

# When Dust Gets in Your Eyes

Researching the Taboo



Fiona Murray

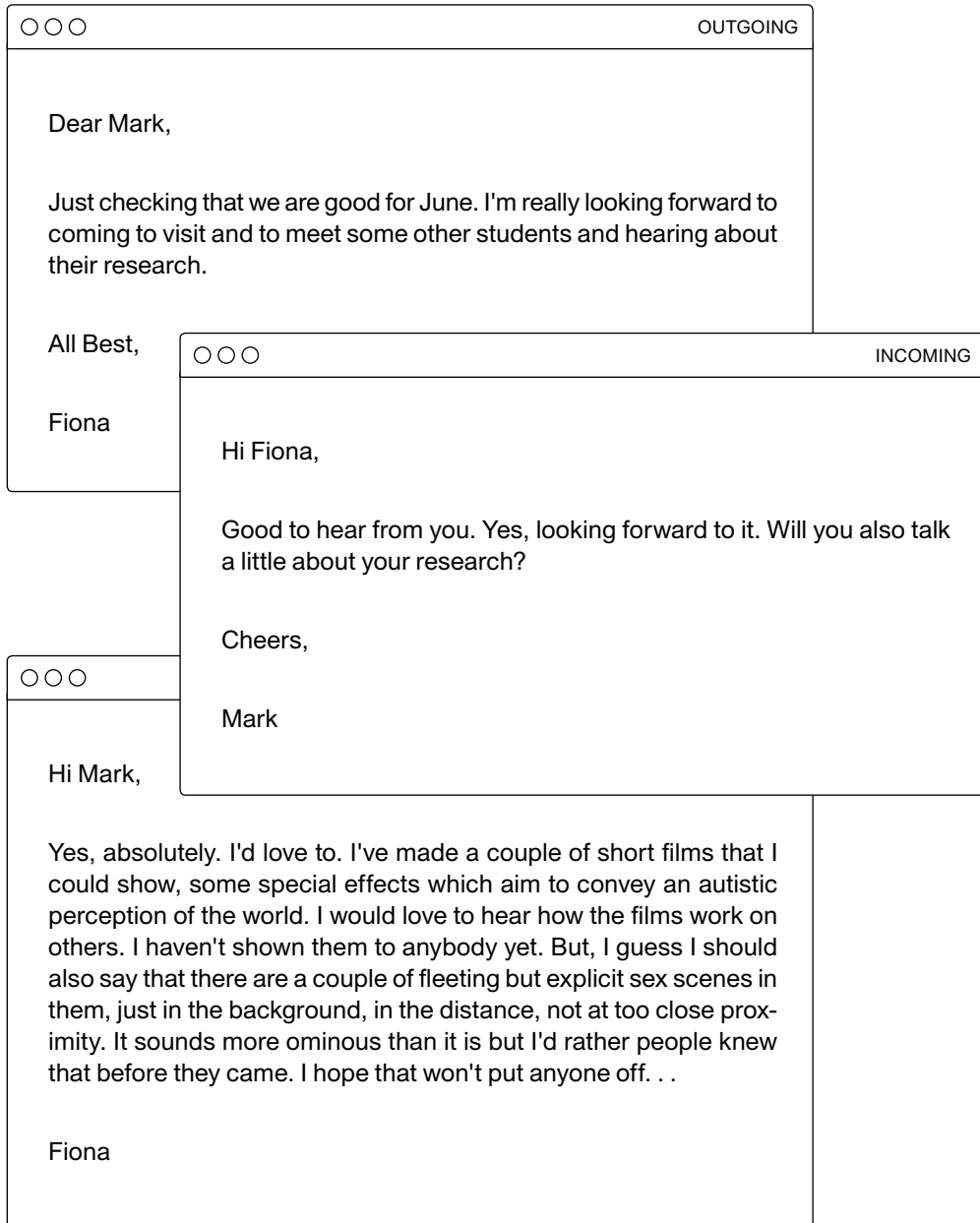
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

This paper has emerged out of a black cloud which disseminates dust and soot more than epistemic knowledge. How do we talk into our research topics when soil folds in to the crevices of our trachea and the earth is in our eyes? How do we embrace a speculative pragmatism in order to stay with the processual and the more-than and avoid making a priori decisions? And what if we find ourselves during this process to be thinking with the taboo, thinking in the act (Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, 2014) with the grime that has tangled in our hair? This paper examines how affect theory puts the political firmly on the table.

## KEYWORDS

Pornography, Affect, Taboo

## Email Exchange



Mark does not come back to me for a while.

## Four years earlier

Agitation fermented in the university classroom as I was asked to enunciate my initial ideas for a research topic. The root of this fermentation was not an issue of having a lack of ideas because as Elizabeth Grosz says, "ideas follow one another in rapid succession, largely but not solely dependent on the flow of the perception of objects" (2017, p. 77). Neither was the agitation around not wanting to commit. Far from it. My angst was such that I was more than ready to launch in and claim a mission as my own. My perceived 'problem' was that I was still inhabiting the 'dissolve' that Stacy Alaimo explains to be where "fundamental boundaries have begun to become undone, unravelled by unknown futures" (2016, p. 2), or that I was perhaps embracing an autistic perspective. This neurodiverse perspective, when entered into from the side and at the angle of speciation as opposed to pathology, is possible for all (Massumi, 2013). Donna Williams describes autistic perspective as a feeling which "comes from a time before words, before thought, before interpretation, before competition, before reliance on the conscious mind and before identity, in a time where all new experiences are equal in their worth and there is, as yet, no discrimination and no established sense of boundaries or hierarchy" (1998, p. 12). The circling agitation in the classroom for me was around notions of external pressures to verbalise my topic which at this point, had not yet tuned to language (Manning, p. 2016). For me to have attempted to shape my project by my own volition, to not wait for incipiency to become directionality (Manning, 2016), would have been for me to interrupt process and in so doing, unwittingly side-step the particular politics of my project.

How can I work to conceptualise my research whilst working with new modes of expression that curtail any *a priori* decision-making? After all, it is in this space of coming-to-be, where the problem is intuited from within, that a rigor of experimentation emerges (Manning, 2016). Yet it is also from this same space, where the topic, in its indeterminacy may be seen as decidedly unrigorous due to its untimely obscurity (Manning, 2016). At this early point, it has a rather precarious ability to withstand academic scrutiny due to its ineffability. For this reason, it could be overlooked, forgotten, or replaced by a topic or problem external to the event. As if, as Alaimo says, "the world exists as a background for the human subject" (2016, p. 1), a world full of contents made available for the pickings of the human. Conceptualising a research topic can be a gradual process where both problem, phenomena and researcher are simultaneously composed. It is through intuition that a problem's pulse can be felt in event time. Intuition is a form of knowledge which can be hard to defend, yet as Manning argues, "intuition is a rigorous process that agitates at the very limits of an encounter with the-as-yet-unthought" (2016, p. 33). If I must start at the beginning how can I start

experimenting with whatever has the sufficient processual allure (Manning and Massumi, 2014); paying attention to the rumbling vibration of the proto-political; thinking through colour and texture; all whilst embracing an ethics of hapticality (Harney and Moten, 2013), and tenderly sensing through the materiality of my emerging topic?

## Three and a half years ago

I'm asked to bring an 'object' with me to a collaborative writing group. I think my way around the house and pick out what stands out to me, anything. I gather everything up, all matters of things, take them out to the garden, and lie them down wherever they want to lie. I don't know why I do that. Some roll away or leak onto the grass, or stab the earth. I lie down with them. Again, I don't know why. But I stay a while.

I wonder about my own ability to carry out a piece of research and to meet expectations: my own mainly. I will myself to be more pragmatic. Massumi explains: "For out of the pressing crowd an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously. One "wills" it to emerge, to be qualified, to take on socio-linguistic meaning, to enter linear action-reaction circuits, to become a content of one's life-by dint of inhibition" (1995, p. 91). Yet despite my good 'intentions' as soon as I ask myself where I stand in relation to my project, what position am I taking, I seem to halt the process of the inquiry. But what I hadn't realised was that by focussing on the here-and-now, by lying on the grass together with 'my data', I had been pragmatic of sorts; or at least pragmatism had occurred, cuts had been made. But this pragmatism was of the nature of a more delimiting, speculative pragmatism (Manning, 2016). It allows me to stay at the very heart of the processual possibility, without putting pressure on it and getting in the way; experimenting in the here and now whilst staying committed to the not-yet-known, or the more-than, where questions of becoming remain over questions of knowing (Grosz, 2017).

As I lie on the grass, listening, I realise how noisy it is; revving and screeching. It is urban. I try not to interpret but there it is; the thunder of engines, and the screeching of brakes. Interpretation happens so quickly. Maybe it is my interpretation, but I don't feel like it stemmed from me. A coffee cup rolls to my side and spills dampness onto the earth beneath my elbow. I am startled. A motorbike ran me over, stunning me and overwhelming my perception and asking me why I

am standing in the road. Didn't I know it may be dangerous here? Now I wonder if I should go back inside. As I try to get back up onto my feet I hold on to the sides of hapticality. Hapticality being

the ability of all to feel into and across the unforeseeable potentials existing within even the most violent and modulatory landscapes. To be haptic is to move with the modes of attention that an event needs, at the meeting point of the ever singular differences that weave the texture of the experience. [. . .] Stretched over this exciting and intimidating landscape, we feel f(t)iction: the interaction of a troubling, a movement" (Gendron-Blais, Gil, and Mason 2016, p. ii).

My view of the landscape is veiled by a black fog or black cloud of dust. I can't see clearly enough where the next revving engine is coming from, rendering the field even more intimidating; it could hit me from any angle and at any time. As I wipe soot from my eyes I can barely see a substance shifting, out of focus but appearing to move to a different rhythm from the engines and brakes. Rural perhaps. Summer breeze. A tender touch, a gently whispering melody, pale yellow. It seems absurd against this particular milieu and its point of difference captures my attention and pulls me toward its delicate and ashen song. Perhaps this tenderness was its own silent scream of 'see me,' 'hear me,' 'feel me', directed out to the uncultivated field. The black dust cloud rumbles a threat of oozing operation and, as I turn, it enters my body through aligning its pulse-breath with mine; in the end maintaining my intimacy and revving me up alongside it, so as I am alert, ready, affecting my capacity to act, a resonance with the oozing operation. I stretch out my hand, a meek gesture towards the melodic song but by now my energy is too high for the fragile sound. The black cloud spits black dust over the top of it, contaminating and dominating it, obscuring its song until it is harder to hear then rises on its back wheel and comes towards me at full speed. I brace myself and inhale before holding my breath as it grabs me and moves through me once again. Its dust folds into the fissures at the back of my trachea. I try to wipe its traces of soot from my eyes. The sun goes behind a cloud and I shiver and try to warm myself as a black cloud leaks into my veins, chills my bloodstream, and then dwells for a while. The intensity is both dynamic and compelling but not pleasurable. I move back indoors with the black cloud settled in my gut. What is this black cloud I wonder, losing sight of pale yellow, and wondering what does it want? As Maggie MacLure says:

Wonder is not necessarily a safe, comforting, or uncomplicatedly positive affect. It shades into curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity. And the particular hue or tenor that it will assume is never entirely within our control. But the price paid for the ruin caused—to epistemic certainty and the "sedentary" achievement of a well-wrought coding scheme or an "arborescent" analytic framework—is, according to Massumi (2002, p.19), the privilege of a headache. Not the answer to a question, but the astute crafting of a problem and a challenge: what next?' (2013, p. 229).

What next? I have begun to pave the way, begun to craft a problem but still my project is, as yet, not ready to tune to language. Would it sound at all legitimate to say that I am researching a fog or black cloud? Or should I just make something up? Pluck something from thin air? It may not have the same rigor but it would at least save me from the anxiety of not-knowing. It is only now with some hindsight that I know that at that point I was still eleven giant steps away from being able to answer questions as to what I was researching. The eleven steps looked something like this:

Black Cloud

Plack Cloud

Plank Cloud

Plank Rloud

Plankgrloud

Plankgrlohd

Poankgrlohd

Poankgrolhy

Poankgroahy

Pornkgroahy

Pornogroahy

Pornography.<sup>1</sup>

Black cloud tentatively (and at times aggressively) individuates and emerges as pornography. This process may go some way to illustrate that I did not exactly *choose* this topic or cherry pick it, but I was in fact experimenting with the pornographic milieu long before I *knew* I was dancing, and at times being run over with and by this phenomenon. If I could have picked my topic, resonated with anything at all, I admit to thinking at times that I would not have picked the pornographic cherry from the tree. Viewing it as all too risky or exposing to me

as researcher, revealing both my proximity, wonder, and interest in this topic and for pulling the unexpectant reader in to being complicit with me. I would have perhaps wondered about how some might view my topic. Susanna Paasonen says that it is "the critic's point of view that tends to dominate in porn studies" (2017, p. 3), and explains that this is due to people's activist and institutional passions surrounding it. I agree with her; although my focus too is on the affective rather than a clear and certain feminist position, the topic, by its very nature, can rub up against others in provocative ways, shooting past them or at times even crashing into them (Seigworth, 2016). I may have gone with the phenomena which was singing a sweeter melody, pale yellow. I'm sure it would have had much potential and complexity of its own.

## Sound byte

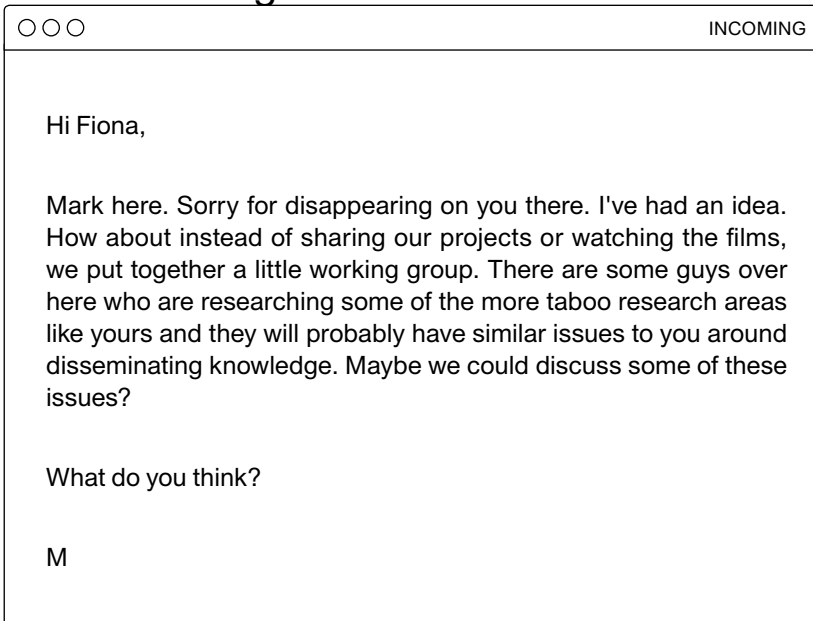
**A** - You know; I think you always have to grieve the projects that you don't write before you settle on what you do write.

**B** - Why must we grieve the projects we don't write? They are alive with potential. It would make much more sense to grieve the projects that we do write.

At this time however, it was pornography that was 'fielding' (Manning 2013, p. 2), and it was what felt most resonant and moved me into action. It would seem that working with affect theory and dancing with its forces, and in turn being produced by it as a researcher, means that the unexpected politics that emerge from inside of the process stun me so as to throw me into a shaky and mobile positioning, an insecure and wavering ontology. I am left to steady myself by holding on to the wobbly table upon which affect has squarely placed politics. Kirby and Wilson suggest that my political task is to "think the always/already of our entanglements and intra-implications" (2011, p. 228) in a way that I may not have been able to should I have chosen a topic, even a very political topic, seemingly external to this process. And for this reason I feel a certain sympathy for, and affirm pornography as, 'my' topic. I am in praise of its insurgent qualities, and its ability to remain speculative and forward-thinking. Pornography, as it follows lines of desire, becomes a pioneer of new fields and new imaginings, and I am in praise of its ability to quiver and tremble at the edges of thought. There has been a parallel process for my thesis; in its coming to be, it has gradually taken the form of a pseudo-porn site, and will not be submitted in the paper form I had expected it to be. This may be a first in my department and I affirm pornography's potential to move into new modes of existence, and to continuously create new forms and concepts. I take full responsibility for my research project but not for the subject itself. As Gilles

Deleuze says, "To affirm is not to take responsibility for, to take on the burden of what is, but to release, to set free what lives" (1983, p. 174). That said, I can get in touch with something more stoic in me when I find myself in the company of those who are perhaps not as at ease with my topic as others. As Grosz explains the stoics never underestimate an individual's responsibility as "an individual's actions come from what he or she has 'in them' as part of their character, what they cause in themselves" (2017, p. 27). At times, I thoroughly embrace working with a provocative phenomenon, and I do not wish to dampen how exciting this can be, but my ambivalence lies around the potential negative impact on me: for what I am about to find out, could be seen as thinking with the taboo.

## Email exchange





It is true that I thought this working group could potentially be pretty generative and it is helpful to feel the support and solidarity of those facing the same issues but, at the same time, there was a loss for each of us to be the motley crew of dissidents, under the umbrella of a supposed taboo. And more than this, I had not previously thought of researching pornography as researching the taboo, especially as there are now peer reviewed journals such as *Porn Studies* which are dedicated to this theme, this email was the first time I had been so conscious of the potential my topic had of being received in this way. In many disciplines, this is a battle that has been largely fought and won already and many researchers in the field have paved the way for myself and others so that citing them brings standing to my work. Yet, in some areas this is an ongoing issue. Transversal modes of thought and capacious journals and conferences help this issue by cutting across these disciplinary barriers.

When I hear the word taboo, I read this as a resistance to what is happening in academia with regards to power-knowledge, as opposed to the genre of pornography outside of academia, and I hear it as marking the differences in speed, and the asymmetry between the university and pornography itself. As Manning (2017) explains, the university is a slow-moving machine, not structurally capable of moving at the speed of thought whilst pornography itself speeds ahead taking us to the edges of our knowing.

In the word taboo, I hear a question around what kinds of bodies, what kinds of knowledge and what kinds of experience sustain norms that can so often be upheld through questions of quality and rigor (Manning 2017). And it seems that it is at the specific moment when these knowledges and bodyings take on an (un)recognisable form that they can be erased or removed. From my email exchange, I am left with questions around what kind of knowledges can be truly heard, and what bodies may act as the purveyor and guarantor of what counts as experience and knowledge in a university (Manning 2017).

If taboo means improper or unacceptable, prohibited, excluded or forbidden, then this would capture an albeit small part of my experience of studying this phenomena: after all it had been difficult for me to find those who would help me to build a pseudo-pornography website, or to act in or produce films with me which contained background explicit material from a website. Yet sometimes being with others who are under the same umbrella, in the way Mark suggested in his email, can be easier.

Nearly a year ago at a conference the chair of my panel introduces me:

'And now we welcome Fiona Murray from University of Edinburgh. I'm sure she will be the climax of the panel today as she brings her paper, "Online Gonzo Pornography: Feminist Struggles".

Laughter: I walk up to the front.

There was no resistance to my topic in the beginning, before the study was named. Now, resistance can be found hidden in the inflection of the introduction at a conference, or the force of the joke made to 'lighten' the academic atmosphere. This policing can come in the form of sniggers, furtive glances, and on occasion, the odd dismissive sneer. It is not that I am against some humour. And I do understand the specific provocations of 'my topic'. I want my topic to play and not act in a supercilious manner. Yet at the same time I would also like it to be met seriously, and for others to tease out its complexities and make sense of its embedded trajectory (Alaimo 2016). And most of the time my topic is met with sincere interest. But when I am introduced at the conference as the 'climax' of the panel, I go through a kind of subjectivation process (Michel Foucault 1982) where I am more than the amp, or the conduit, for expression but rather a phenomenological subject whose project is about *my* direct experience rather than about *our* entanglements of which we are all a part. And if the climax happens during the second of the six speakers, this makes for a rather long post-coital phenomenological love-in.

At the same time, during this panel, I performed an auto-ethnographic piece which is no mean feat, and not without its tensions when embracing a new materialist lens, and so in many ways I encouraged ideas of my own solipsism in order to challenge it. In my own mind, I referred to this as my ethno-autography where I recognise the entangled nature of my own transcorporeality, whilst putting the ecology and the field of which I am already (t)angled first (Seigworth 2016). This seemed to pay due respect to the knowledge that "the human has become sedimented in the geology of the planet" (Alaimo 2016, p. 3), and at the same time recognised my own coming to be as the architect of my research. It felt like an effective practice where experimentation can play in the void, with all its exposures and vulnerabilities and pleasures. The 'I' being interface with the ecological aspect of ourselves, a superject (Whitehead, 1927), where experience is not belonging only to the human. My ethno-autography pays minute detail

to how an individual comes to stand out as one from a broader field of activity (Massumi 2013, p. xi). It is not an 'I' of a singular, localised subject but a tentative expression towards an 'autie-I', a heterogeneous, neurodiverse 'I' which embraces the production of the whole; connecting the human, the nonhuman and the more than human, where there is always more than one, more than two. As Manning says, "the relational is everywhere active in the writing, a language we can also become attuned to in the complex fieldings of choreographic thinking, in the dance of attention, in architectings of mobility that create propositions for an ecology of participation that exceeds what we thought movement could do" (2013, p. 185). It pays close attention to the work of the hyphen (autie-I) asking once again with Manning, "in what ways does the hyphen make operational interstitial modes of existence?" (2016, p. 11).

## In the future

I find myself on a panel again at the next conference. So as to avoid a similar disparity (hilarity?), this time I am with others who 'chose' similar topics. Just like when I go to visit Mark I shall meet with others who have perhaps 'chosen' similar taboo topics. Choice is something that is celebrated by neoliberal feminism, celebrating a woman's 'choice': choice to objectify herself should she wish, or to choose a taboo topic should she wish, and that if I don't want to be met with such issues then I should 'choose' another cherry from the tree. As Michael Ferguson says, "This focus on individual freedom, choice and autonomy is what undergirds new-liberal feminist ideology: women should respond to gender inequality by making better individual choices" (2017, p. 59). Such 'choosing' takes the political back off the wobbly table again.

Is there a loss to this making-coherent (rational) of the panel? How can conference panels be more capacious and work so as not to collapse divergence into coherence and consistency and into restrictive limits, ensuring "consensus and inclusion in advance of political action" (Ferguson 2017, p. 53)? How can they work to maintain the hyphen in order to see its effects across the different papers and disciplines?

## Now

As I near the end of the creation of my research project I contemplate that — should I actually have the choice, if what I could choose was distinguishable from the choice (Deleuze 1986), would I continue to work with my pornographic

cherry? I'm not sure, but if I do then I hope for capacious conferences and journals with my own words, and (t)angles through engagement and participation in a "creatively productive fugitive zone. . . (where) we might practice the arts of divergent, tapestried becomings" (Joy and Fradenburg 2016, p. 168). And I would do it for the reasons offered by Rosi Braidotti: "for the hell of it and for the love of the world" (2006, p. 259).

I start to pack up my things. I've been at the office on the top floor all day. An office of around forty hot desks. I like desk number twelve. I wonder if anyone would mind if I left a couple of folders on the table since I'll be back in early tomorrow morning. No. I better not. I put them in the locker, clearing all traces. I wonder if anyone else will sit at 'my' desk today and what they will be writing about. The door closes behind me and I wait for the lift. Someone is just arriving. We say 'Hi' as we pass. They enter the office and sit down at desk number twelve. The seat is still warm. They take out their folder and log on to the computer. They wipe the black dust from the keyboard and a little bit of soot gets under their nail.

## Endnotes

1. The idea for this word-play came from a presentation by Helen Palmer (2016).

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