate supervision practices and post-qualitative pedagogies can encourage new forms of subjectivity and non-representational methodologies which may post a risk as they challenge dominant research discourses in the academy. (151)

Key words: doctoral supervision practices roles and relationships, ethno-drama performance, innovative writing practice

Background

This paper suggests that personal experiences (in this case the experience of supervision and being supervised in doctoral research) and reflection on, or reflexive engagement with, those experiences (through a performance of those enacted experiences) allows for a theoretical perspective that foregrounds the importance of subjectivity and identity work to the doctoral supervisory process/relationships. By presenting our experience of supervision as performed/scripted ethno drama we attempt to offer an account of our everyday experience, producing what Mienzakowski (1995: 364) calls 'vraisemblance' characterised by the use of our "authentic" language/voices and personal feelings in the performance. In addition by framing the script that we performed, within this more conventional written paper, we accept that we are changing how those experiences are received and understood by a reading, rather than a watching audience. One might argue that the message of the paper is less powerful for that audience, less personal to us as its creators now it has been presented in print. This may be because in reading the script the reader can only imagine the intonation of our voices, our body language and interaction with each other, the responses of the audience, our eye contact with them and the smiles and nods of recognition that pass between us in the performance. In this paper all that physical, 'in the moment' stuff has been stripped away and only the words and what the reader decides to make of them, remains. However, we have decided that an academic article offers another channel for getting our experience of doctoral supervision 'out there', in order to continue to open up the debate and address the issues that inform this complex and often difficult relationship.

The joint dialogue contained within this paper suggests how innovative post-graduate supervision practices and post-qualitative pedagogies could encourage new forms of subjectivity and non-representational methodologies that may pose a risk as they challenge dominant research discourses in the academy. As supervisor and supervisee our script discusses our joint experiences of doctoral writing and supervision and how they come together to 'make' a doctorate. The act of writing a thesis, in this paper, is considered as a 'technology of the self'; as such we explore how it can become:

...an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and at the same a historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. (Foucault, 1984, p.118)

In creating and performing the script we want to explore how our relationship, which necessarily centred around this task of 'making a doctorate, went beyond writing to inform other 'technologies of the self' that we were experimenting with, not least our 'acting out' of those social practices which inform disciplinary expectations, institutional cultures and forms of expression around doctoral supervision and production. The script and performance allow us therefore to re-present the doctoral supervisory relationship as a playful, provocative space within which we, as student and supervisor, perform, enact and shape shift a bricolage of "petit-recits" towards a capricious 'final thesis', which is itself a form of faltering "stammering knowing" (MacLure, 2006) fixed in to being only at and by the moment of binding.

Through the script/performance we draw attention to the often impersonal representational effort of 'fixing' the doctoral research product alongside our felt experience of the emotional labour required by doctoral writing and supervision. Paraphrasing Cordelia in King Lear, we found writing this script to be process that required us to "heave our hearts in to our mouths"

bringing our voices and feelings to the fore in our reflection on this most academic, one might say dispassionate, educational act. The script also plays with the idea of the doctorate itself as a performance as in Butlerian sense we believe the script speaks to and of the 'selves' that doctoral students and supervisors construct in their many guises as supervisors/researchers/academics/writers/professionals/lecturers/students.

The origins of this paper and the performance that preceded it lie in our frustration with increasingly predictable forms in the philosophy, content and assessment methods of post-graduate research and supervision in the educational disciplines noticed by Lather, (2006, Ball, (2008). This predictability, we argue, has led to a corresponding lack of ontological and epistemological diversity within educational doctoral research (Pallas, 2001). We believe that there is a pressing need to encourage post-graduates and their supervisors in the educational disciplines to be more adventurous and innovative, to "push out from the safe(er) boundaries of established methodologies" (Nutbrown, 2012:241), towards the production of work that is alert to more emergent and unstable epistemologies and methodologies. In particular, we wanted our approach to trouble the 'tidy binaries' (Lather, 2006) epitomised by so-called qualitative/quantitative and positivist/post positivist educational research approaches. Instead we explored in our ethno drama our impulses for movement. Performing what we felt allowed us to shimmy backwards and forward, betwixt and between our entangled 'selves'. The script speaks of our considered experiences and reflection as well as focussing us on the present – the moment of performance/presence - (those people in that room, then!) cleaving new spaces in our narrative of relationships and processes.

We hope that this exploration of the imaginative spaces created through doctoral supervision will encourage other post-graduates and their supervisors to experiment with working creatively across interdisciplinary spaces and creating radical and even risky ways of mediating post-graduate teaching and learning relationships.

Autoethnography

A qualification of what we mean by auto-ethnography and how we want it to mean in this context is important to make here in order to address the criticism of auto-ethnography by writers like Delamont (2007) who complain that it is too subjective and experiential and cannot challenge the power imbalance inherent in qualitative research approaches (2007:3). Auto-ethnography is offered here as nothing more than an act of personal story-telling, a frame for our auto-biographical personal narrative, a 'petits recits' (Lyotard, 1972)) if you like. This narrative is not understood to be 'truthful' in any totalising sense but we argue that is nonetheless still of interest because it showcases our textual identities in the moment and act of performance. In the instance we perform them they exist in a way they never could if they were simply just read off the page. Moreover, the opportunities for discussion after any performance allow for the audience to 'talk back' to those textual identities – to challenge and explore or play with and against them.

We take the view that fluid and multiple postmodern notions of 'self' inform how assuming particular identities (in this case 'the doctoral supervisor' and the 'doctoral student') are bound up with a 'capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (Gauntlett, 1991, p. 54) within established discourses and wider settings. In this way our performed narrative articulates the expressed trajectories of our 'individual identities' in these supervisee/supervisor roles as they played out in our institutional settings. What is important here is not the *realities* or *truth* of our experience or actions but our perceived selection and mobilisation of particular

discursive positions to do particular sorts of identity work in those roles through the script. In relation to issues of ‘power’ our rejoinder to Delamont’s concern is that undoing the traditional power relations of the pedagogical transaction is fundamental to the thrust and purpose of our paralogical auto-ethnographies.

Radical methodologies like autoethnography explore and represent the complexity of lived relationships, not least because they can transgress conventional and traditional ways of analysing, reflecting on and representing data/experiences. Autoethnography is a hybrid of auto-biography and ethnography (Ellis et al, 2011) where the autobiographical elements focus on notions of selfhood and subjectivity whilst the ethnographic elements are concerned with social setting and practices within which such selves are constructed and played out. Butler (2005) argues that we are opaque to ourselves normally, so much so that explorations of identity can only really be mediated through an exploration of the social world within which selves or identities are constructed and performed. In many ways autoethnography allows one to express an affective reflexivity about one’s self or subjectivity self within any given social practice context. Moreover, Ellis (2004) and Sparkes (2007) create different kinds of autoethnographic narratives, like our own, that seek to evoke emotion (and often different forms of identification in the readers).

In writing this ethno drama we have overtly become the ethnographers of our ‘selves’ as doctoral researcher and supervisor. This is possible because an ethno drama is created out the transformation of traditionally autoethnographic forms such as interview journals or field notes into a dramatic performance. Our ethno drama script was developed out of a relationship spanning over six years. We drew on this relationship to work up a script through a series of email conversations and corridor conversations contingent, incidental to and entwined with the day-to-day concerns of our working lives, towards a distillation of the many conversations we had had over the years we have been working together as doctoral supervisor and supervisee and also as colleagues, first in one institution and then in another. Autoethnography is put to work here to embed ourselves deliberately and consciously within the various theoretical and ontological struggles that informed our relationship as it developed throughout the course of the doctorate.

Performing ethno drama

The performing voices of ethno drama are not the same as the traditional (that is, expected/assumed) authorial voices that ‘voice’ academic papers. The autoethnographic approach taken in our ethno drama can be perceived as controversial because it resists the pseudo-rationalism or empiricism of so many qualitative research accounts. This alternative, more “evocative” approach is perhaps typified by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Anderson (2006) who write deliberately in order to evoke emotion in the reader. (These emotions can take many forms including anger and sympathy.) This is not the same as saying that our experiences of the doctoral relationship are typical, however, we can report that our emotional investments in the doctoral relationship, which manifest themselves through our humour and passion have clearly resonated with our audiences thus far. We perform our evocative autoethnographic data in order to provoke an emotionally charged recognition of our experience in our audiences, creating a less tidy, or less sanitised, account to that offered by more traditional academic formats such as the conference workshop or academic journal article.

In asserting the constructed 'acting out' of ourselves through the ethno drama we are drawing on Barthes's notion of 'punctum' in *Camera Lucida* (1981) which we use this unfamiliar form to rupture and challenge accepted ways of thinking about the doctoral supervision relationship, as opposed to 'stadium' thinking which represents more typical representations of the relationship. Another aspect that this approach reflects is the idea that post-graduate study is about researchers writing themselves into being as researchers so that they become a character in the 'figured world' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998) of their research; a process, that we argue can be nurtured or hindered by different kinds of supervision practices. Taking the work of Laurel Richardson we regard the script itself is an act of 'textual staging' (1997:64) bearing in mind there is no single way - much less a 'right' way - of staging a text.

As performers of our ethno drama we attempt to make our experiences accessible in different ways by acknowledging the multiple voices and versions of reality that characterise this relationship as they do any other. The script offers a form of poly, even rhizo-vocality (Jackson, 2003) as we move between the different selves we inhabited using the different voices that embody those ever changing selves. Performing personal reflections through ethno drama brings the audience into a more direct relationship with us the performers (of academic identities?) who are telling our story. It gives them an opportunity to experience our 'telling' differently than if we were just reporting on it through a typical conference paper or presentation. Becker, Howard, McCall & Morris (1989) for example state that performing:

Deprivileges the omniscient author and reduces the dominance of the analytic voice, it makes it easier to communicate emotion and mood as well as facts ; and it acknowledges openly, instead of trying to hide apologise for, the constructed character of social science data...(p.95)

As a performed piece, the material in this paper strongly supports the idea that reflecting on learning experiences should be extraordinary and transformatory. Our performance tries to encourage the audience to become more aware of how we, as a post-graduate student and supervisor, were variously positioned by their use of methodologies that increased our awareness of and resistance to the 'prison house of academic identity politics' (Spivac, 1999, p. 29). As a performance our ethno drama challenged (for us and our various audiences) the expected boundaries of research presentations and sought to reflect on how (for us at least) radical research relationships can open up unchartered and sometimes unruly spaces for new ideas and practices in academic thinking and writing.

‘Getting lost in Supervision’

An ethno drama in 3 acts by Amanda French and Alex Kendall

ACT 1 Beginning

ACT 2 Becoming

ACT 3 Shape shifting: being and becoming

ACT 1 Beginning

A lecturer’s room in a typical modern university building, it is a soulless box enlivened by postcards and posters, and lots of papers on the desk.



Picture the scene: Seated on either side of a round table is the supervisor (Alex) and supervisee (Mandy) their backs to each other.

Mandy:

I was keen to do a PhD. I knew that it was important for my career in higher education. I was an experienced practitioner in FE and adult Ed and I was going to do my research on an area of practice I was interested in (academic writing development for students as it happens). I had spent years supporting learners with their academic writing, I knew there was a problem. So my idea was to use my research to look at the problem.

I made enquires, applied for funding and was assigned a supervising team. They did not really have a background in academic writing development, but they had a lot of experienced in teaching and learning. The research, I was told, had to find something new out.

A new way to deal with the problem perhaps?

I needed to find out what was happening, talk to colleagues about what they were doing with students around academic writing development. I had to talk to students, observe practice and collect data. They told me that the point of the research was to establish 'best practice', to develop a taxonomy of best practice and then to share the best practice through publications and conference papers.

My thesis, they told me was my chance to really contribute something new to the field.

I started reading around the subject. I did a pilot study. I suffered a crisis of confidence. I lost confidence in the idea of best practice, I no longer knew what anyone meant by 'academic writing' and I did not feel as though I was turning into the kind of researcher my supervisors wanted me to be. Problem was I did not know what kind of researcher I did want to be, I didn't know what kinds of researcher one could be.

I began to dread my supervisions. Don't get me wrong I worked hard...I read and read...but nothing I wrote met with favour. I was too subjective, my data was not representative enough, and my conclusions were too tentative.

(with emphasis) APPARENTLY I NEEDED TO DECIDE WHAT THIS THESIS WAS ACTUALLY TRYING TO SAY OR PROVE.

I felt that my supervisors just didn't get where I was coming from. They were clearly exasperated with me. I would see their worried glances when I came into the room. They were trying to be supportive but increasingly I felt we were speaking a different language. They had never read the people I was reading ...they kept asking me to read people who I thought were boring.

In particular, I found the distanced and distancing, so called objective scholarly style that they were asking me write in for difficult to produce because I did not feel it was me, it did not excite me. It did not reflect the reading that I was doing, or the ideas I was developing. There was a lack of fit.

(I realise now that I was suffering from an ontological crisis.)

I did not believe in my research.

I did not believe in myself as a researcher.

I needed help.

Alex:

It was a controversial day the day they asked me to join Mandy's supervision team. I wasn't an obvious choice apparently, I'd done a PhD, published in the field, returned to RAE 2008, but I wasn't the right choice, couldn't be, could I? It was nothing to worry about, they'd reassured me, explained it very clearly, very helpfully. Explained that I couldn't supervise, not yet, not until...they didn't know until what...just not YET, just in case, just in case...I didn't really know what a PhD should look like. I'd done one yes of course but, they explained, what evidence was that? How would I recognise the real thing when I saw it...they were sure I might not, wouldn't know and wouldn't know how to let Mandy know.

I was sure I wouldn't too, wouldn't want to. That's what my own PhD had been about, doing the PhD differently. It seemed to make them wary, it made them suspicious, it made them shudder with scientific certainty. But then, then disaster, a dilemma...they said they needed a 'subject expert'. There were discussions and conflabs and heaving and sighing...perhaps I could be an 'advisor'... a 'third supervisor' even, but not straight away...with support of course so that I could be guided through the right structures, the formats, the registers, so that I'd know, I'd learn to recognise...they were driven to it really, it was a disaster, they wouldn't have asked me, hadn't meant to but they had a dilemma, a dilemma that forced their hand...Mandy needed more support, something very specific, very, very specific subject support, Mandy needed, needed, poor inexpert Mandy...

"I'm not really...well 'expertise' isn't really my thing" I began to imagine myself saying..."grand narratives don't really work for me, I like the little stories" – "I'm more your stammering knowing, your paralogical turn"...I was about to stutter...but then pulled myself together and realised that this was just the game, "yes" I said "yes of course, it would be really interesting to join the team as the very, very junior, very humble third supervisor my apologies, specialist advisor...so that yes I could learn to know what a PhD looks like, recognise one when I saw one, a proper one that is, not one like mine, not one that tells stories, meanders and contradicts itself, one that doesn't do anything, show anything or prove anything."

After a dramatic pause they turn to face each other

ACT 2 Becoming

Alex: So Mandy we asked, “Is your lit review systematic enough?” “How is your pilot study progressing?” “What does your sample look like?” “What are you finding? What does it all mean?”...is there a comma missing there, a full-stop here an over-embedded clause there...I pretended to care about the answers...how did I get the secret message across? Give myself up without giving myself away, “Mandy I wanted to whisper, I don’t know what a thesis looks like either? Mandy I wanted to say “I can’t do it like this...I don’t know what a thesis looks like, I don’t care what a thesis looks like....”

I could see she wasn’t really *getting to know* the PhD, not *doing it right*. Perhaps she was doing it on purpose? It was hard to tell and dangerous to ask. She was playing along really nicely in our supervision meetings – us three one side of the desk, her on the other, always in the same seats - she was polite and a bit, a bit domesticated, quite unlike her usual self, quite, quite unlike her usual self. She was earnest even, writing everything down, going along, getting on,...but in her writing she was perplexed, distracted, bewildered...bored, they called it sloppy, not paying attention to the rules....but it was all...well all very boring and dispirited.

Mandy: Meanwhile I bonded with Foucault (he could help me couldn’t he?) and flirted with Butler (she was definitely someone I wanted to get to know better). But back in the supervisory meetings they kept wanting me to stop messing about and fix on a methodology. I needed to ‘get organised’ and ‘start collecting data. I wanted on the contrary to get disorganised, I wanted to spend more time questioning the whole process I was engaged in as a doctoral student/researcher. Even so I felt defensive about my PhD because I still wanted to ‘pass’ as a real PhD student. A new voice stuttered and stammered into life. I kept a journal about the experience of writing the thesis that was much more exciting than my actual thesis voice. My thesis ‘voice’ felt flat. It was dull. It made me feel dull. I felt like I was being flattened by my thesis!! I could do it but it didn’t make me feel good about myself. Alex, initially quiet and observant, began to speak up, emboldened by her interventions....

Alex: (As if talking to someone else) It’s Mandy’s thesis she can say what she likes’ ‘if she’s taking a risk then the risk is hers to take’.

Mandy: I liked the idea of taking a risk. But I still stuck to the idea that the PhD ‘proper’ had to work in a particular way. Yet writing it constrained me, I felt I was being encouraged to hide any emotions, experiences, insecurities, prejudices behind the doctoral form and ‘appropriate’ academic language and ‘proper’ research frameworks.

However, I continued to struggle and play with my new ideas in private. Gradually they began to ‘leak out’ in presentations and papers.

Eventually I did a conference paper about my difficulties with being a proper PhD researcher (I had internalised the problem very effectively you see). I talked freely about my struggles with representation and story-telling. It was the first time that I publically acknowledged my struggle with the conventional thesis form and the language and research frameworks that went with it. I knew the thesis had agency, felt its **THING POWER!** After all it had the weight of higher education behind it. Who the hell did I think I was taking it on?

SHE LOOKS INTO SPACE RESIGNEDLY AND BEGINS TO FIDDLE WITH THE PAPERS BEFORE HER.

Looking back I think I was trying to articulate how I felt insubstantial as a doctoral student, how I felt I was inhabiting a false identity, how my writing for the thesis felt superficial, how it made me feel stupid. I did not know if what I was doing was any good. I thought I knew what I was supposed to do, I knew what I didn’t want to do but that was not the same as knowing what the right thing to do was. I did not know where to position myself, I literally did not know who ‘I’ was in this thesis and I did not know how to find ‘myself’ in it.

Alex (Aside): There she goes again striding the paradigms, *feeling* the fissures, the space between as problem, tension not opportunities for the re-imagining she’s so very good at - she did it with “skills” you know, over and over again we’d do the paradigm work, rigorous, difficult, undoing (for both of us) until she fell in to the ebb and flow, the flotsam and jetsam of Lather, St Pierre, Richardson, Foucault...but the skills discourse kept seducing her back, throwing her a secure line from a solid, dependable bank...

Mandy: So I started getting rid of stuff to make way for the new. I lost the idea of academic writing as a skill. I rejected the idea of ‘originality and the ‘contribution to knowledge’ which I had been told was so integral to the whole PhD project. I thought differently about knowledge, I did not see the ideas that I was working with as ‘mine’ rather I felt I was ‘plugging

in' to something bigger and wilder than I would ever be by myself. This experience was at last beginning to change me in ways that I did not fully understand. I was beginning to theorise and critique the interactions and contradictions between subjectivity, power, language that I was experiencing as a writer and researcher...

Alex: Our mode of thinking became not a line of flight, but an anchor spinning on a fulcrum, fixed valid, reliable, centred, crystal clear, crystal, crystal clear...the refractions saved us: distracted, appalled, amused, enchanted and compelled us, ruining our gaze. Like Maclure's peepshow voyeurs we embraced the unavoidable absurdity of the research posture - to view the delights of the peepshow, she says, you have to bend down, present your backside to public view, put yourself at risk. (2006, p.18)

Mandy: At last I became my PhD, in all my complexity, its messiness we gelled. It became mine. I could own it at last. I increasingly saw my doctoral self as a work in progress; writing the thesis became a 'technology of the self' that I enjoyed now that it did not have to fit a particular shape.

Alex (to Mandy): But Mandy how can you not be your PhD? You are your PhD, your PhD is *you*...it is of you and you are of it, emergent, entangled. The *lens*, Mandy don't forget the *lens*.

Alex (Aside): I'm always telling her about the lens, keep your eye in I nag, keep your eye in till I'm boring myself and my own gaze is wondering.

Mandy: You're so right!! It is a question of literally seeing things differently of having the confidence to hold my gaze, even when I am no longer sure what it is I am seeing. Once I got my head round that I began to not mind so much that the thinking that I was putting into the thesis was decentring me in lots of ways. You encouraged me to let go and see what happened. I am now more ontologically congruent with my work! I have become more reflective and reflexive about myself as a researcher. I am at one with my multiple subjectivities and contradictions.

Alex: I wonder if this is what Street (1999) imagines when he ‘dares’ teachers to work against the grain? It is about a paradox, an uncomfortable meeting between a politics of social justice and the personal benefits, the professional cosiness and social & cultural capital that the receiving end of elitism assures us of. A truly critical doctoral literacy may well need to signal an end to the “fish in water” feeling of being on the inside, that’s the dare isn’t it? Ironically the sweetness of ‘getting in’ may be ever the more desirable for those of us only just learning its taste as first generation academics and perhaps therefore the disappointment of its (surely) necessary loss ever the more disappointing.

Mandy: I used to think I was doomed to imitation and pastiche? Was this my inevitable doctoral literacy? Now I realise that that is essentially what so much academic/research work is about. In my thesis I now celebrate and embrace the notion that I am a patchwork thinker, a bricoleur? My thesis is made up of lots of different subjectivities, mine, Alex’s, my participants, the subjectivities of all the people I have read and talked to about the thesis. I now feel my research is about stitching or weaving all these subjectivities together but not worrying about any holes or dropped stitches long the way as they just become part of the pattern.

I don’t want everything to make sense and be explained. I am more interested in making new kinds of none/sense. Thinking about how what we see depends upon where we’re standing at any given time. It’s about accepting that we often don’t have any sense of where we are standing...politically my PhD feels in line with everything else I care about ...but I still sometimes feel quite marginalised within the academy, or at least certain parts of it. I often don’t have access to the bits I feel part of except through texts although I am getting better at finding the people who believe what I believe...

Alex: ...these are the things that I wanted to address in the early days of ‘correcting grammar’. I wanted to play with big stories about fitting in, or not, about the politics of seeing. But this is not what I said, I stuck to literacy, only literacy, my ‘specialist’ area my ‘expertise’ until...I found a tactic. “The external examiner will be looking for something more than this”, I said and “the external examiner will want to see more than this...” I said. I’d got braver, I said “thinking in this field has moved on from this”. I’d learned to play their game more mischievously and played my expert wild card, a terror of performativity that terrorised and disciplined its disciples...assessment, the day of judgement when ideas and effort would be weighed and measured. Originality - how much? Contribution – how significant? Meaning, findings - how substantial?

How, how, how they would want to know, just how has the world changed? Surely only an “expert” could judge? Surely only an expert would know? Tables were turning, tectonic plates shifting, there was shuffling in chairs, (deep intakes of breath) expectation...fear...resignation. “perhaps you two should meet separately to discuss the you know erm (clearing of throats) ‘specialist’ aspects of the project” they said “if you must stagger through this side-show of freaks and monsters, please go it alone...and quietly...we’re just not kiss me quick, end of the pier kind of people here we do proper research, research that looks like research, real PhDs that look like PhDs”

ACT 3 Shapeshifting: being and becoming again ...

Alex: And so we changed university. Made our own circus where suddenly it didn’t matter what a thesis looked like anymore, only that we can make a good account – alongside new colleagues who would peer and guffaw with warm curiosity.

Mandy: I no longer felt as though the research had to move towards an end point inexorably and inevitably rather it danced and shimmered rhizomically outwards towards greater diffusion and chaos. The thesis now started to feel like more of an opening up.... an opening... a finding out and a letting go. More of a start than a finish...I felt like I had come home.

Alex: And here we are on the home straight, near the end of something, towards a close except it doesn’t feel like that at all. I’ve enjoyed the push and the pull, the twists, turns and cul-de-sacs, loved it when we stumbled in to Deleuze and played with rhizomes, lines of flight, refrains, organs without bodies (organs without bodies?), hearts full, mouths open, words breaking and reforming our thinking and writing – rhizovocality? What about rhizo-pedagogies...or rhizo-this and that we’d say half joking half wondering?

Mandy: I am not interested anymore in creating one elusive, authoritative, doctoral voice. My doctoral voice embraces many voices and subjectivities...it’s positively revelling in uncertainty. Nonetheless I accept that the thesis itself as a thing represents an end-point, a fixing in place of that uncertainty. To accept this is to accept how it must be. However, there is always after the thesis...

Alex: Now we have ethno drama? I wanted to read Richardson's Sea Monster, I didn't want to be in it! I can hear my own nagging voice coming back at me "avoid the imposition of new orthodoxies Mandy" keep it moving, deconstructing – ...but hey that was for you, not me....and now look? Untethered, undone...unhinged – thank goodness, thank goodness (thank goodness my kids aren't here)!!

Mandy: And why not ...I have been changed through engaging in this doctoral process why shouldn't you be too. I am not the person I was when I began, are you? I think differently, I write differently...remade, rebooted resurgent...we both perhaps are in a new space but neither of us intend to stay here of course?

Alex: And so here we are nearly ready to bind this thesis into closure – coverings, page numbers, chapter headings forcing a pretence at harmony and linearity where we feel that none exists. We'll settle down the 'I's that perform her work, 'I's' that we re-encounter as we're editing, proof-reading and revising - setting fragments alongside one another. Perhaps a thesis is already a kind of palimpsest, written over and through satisfying the 'I' that dominates the moment of the 'end'. It'll be a challenge to let the 'I's alone Mandy to give licence to them sitting alongside each other, jostling for position, only you and me - in a different way - familiar with their historiography reading them slightly at odds, not quite sitting comfortably...

Mandy: I don't want this 'final version' to be comfortable for me or anyone else... ultimately I now view this thesis as a form of "self-writing". Through it I have written various selves 'I's into being: one obvious contender is the doctoral student 'self' or identity that the process of research confers upon me. Others I have discarded, my unquestioning qualitative research self for example, whilst others I have come to love such as my post-qualitative research self that is unruly and takes risks.

Alex:and speaking of risks what about the examiners.... What about the sleepless nights and fretful days. Have we got it right? Are they, as we speak, working the baroque, powdering their wigs, re-touching their beauty spots and adjusting their masks, can they ever be open to our magic and enchantment...or are they sharpening their boundaries, narrowing their eyes and smoothing down their paradigms, poised, Tooley-like (Tooley, 1998: 62), to see only 'academic Chinese

whispers' pervert the real, the absolute and the resolute...oh my goodness where...how will it all end?

Mandy: Have we got it right? I wonder will my performance as doctoral candidate meet with approval outside this relationship? Can I play the part convincingly enough? In playing up and playing out... the writing selves that have been nurtured and evolved through this thesis...this relationship are not what I or anyone else could have expected will they suffice, can I pull it off?

Alex: Does acting matter? As we've shaped the thesis we've shifted how we know ourselves and each other as readers, as writers, as collaborators, as female academics, as friends...resisting...reshaping, reworking

Mandy: ...always becoming... shape shifting ...ready for the next thing and the one beyond that. Bring it on I say...I am already looking forward to future possibilities for further self-invention and exploration....

CURTAIN

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