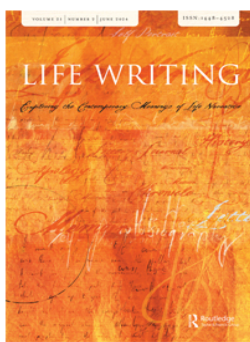

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Affective Ambush: An Autotheoretical Approach to Understanding Emotions as Useful to the Research Process

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the use of emotions in life narrative research. Using autotheory the authors recount and reflect on their experiences of a phenomenon they are tentatively calling 'affective ambush', wherein during the course of research the researcher unexpectedly experiences significantly heightened affect—or 'big feelings'—stimulated by research materials. Drawing on Sarah Ahmed, they position sites of affective ambush as feminist spaces of encounter that yield rich data accessible through embodied modes of enquiry such as autotheory and autocriticism. As such, in this essay they seek to trouble and problematise the dominant detached and 'objective' academic position, and investigate how moving outside of this paradigm has unique implications for scholars of life narrative, trauma and grief. They propose instances of 'affective ambush' as sources of affective information that, if integrated into the research process, can reveal new insights about the texts and subjects that we investigate as life narrative scholars.

KEYWORDS

Affective ambush; affect; memoir; emotion; feminist research methods; autotheory

> Writing is power and has the potential to create knowledge, manipulate, enlighten, disarm, and destroy and is not an innocent act. (Kim M Mitchell 2017, 1)

Emma ~

It is dry season in Far North Queensland. I sit on my balcony with a highlighter and a stack of printed journal articles. The sun blazes and there is no breeze; the humid air lies dormant, building up behind closed doors and settling heavy over everything. I am soon leaving damp fingerprints on page corners; I feel sweat prickle at my hairline. Condensation streams down the sides of my water glass. I shuffle through the stack and pull out an article I've been meaning to get to for at least a month. It is titled 'To

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Tell the Truth, (Re)Tell One's Tale: On Pedophilia, Taboo Desire, and Seduction Trauma —Introduction to *The Tale* and *Leaving Neverland*: A Panel on Two Films on Childhood Sexual Abuse.' It is written by Jill Gentile and Kenneth Feiner (2021), who, according to their contact information, are in a postdoctoral programme in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

I haven't come across the film *The Tale,* but I watched *Leaving Neverland*, a documentary about Michael Jackson's victims, three years earlier. It was not long after I had separated from a long relationship and was only beginning to allow myself to sense the trauma at its foundations, an unspoken and—back then—shadowy part of my life. Watching the documentary touched a nerve. It left me numb with shock. I watched the survivors describing their abuse with my heart in my mouth, and days later still felt the shock of it as a splinter in my brain. I hadn't been ready to consider why the documentary had affected me this way. The affective echoes of watching *Leaving Neverland* perhaps explains why, three years later, I had put off reading Gentile and Feiner's article for weeks even though I knew it would advance my research about women's contemporary sexual trauma memoirs. But I am here now, on my balcony in the glaring afternoon, with the article in my sweaty hands.

A line in the abstract catches my eye and I highlight it: '[psychoanalysis] underestimates the survivor's investment in her romantic fantasy, and its identification […] with her aggressor's "grooming" as a force that denies the real of her trauma' (71). I read on, alienated but intrigued by the psychoanalytic lilt to the analysis. The authors write with more drama than I am used to, they use alliteration ('memory's messy malleability' (71)), and say earnest things like, 'the reawakening of foreclosed memory prompts both dread and resistance to further knowing, while also issuing an insistent charge to reckon with what has long, perhaps too long, lay dormant' (72).

It is when the authors introduce a phenomenon called 'splitting' that my heart starts to beat more quickly. The phenomenon describes a psychological effect of grooming: the victim adopts a survival strategy where they frame the abuse experience as a powerful love story. This strategy serves to delay the acknowledgement of the trauma of abuse in which 'their vulnerability, openness, trust, tenderness, excitement, and felt need to be special, [is] exploited' by a person they trust and, in some fashion, love (73). The article continues:

> On one side of the split, the child or young teen comes to feel special, recognized, empowered by her secret 'love,' […] She wishes to safeguard what she, in some real way, experiences as enriching and empowering—for example, a sense of herself as desirable, as special, as agentic, as having a story to tell […] Sadly, the costs to the survivor of this strategy are high: The other side of an often cataclysmic split holds 'the most perverse nightmare' ([Springora], p. 113): the warded off abuse scenario and its accompanying tormenting affects. (73)

I feel something inside me jolt and the sensation of a persistent electric hum vibrates through my skull. My body begins to feel distant, like I am floating up out of it. Still, I read on, entranced. The authors quote Jennifer Fox, writer and director of autobiographical film *The Tale,* who comments, 'The abuser runs ahead of the child's own development […] I had to pretend to be somebody I was not ready to be. I had sex before I could and so what I learned instead was to be a false person. I learned how to tolerate sexuality' (74).

My limbs are tensed, arms stuck to my sides like iron bars, one hand at my mouth. But mostly I don't register what my body is doing. What tips me over into absolute chaos, which I experience as a deadening, a shutting down, is the part of the description where the authors describe mirroring between two stories of abuse—the one told by Fox in *The Tale*, and that told by author Vanessa Springora in *Consent*, her memoir of experiencing abuse as a young teenager. Specifically, the article describes the events in these two stories that triggered the dissolution of the 'powerful love' framing strategy:

> [a turn of events] alerts [Jenny] that she is not the sole chosen lover and that at least one other girl is also involved—that she is not an exception: their love, unexceptional. Springora's account is emphatic on this same breaking point: '[…] our extraordinary passion might have been sublime […] if not for the fact that G. had repeated the same story a hundred times already.' (74)

The buzzing in my head grows too loud to ignore and suddenly I am engulfed by an internal rushing up of sorrow. Here, mirrored further (as in a fun house) is my own 'breaking point'; the catalyst for both the end of my relationship and the beginning of the 'perverse nightmare', facing the 'warded off abuse scenario'. I'm not able to read any further. I put the article down.

Afterwards, I cry a lot.

The rest of that day goes missing from my memory, but I know I called in sick, unable to work or do anything, really. For a few days I found myself unable, or unwilling, to go back to my research. I had been working already with an excellent psychologist to process long-held trauma, developing strategies to deal with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress like dissociation, depression, and panic attacks. The hard work of processing trauma means that effects like the ones I've described here eventually happen less and less often.

Eventually, I did finish reading the article. The notes I made about it in my reference management database reveal little of the emotional intensity of my reading experience:

> This is fascinating! It […] shows how victims are possessed by the narrative of romantic attachment or love for their abuser, and how the grooming process prevents their acceptance of the true narrative of abuse. Some keen insights here into victim psychology. Some very useful quotes about narrative, fantasy and the blending of fiction and reality that will be very useful for my chapter on autofiction. The Tale may become an additional primary text for that chapter. This is an intro to a spec. iss., which I'd like to obtain.

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Emma~

I started reading about paedophiles because I wanted to understand my past. I wanted to understand what happened to me. When I was fifteen, I met a man. I had been taking music lessons with him. Ten months later, we began a relationship. He was older than me by five years; the age difference made people who knew about the relationship uneasy, but not uneasy enough to intervene. No-one really raised the teacher thing. We stayed together until I was 33. Not too long ago, I found out he'd been charged for allegedly doing 'something' with a high school student, a girl he had been giving music lessons to. At the time of writing, the case is yet to go to trial, but learning about the charge has changed me. It has compelled me to confront things I had been

suppressing. It was the catalyst for a full-scale recalibration of how I understand myself, my past, and the relationship I had with him. What also followed was a drastic intensification of the post-traumatic stress symptoms I'd been experiencing for years. Put another way, my world fell apart.

I spent 2022 picking up the pieces. This is work which I will probably be doing in some capacity for the rest of my life. Part of it, at first, has been trying to figure out the *why* of him. When you are in a relationship with someone skilled at secret-keeping and emotional manipulation, there is a sense that you do not understand who your partner is, why they act in certain ways, and why you feel so anxious and confused all the time. It was a problem I'd been working on for a while. But now, with the new knowledge of the legal charge and all that it signified, it felt like I might actually be able to find some answers. I am a researcher by trade, I am good at finding information and synthesising it. So they are the skills I fell back on.

And maybe without really thinking more deeply into it, I would find myself on weekends trawling unfamiliar social science databases for articles about grooming, victim perspectives, criminal psychology, and theories of sexual deviancy. These articles from criminologists, psychologists and law scholars spoke in new languages with unfamiliar dialects but they struck me with something resonant. Something I recognised as truth. I found words for things I thought were unspeakable, nameless, shadows. Some of the things I read made me cry or sent me into shock, and there appears to be two elements to the kind of material that had this effect on me. The first was when I had read something that echoed my own experiences, that confirmed what I thought had happened *did* happen, that things I had fought off for years could be accepted, unquestionably, as reality. The other was the researcher taking the victim participant's word as the truth. They were being believed. I was entering a world where people know, understand, and believe. And the relief of this was potent. Simultaneously (and for the same reasons of self-discovery) I had also been reading memoirs about sexual trauma: Alisson Wood's (2021) *Being Lolita*, Annie Ernaux's (2020) *A Girl's Story*, *No Matter Our Wreckage* by Gemma Carey (2020). I am a life narrative scholar and although I came to these texts trying to understand myself, my scholarly brain had been awakened. I was noticing a trend: women's memoirs of youth sexual trauma were proliferating in the years after #MeToo. So while my interest in this subject matter began as a personal enquiry, over the months of 2022 it organically became something I wanted to work on professionally. It was sometime during this year I read the psychoanalytical article about *The Tale* and *Leaving Neverland* on my balcony.

There is an important difference in how I approached reading the memoirs compared to the academic articles. Although I was drawn to both kinds of text in search of information, I had different expectations of these two forms of writing. I felt primed to feel things when I opened a memoir in a way I wasn't when it came to scholarly articles. I expected, in a memoir, to be drawn close to the intimate, emotional truth of the author and be made to feel things about their experiences. But with academic writing, I expect to suspend my emotions and be drawn into an analytical mode of enquiry and revelation. Memoir draws on conventions of fiction to tell a story that is in some important sense 'true'. Part of this mode of storytelling involves creating characters for a reader to invest in, and using tools like narrative, tone and voice to emotionally engage the reader. In literary theorist Suzanne Keen's words, they 'invite feeling

responses' (2022, 75) and are 'affectively-charged' narratives (76). We expect to feel things in the course of reading a memoir.

But scholarly writing is traditionally more detached and unemotional. It is a style of writing that doesn't appear to 'invite feeling responses' as Keen says. When I read scholarship, I expect to have my intellect engaged, but I also usually expect to be able to push feelings out of the picture. For Keen, scholarly texts invite us to engage 'cognitively' rather than affectively (2022, 80). And this paratextual priming has real effects.

Media psychologists Markus Appel and Barbara Malečkar (2012, 459; 475) indicate that paratextual genre labels like 'nonfiction' and 'fiction' trigger different needs for either cognition (which is more likely triggered by a nonfiction label) or affect (more likely triggered by a fiction label). Often, this primes readers to engage with a text in either a cognitive or emotional way, and this influences their reading experience. However, the study found nonfiction actually has a similar capacity to result in emotional 'transportation' as fiction, despite such expectations (2012, 474). Appel and Malečkar hypothesise that when nonfiction texts do result in 'similar or at times even higher transportation scores' it is 'arguably due to the greater relevance of nonfictional incidents to recipients' real life' (474). We agree that there is something to this hypothesis, and we shall expand below on how proximity and identification are implicated in affective ambush.

Autobiography scholars have also explored the interplay between readers, texts, and framing devices. Gillian Whitlock (2007) and Leigh Gilmore (2015) have explored how peritexts and paratexts set up readerly expectations that impact on how memoirs of middle-eastern women and chronic pain narratives, respectively, are read. And Julie Rak (2013) has explored how genre creates expectations of particular kinds of truth telling and storytelling in the memoir boom. Relatedly, Astrid Rasch's (2023) recent article about 'anxious reading' explores the emotions of the researcher and how they might be integrated into life narrative research methods. The links we are making here between generic associations and readerly expectations of the affective kind sit alongside this kind of life narrative research about the framing functions of paratextual elements and the role of emotions in research.

This essay is intended to be both affective and cognitive, and we employ both modes as a life writing scholarship method. Indeed, scholars like Nancy K. Miller, Elizabeth Hanscombe, Marlene Kadar and Sidonie Smith have made significant contributions to the field using such methods. Here, we are doing so in a reflexive way: we are both writing about emotional responses, and we are doing so using a mixture of analytical and affective modes of inquiry.

***

Marina ~

When I was 18, my childhood best friend died unexpectedly, and in circumstances I never fully understood. Mere months later, my beloved mother died of terminal cancer. These events brought my family to breaking point, and led me to experience estrangement, houselessness, complex grief, and eventually even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). As a creative writing student and the child of two poets, I turned to

life writing as a way to process loss and make meaning of the things I had experienced. I also turned to academic writing and research as a way to understand why others might do the same. I embarked upon a PhD in grief narratives and, essentially, signed up to write my life and my heartaches as a work of academic research. I did, and still do not, mind this; in many ways I am an open book. Perhaps in future I will see this as naïve, but then (and now) I saw writing as a quest for knowledge, a way of knowing the world and myself more closely. Academic writing, like creative writing, allows us to invite others into our own explorations; amplifies our goals of understanding, makes the quest for knowledge something shared, even for the most personal of stories.

My PhD research was about objects and grief. I examined how memoirists tell stories of loss through and with personal possessions. The memoirs I read as part of my research were about car crashes, suicides, murder, terminal illness, natural disasters, sudden deaths, and more. Sometimes in these stories objects and documents are left behind by loved ones, markers of their material presence on this earth. Writers use the objects as prisms to examine the events of the loss, their grief afterwards, and their hopes for the future. Other times there is nary a material trace to be found; no 'real' anchors to the people who had once been 'real'. As Margaret Gibson (2008) argues, the loss of objects while grieving is thus felt as a kind of double loss; it 'indirectly' and 'symbolically' repeats the experience of death (n.p.). Much of the research I drew upon was about materialism and grief and straddled different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, death studies, and museum studies. While I also read works of scholarship from life writing practitioners, these usually announced themselves early on, in abstracts or introductions, through identifiers such as 'practice-led' or 'hybrid'. I therefore read works about death, and grief, without a trace of emotionality as well as creative-academic works which leaned on their emotions as a key source of information.

While I was invigorated by my research topic and emboldened by the writers who had gone before me, the act of reading about grief, writing about grief, and experiencing grief all at once was fraught. I often felt joy and devastation in equal measure. The first time I experienced the phenomenon we are calling affective ambush—emotions unexpectedly inserted into otherwise (traditionally) academic reading—was an experience where I keenly felt the clash of personal and academic research. It was, at once, fruitful and derailing. I was, at once, excited and upset.

***

Marina~

It is a cold early-August day. I am always aware when August is on its way. Not only is the chill in the air a little icier, my body is aware of something else. I am aware of the way that stairs get slippery, just like those of the hospice building. Flowers are icy in the mornings, just like the roses we could see from Mum's window. As August approaches I think of the fogged clouds my siblings and I breathed out as we made our way to her room. I think of my mother, fading. This August, 2022, marks six years without her. It has been a long six years, it has been a short six years. I have busied myself with creative pursuits, with writing, with research. I am more than halfway through my PhD and have read more heartbreak than I care to admit. The librarian gives me a lingering look over her

glasses when she sees me loan yet another stack of books with the word 'death' or 'loss' in their sub-titles.

On this August day I am working from home. I'm sitting in my favourite reading spot—although my older sister, a massage therapist, baulks when she sees me working here. It is a curvaceous mustard sofa, a little worn on the arms but still springy in the seat. I adore it. My sister helped me lug it up the stairs when I bought it, and she must have known then that it would become a favourite writing spot. Rooms of our own are fantastic, hard-won, but to me corners are even better. Give me small spots to examine the world from; give me plush places to examine hard things. At this stage of my research, I'm looking into archival and curatorial practices towards objects and the ways they might hold memories or information. I am aiming to thread between material studies, death studies, and creative writing. The article open on my iPad, vying for space on my lap next to my cat, is titled, 'From the Sidelines to the Centre: Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives' (Douglas and Mills 2018). In the abstract of this work, authors Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, state their argument: 'whether a record is considered personal or not is best determined not based on who created it but rather on how it is activated' (257). They state that each author will present 'intensely personal' autoethnographic case studies in support of their position. They do not give further detail. Reading the article it soon becomes apparent that Douglas has experienced a profound loss; she is the mother of stillborn child. After several pages discussing autoethnographic enquiry, record requests, and accessibility, Douglas shifts tone. Under the sub-heading 'Case Study 1' she begins to describe her loss as 'personally devastating' and 'professionally damaging' (264) and the impetus for her research into grief and records. As I read this section, I felt my breath catch in my throat. Douglas is describing a very similar trajectory to my own exploration into grief and materiality. We share the same fears of object-loss or access, and a desire to know our own griefs through documents as well as frustration at the limitations of such items. Douglas writes of the moment she finally reads her daughter's medical records:

> The pain and anxiety I felt upon realizing that the coroner was describing parts of my daughter's body that I did not ever get to see myself. I wondered, as I read the coroner's assessment of her eyes as 'normal,' what colour they were. I thought, as I read the coroner's description of her heart and other internal organs, about the process of an autopsy and about my tiny daughter's body being subjected to that process. (267)

I felt a tightness in my chest, a constriction, and I began to cry. Not only tears, but heaving shoulders, shuddering breaths. Her phrasing, 'I wondered, as I read the coroner's assessment … what colour [her eyes] were', played over in my mind. I was reminded of the medical, clinical side of loss, and how it can so often be at odds with the deeply emotional and transformative side. I felt that Douglas and I were perhaps two sides of the same coin. It moved very deeply, and very unexpectedly. I stood, left my cosy reading corner, and walked through the damp streets of my neighbourhood to clear my head. On an otherwise usual research day I was ambushed by Douglas's work. It was interesting to note, even as I was in a heightened emotional state, that the other work I'd been reading on other traumas (often very detailed and descriptive) hadn't impacted me in this way. I thought

perhaps it was because the description of a body reminded me of my mother's body, the kiss I left on her cool forehead when I said goodbye.

As I walked I thought about how effective Douglas's testimony was at proving their argument—how neatly it complemented and supported the authors' academic reasoning. The effectiveness, I realised, was in the way Douglas presents researcher rationale interwoven with parental anger. She explicitly draws attention to these dual roles when she writes,

> As a trained records professional, I can rationalize the reasons why the file I received in the mail is inadequate to my needs as a bereaved parent. As a bereaved parent, however, I want to rail at the system that produced this cold, alienating and terribly disappointing file. (267)

While attempting to calm myself from the throes of panic and upset, I couldn't help but ponder where Douglas's testimony might sit within my research, and how it might corroborate my own argument aims. I saw the usefulness of this work, the integrity, the scholarly rigour, through the fog of my own bereavement. I thought that I could—or already was—holding my grief at arm's length (as evidenced by my reading of various trauma-based works with an 'objective' eye until this point) but learned that this was not true. Affective ambush brought me face to face with my own active experience of loss, and the capacity for engaging these emotions to help me engage more closely with my research. I was emboldened by Douglas's approach, by the idea that grief could be harnessed and integrated as an active part of research, not something which has to be discarded in order to read or write. Ultimately this realisation helped me complete my thesis in a more authentic and honest manner than I might have otherwise.

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The problem of emotions in the academy

In talking about these experiences together, we noticed we had a shared sense of shame or wrongness attached to the idea of 'feeling while researching'. We felt this shame carried over to the act of writing academically about those feelings. Just as we expected to feel feelings when reading memoir but not while doing research, we had a vision of a detached, objective researcher who was untouched by feeling while in the act of 'doing', reading, writing. We agree this is part of a larger context around the way academic identity is shaped by the masculinist vision of objectivity. Kim M Mitchell (2017, 2) in her feminist critique of objectivity in academic voice, explains that positivism—the empirical philosophy from which objectivity springs—begins with the assumption that there is a reality outside of subjectivity, beyond the researcher, which can be observed, evaluated, and categorised. An objective detachment from this reality, so the line goes, enables the researcher to use logic, reason, and facts to discern the truth about the world. In this schema, knowledge has as little as possible to do with the researcher's inner workings and unique perception of the world.

Striving to maintain and convey objectivity, academics learn to write with a particular voice: one that is neutral, formal, and detached. One that does not betray the reality that there is a person behind the work. A person who has a life, attachments to identity markers, a history, a psychology, a worldview, and an emotional range that informs

their perception of reality. Mitchell eerily describes this academic voice as 'disembodied' (2017, 2). Dis-embodied. The disembodied academic voice that Mitchell critiques performs the trick of erasure, producing the illusion that knowledge is not created, but discovered.

We imagine this disembodied academic voice in two ways. One version is godlike, freed from her human body and granted access to a higher plane of knowledge. Sitting above all, she reports back on what she can observe from up there.

A view of the academic as lofty, objective, and detached is part of a masculine ideal formed by the patriarchal structure of the academy. There is plenty of excellent feminist scholarship that explores the gendered imperative of scientific objectivity, although this lies outside the scope of this essay. But in the tradition of feminist scholarship, we want to trouble and problematise the detached and 'objective' academic position and investigate how moving outside of this paradigm has unique implications for scholars of life narrative, trauma and grief. We also want to point to this normalised academic subject as part of the reason emotions and embodiment occupy a contested space within the academy.

Another way to see Mitchell's disembodied academic voice is to see her as disembodied in the sense of being dislocated, or torn out via excision. She is a voice ripped apart from her body.[1] Seen this way, the academic voice without a body is a partial being missing vital parts of what makes her human.[2]

Associations of the body and emotions to femininity are at play here, and, like the feminist scholars to which we are indebted (Evelyn Fox Keller, Catharine MacKinnon, Adrienne Rich, Sheila Rowbotham and Monique Wittig to name only a few), we want to draw attention to how refusing the patriarchal dichotomies of body/intellect and emotion/reason can open up new avenues of relating to, understanding, and producing research.

We have both felt the imperative, at times in our academic life, to extricate our scholarly selves so that they could operate unimpeded. We have also rallied against this imperative, and endeavoured to bring our 'whole selves' to our academic work[3]—particularly across research and teaching. As we persist, though, amid the gladiatorial arena of the neoliberal academy, we are not sure how much work of true value this partial being is capable of. It seems as though the disembodied academic is liable to exclude important affective and subjective data in their contributions to knowledge. And further, we worry that research that refuses to engage on a fully human level with its subject has the potential to lose sight of humanity.

In the introduction to a scholarly collection on affect theory and literary criticism, Stephen Ahern asserts that a fundamental insight of affect theory is that 'no embodied being is independent, but rather is *affected by* and *affects* other bodies, profoundly and perpetually as a condition of being in the world' (2019, 4–5). Applying this assertion to the disembodied academic, it becomes clear that to take on an identity that omits or ignores the emotions, feelings and affects that emerge in research can obscure vital insights and critical avenues. We suggest that investigating our own affective responses as researchers illuminates how involuntary psychological triggering during the research process might not only be managed, but might be productively acknowledged and used as a constructive or generative part of research method. Through this analysis we suggest that integrating and evaluating researcher affects can yield important insights about our research subjects (here, life writing about trauma and grief) as well as the processes of research.

Affective data: emotions and knowledge

Emotions and knowledge are deeply intertwined and are now generally accepted to form a part of cognitive processes rather than the two being conceived of as opposites. In her introduction to a volume that explores the philosophy of emotion in relation to knowledge, Laura Candiotto explains, 'emotions are now understood as a constitutive element of human rationality, grounding concept creation and deliberative thinking, and partaking in the various cognitive processes, rather than being framed in opposition to rationality' (2019, 4). Philosopher of emotions Cecilea Mun (2019, 29) furnishes us with a useful metaphor when she theorises emotions as 'vehicles of knowledge'. Emotions function to help us decide what to pay attention to in a world full of things competing for our attention (De Sousa 2004, 116–117; Robinson 2004, 67), they move us to action (Elster 2004; Robinson 2004, 73), and they are part of the process of forming evaluative judgements (Solomon 1976, 188)—or indeed may even *be* judgements (Nussbaum 2004). Emotions are conceived by some scholars as information which guides our responses to situations (Clore and Storbeck 2006; Schwarz and Clore 2007; Storbeck and Clore 2008 cited in LeBlanc, McConnell, and Monteiro 2015, 268). Research into the connections between emotions and knowledge is broad and diverse, offering a plethora of arguments and models, which we do not have space to explore here. However, we have included some of the most relevant principles and theories here which support our assertion that affect is a part of what we do when we do research, and forms a productive site for exploration in the wake of what we are calling affective ambush.

Affective ambush is the name we are giving to a phenomenon we have both encountered in the course of the research process. Illustrated by the experiences we recounted in the first part of this essay, it is the experience of encountering material during academic research that unexpectedly induces an intense emotional response. For us, these responses have been to the point of overwhelm, meaning we needed or were compelled to stop the research process and step away from it for a short while. Such materials (and the emotional responses they bring about) are associated with areas of personal as well as academic investment. This makes sense, when we think about how Martha Nussbaum writes about emotions as being triggered by objects that are of great importance to us, explaining that

> this is why, in negative cases, they are felt as tearing the self apart: because they have to do with damage to me and to my own, to my plans and goals, to what is most urgent in my conception of what it is for me to live well. (2004, 319)

Nussbaum's comment here speaks to the more holistic academic self that we are positioning as important for enriching the range of academic methods and findings here, and which the dogmatic adherence to objectivity in academic voice and process attempts to obscure or leave out.

Ahern asks the question, 'What identities, what affective assemblages—queer, hybrid, transnational—take shape in the spaces opened by heightened emotion?' (2019, 3), and he suggests that 'attending to the circulation of affective energies might deepen—perhaps even move us beyond—the insights of [traditional critical] readings' (3). We, too, are interested in what identities and critical possibilities take shape in affective domains,

and in what considering affect as part of life writing research can afford those of us working with trauma, grief and other troubled and troubling subject matter. To do this, we take a cue from cultural and affect theorist Sarah Ahmed who describes the problem of research in her field that moves too far into abstract territories: ‘to abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert’ (2017, 10), she writes. As a solution, she proposes that ‘we might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory *back to life*’ (10, our emphasis). This, of course, has specific nuance and implications for scholars of life narrative, a point to which we will return.

Ahmed, importantly, situates this work as feminist, and she describes the importance here of using feminist materials. Her categorisation of ‘materials’ moves beyond traditional critical tools of enquiry like theories, scholars, and books to include ‘spaces of encounter; how we are touched by things; how we touch things’ (17). The materials we draw on here are such spaces of encounter, moments of being ‘touched’ and seeking to touch. These spaces—instigated by instances of affective ambush—and our subjective reflection on them form rich sites of data and knowledge creation that contest and supplement disembodied forms of life narrative research that focus chiefly on texts and theories.

One method that usefully integrates affective and embodied lived experience with theory and analysis is autotheory, and for that reason it is the mode we are working in here. Autotheory is described by Lauren Fournier as ‘the site of engagement with the materials of the [researcher’s] life’ which produces ‘theory that emerges from the self’ (2021, 32). Here, ‘embodied experience [is] another text, framework, or catalyst through which to think through aesthetic, social, cultural, moral, and political issues’ (Fournier 2021, 32). Autotheory here presents as a ‘back to life’ approach that is useful to us in our phenomenological investigation of affective ambush because it enables us to take our experiences and make sense of them through the lens of affect theory, philosophy of emotions, and life narrative theory.

Autotheory, too, has important implications for speaking back to or contesting the dominance of the disembodied, ‘objective’ researcher and the masculinist discourse it emerges from. Fournier explains, ‘autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation’ (10). Here, our acknowledgement of the researcher’s subjectivity and embodiment refuses to collude in illusions (or delusions) of objectivity and detachment of the researcher. The myth of objectivity can obscure assumptions, prejudices and identity frames that consciously or unconsciously skew research. Our use of autotheory here is a ‘back to life’ (Ahmed 2017, 10) mode of resistance to masculinist and patriarchal discourse within the academy that attempts to impose a subordination of feminine-coded qualities like emotion and embodiment and an elevation of masculine-coded qualities like mastery and reason. Our use of autotheory is also an attempt to find a methodology appropriate for critically analysing our experiences of ‘affective ambush’ in our research practice.

Incorporating feelings and emotions into this subjective mode of research is crucial. Peter Goldie writing on the philosophy of emotion asserts that feelings ‘[play] a centrally important epistemic role in revealing things about the world’, and that ‘emotional feelings are a potential source of knowledge’ (2004, 158). Further, he breaks down feelings

into two categories, ‘bodily feelings and feelings directed towards the object of the emotion’, and explains that

> both kinds of feelings can reveal things about the world: things about ourselves—what I call *introspective knowledge*—including our thoughts, emotions, and the condition of our bodies; and things about the world beyond the bounds of our bodies—[…] *extraspective knowledge*. (159)

In thinking against the disembodied or partial researcher, and towards a more holistic view of the researcher, it is significant to consider how the interplay between introspective and extrospective knowledge can make scholarly work gratifying for academics on multiple levels. Our instinct is that research is often fulfilling on both professional and personal levels for many academics.

Following on from Goldie, one of the greatest impediments of emotional suppression or avoidance when it comes to doing research is that it obscures the affective frames that we bring, inevitably, to our work. Such affective frames shape, along with other personal factors like lived experience, what and how we study and the conclusions we draw from and about observable phenomena. One perspective is that such subjective factors cloud judgment, but we are proposing it can enrich judgment, as well as enrich the research process and outcomes. By naming, considering and writing about our affect as researchers, we can make visible and transparent the things that shape our ‘perception of reality’—the key here is that the world is perceived and our emotions (along with other personal factors) shape that perception. They shape what we actually see when we do the work of academic observation. We hope that by examining our own affective entanglements in our research we might open space for others to speak more openly about their own entanglements and experiences that have thrown up problematic or puzzling affective responses.

Importantly, we found that the utility of affective ambush was to act, as the emotional philosophers describe, as flags that drew our attention to things we needed to pay closer attention to, to stop and consider more deeply, and to process through personal, experiential, affective, and embodied ways of knowing.

In Marina’s experience with Douglas’ testimony, they stopped reading and were able to connect some vital intellectual and emotional points while taking a break and going for a walk. In Emma’s experience with the psychoanalytical article, she learned a complex but recurring part of victim-survivor narratives of abuse is the illusion (and subsequent shattering) of romantic love with the abuser. This element factors importantly in her analysis of women’s memoirs of youth sexual trauma. Rather than rushing over these points, the experience of affective ambush became flags that told us, ‘There is something important here: pay attention.’ And the space away from the research demanded by the affective response gave us the space to reflect on and consider the implications and associations of the material to our research.

Trip wires

When we began to examine various recent instances of affective ambush, we noticed that they were almost always instigated by the appearance or intrusion of some element of life narrative embedded within scholarly writing. Places where the academic voice engages in self-narration and self-reflection, places where a voice from a memoir or interview

appears, quoted directly, as if speaking from the page. We came to think of these snatches of life narrative embedded within academic texts as 'trip wires'. As life narrative researchers we are accustomed to reading memoir that employs and elicits emotions. But while both kinds of writing had the capacity to move us emotionally in the course of our research, we were not primed to expect it when we were reading scholarship and this led to a complex feeling of ambush that compounded and complicated the emotions triggered in the reading experience.

We know all too well the potential for these trip wires of life narrative to disarm, and even distress. In fact, in the course of undertaking this research, Marina recognised that they had not only been affectively ambushed but employed it within their own work. Specifically, when presenting a hybrid creative/academic paper on grief writing at an institutional conference, they interspersed highly emotional excerpts from their grief-memoir-in-progress with scholarly discussion. Swapping back-and-forth from fragments of emotion and rationale was indeed intended to be *disarming*; to draw attention to the blurred lines between academic work and life. In Marina's case, the story itself demanded this; they wrote of the death of their mother, who was also an academic and poet. Words and research were part of their shared ways of investigating the world. Although Marina prefaced this paper with a 'content warning' that discussions of death and dying would occur, the paper did work as a kind of ambush. The audience were surprised and suggested as much in the feedback portion of the presentation. One person even expressed upset that they had been 'unexpectedly' brought to tears, and seemed alarmed by the fact they were 'crying at work'. They warned Marina against using such destabilising techniques in live forums like conference papers.

It is true that Marina might have chosen to illustrate their approach more fully at the beginning, to warn about the content in more detail. They might have gone so far as to take a disembodied position rather than embody their grief to an audience. But, if they did, what would their audience potentially have missed? The surprise, the ambush, is sometimes the vehicle for the affect. In asking to leave out life narrative trip wires, intentional or unintentional, what are we asking research to omit? suffer?

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Although we have referred to these life narrative intrusions as trip wires, we do not intend to imply that they are only harmful and not productive. In contrast, upon reflecting on the employment of embedded life narrative, we suggest it is because these traces of the personal are articulated through a theoretical framework that exposes, draws attention to, or makes visible the intellectual and affective richness of such narratives that they are so productively affecting. They are not cheap uses of emotional manipulation, rather they suggest the power of life narrative to move beyond objective engagement and merge various ways of knowing (intellectual, embodied, affective).

Something that life writing and scholarship have in common is their relationship to the 'real' world in which the reader also exists. The events that take place in a work of life narrative, the problems explored in scholarly work, and the life of the reader all occur, in an important way, in the same reality. It is this connection to the real that we might think of as part of the claim to 'truths' life writing and scholarship make. Both forms are, in different ways, claiming to tell the truth about something. In thinking about the assertion of emotion science scholars Greenaway et al. that 'context is the

essence of emotion' (2018, 12), we are compelled to think about the context for these experiences of grief, sorrow, pain, numbness, overwhelm, and gratitude.

In an examination of the role of affect in researching and writing biographies, Rachel Morley draws attention to what she describes as 'uncertainty' among biographers as to how they should manage 'the issue of ourselves as feeling/experiencing knowledge-makers' (2012, 77). Morely draws attention to the productive nature of the personal and the affective in biographical praxis, arguing that because biographical work requires entering into another person's intimate life in order to write about them, the biographer's work is 'mediated by feeling and self-discovery' (79). In learning about another person, the biographer also learns about themself.

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Morley's work leads us to think critically and ethically about the relationship between life narrative research subject and life narrative researcher acknowledging how the responsibility of consuming lives and making statements about them requires us to cede the hierarchy imposed by the institution of academia. The act of reading and interpretation is not unidirectional: the text has the potential to shape the researcher just as the researcher has the potential to shape (i.e. to make authoritative statements about) the text.

Reflecting on this relationship, we articulate this statement to the subjects of our research: Because I am the knowing being through which your experiences are filtered, in trying to understand you I must also try to understand myself. Knowing and understanding you changes me in important ways.

Morley's term 'feeling/experiencing knowledge-makers' is appropriate for how we see ourselves as researchers in memoir and grief, for Marina, and life narrative and sexual trauma, for Emma. For us the feeling/experiencing knowledge-maker is a step towards a holistic academic subjectivity. For Morley (79), biography is 'an entry point into an experiential realm', 'a site of self-other illumination', and a place of 'working-out' the self through a kind of deep relationality. These terms are useful to us here. It is true the argument could be made that many kinds of scholarly research might be sites of self/other illumination and spaces of 'working-out' selfhood. But this is especially the case for (a) researchers investigating subjects of deep personal relevance, and (b) research that involves materials containing traces of the personal lives of others. Oftentimes our research subjects in the field of life narrative studies are real folks and the traces or constructions of self that emerge from their real lives. Honouring and engaging ethically with research subjects in this field demands that we never lose sight of the humanity of our work. Our subjectivities as scholars are entwined in complex ways with those of our research subjects. This is even more reason to acknowledge and reflect on the role of our emotions and affective encounters during the process of research.

Experiential knowledge as expertise

Emma ~

When I started to research sexual trauma narrative and confront my past, I was personally gratified: I was learning about my past and making sense of deeply troubling experiences and truths. But it also triggered my research brain. I began to understand that I

could contribute to this field because of my experiences, not in spite of them. What I'm seeing in memoirs like Vanessa Springora's (2021) *Consent* or Kathryn Harrison's (1997) *The Kiss*, makes sense to me in a specific way. Not only do I bring my expertise in girlhood, self-mediation and life narrative strategies to bear on these texts, but also my experiential knowledge of the complexities of being groomed as a young person and trying to make sense of this experience as an adult. I began this research wanting to find out what has happened to me in my life, but in doing so I've become motivated to contribute to this body of knowledge around victim-survivor narratives. And I'm well placed to do this work, even if it is sometimes difficult.

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Our experiences inform what we know about the world and thus what we are capable of observing. Experiences like trauma and grief make us able to perceive subtleties that may not be observable through a more detached or otherwise-informed lens. We also have a rich experience of researching topics close to home: as well as resulting in contributions to the field, building of professional competencies, and advancement of our careers, our work results in invaluable personal transformation through knowledge-acquisition, that is then bled out into our communities through interpersonal interactions.

Experiential knowledge gives us experiential expertise in our research topic, and this knowledge sometimes presents via affective responses. What we noticed when we began to examine the connection between experiential knowledge and affective ambush is that affective ambush occurs for us when we are exposed to material that facilitates bodily knowledge to become intellectual knowledge.

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A part of my own experience that I was trying to unpack in 2022 was the naivety of my teenage self and inability to see clearly the man I had entered into a relationship with as well as the nature of the relationship. There was so much I didn't know as a teenager, and that ignorance made me vulnerable.

In researching the unique aspects of the sexual abuse of teenage girls I had come across an article by a Finnish educational psychologist, Helena Louhela (2021). The article, titled '"I was Fully Consenting": Sexual Violence Voiced by an Adolescent Girl', analyses four interviews with a single participant over the course of five years. Louhela (2021, 7) studies 'how an adolescent girl with an institutional background voices her previous experiences of a statutory sex crime relationship' in order to examine how the teenage girl's understanding of the crime changes over time. Louhela uses a fascinating method to analyse the interviews called the Listening Guide (Gilligan) that focuses on human relationality and vulnerability as well as how social and cultural contexts affect subjects' understanding and gaps in it. This method accounts for 'the mind's ability to dissociate or push knowledge and experience out of conscious awareness' (Gilligan and Eddy, 2017, 79, quoted in Louhela 10), so it struck me as particularly useful for analysing the complex experience of speaking about sexual assault and abuse as a teenager.

The girl Louhela interviews, whom she calls 'Mari', is 15 years old when they begin, and the abuse is recent. At the final interview in 2017 she is 19. There are many insights that this fascinating study offers, but what affected me when I first read it was the way that Mari asserts her agency in the 'relationship' with the adult man, refusing to articulate her experience as abusive. As well, the way that Mari's perception of the perpetrator's

kindness towards and care of her is what she most wants to hold on to from this experience. It stands out as one of the most important parts of her account, even as the account, by age 19, becomes more complex and moves towards acknowledging the unlawfulness of the man's actions.

Louhela posits that her study reveals a new aspect—that of *illusion of care consent*—to an existing social model of abused consent, already including coerced, normalised, survival and condoned forms of abused consent (9, 18–19).

I was flooded with gratitude towards Louhela and tenderness for 'Mari' when I read this article and remained affected by it for days. I talked about the unique method and the valuable findings to fellow researchers, unable to stop thinking about Mari and Louhela. I puzzled over the emotions that were coming up for me, but I eventually realised that I was grateful to Louhela for being able to see why Mari's original and revised account of her experience was not the whole story. I felt as if she knew that the narrative Mari had constructed for herself served in part to protect her memory of feeling cared for and thus her identity as a person for whom others could care. I am, of course, projecting my own experiences onto Louhela's findings. I was deeply affected by the idea of an adult wise enough to understand my vulnerability, my naivety and the harm of that relationship—an adult like Louhela—holding my story for me and understanding the parts of it that I could not at that age.

I also saw in Mari a version of my younger self. In the quotes from Mari that are reproduced in the article, I heard echoes of things I had said and believed as a young person. Things that revealed more about how I wished to see myself than about the truth of my circumstances.

This article, along with the others that engendered an experience of affective ambush, exposed me to material that spoke to something that I felt in my body to be true but which I had perhaps not put into words yet.

We think that this may be a key part of acknowledging embodied and affective forms of research. These life narrative 'trip wires', and the reflection they demand, create the opportunity to integrate embodied and intellectual forms of knowing. This is beneficial because it can advance the research but also, vitally, instigates a broader kind of insight and understanding for the academic, the achievement of which centres on intellectual and affective interplay.

Another part of this connection between experiential knowledge and affective ambush is the scholarly context. It is the positioning of these narratives and the research topics of which they are a part, within academic discourse that gives a legitimacy to the experiences on the page, and their worthiness of deep consideration. This is deeply affecting in terms of victim-survivor discourse, where internal and external struggles of legitimacy, narrative stability, and being believed are continually fought. It is relevant, too, in grief narratives in which the grief experience is often felt to be singular and isolating.

Ethics and institutional duty of care: scaffolding for affective ambush

As part of the peer review process for this article we were asked to consider what the institutional duty of care might be in terms of the ethics of trauma research. Do research institutions have a duty to provide scaffolding and support to facilitate this kind of research? This is something we have been thinking carefully about. There is currently no

framework we are aware of that scaffolds trauma studies for researchers. Ethics applications are one existing framework that aims to ensure careful handling of research subjects, but we do not suggest this as a useful model of scaffolding to protect or support researchers from affective ambush. Currently what we see is researchers negotiating these issues independently and contextually. For example, as a doctoral candidate Marina had access to supervisors who provided a space to raise issues, reflect on them, and seek guidance for navigating the affective terrain of writing a grief memoir. For Emma as a project lead instructing research assistants on a journal special issue about sexual violence testimony, it became paramount to create space for support and to scaffold the affective elements of this work. One approach Emma took was to include the following paragraph in an email to the research assistants who would be reading through abstract submissions:

> Just flagging that it can be A Lot to read through these. I've had a few moments of feeling overwhelmed, sad or triggered. I wanted to mention this to encourage you to do some self-care if you need to while reading the abstracts. You might want to pace yourself with them, reading a few at a time and having lots of breaks. One thing I find helpful is to take a break to do or think about something that makes me happy, spend some time with a loved one, request some hugs, make a cup of tea, go for a walk.
>
> And let me know if you need support of any kind while doing this work. (Emma Maguire, pers. comm., March 5, 2024)

While supervisors and project leads who are mindful about these aspects of potentially triggering research may have the capacity to provide scaffolding, we recognise this is possibly not the case broadly. There is also the issue of individually driven projects, which is the norm in humanities disciplines. Both examples we have gestured to here are from team contexts: an advisory team and an editorial team. But literary researchers, and humanities researchers broadly, do not tend to work predominantly in labs or teams as is common in other disciplines. While an ad-hoc approach to care and wellness for researchers is not, we think, the optimal situation, we are also cautious about calling for institutional address. We can't imagine all institutionally-led interventions being useful or equal in the neoliberal university landscape. While we see the value of ethics clearance, for example, anyone who says they might be doing traumatic research might be forced into the additional labour of navigating red tape and completing paperwork without any meaningful actual support as a result. We would not want to see 'support and scaffolding' become another box-ticking exercise. One suggestion we can make is that the inclusion of a support officer who has expertise in navigating traumatic research topics could be very useful within centralised organisational units such as counselling services or research offices. This is an area we are interested in exploring further.

Marina~

As our discussions and work with Affective Ambush have developed, our conversations have also naturally turned to pedagogy and experiences of (or potentially applications for) Affective Ambush in classrooms. As well as researchers, we are both committed teachers of English Literature and Creative Writing working in Australian universities. As such, we see our duty of care extending to our students. Trigger warnings have

emerged as a point of interest and conflict in discussions with colleagues also teaching Arts. Some argue that protection and accommodation for trigger warnings are a matter of mental health support and a natural extension of access measures such as those for students with physical disabilities. Others suggest that university is a place of intellectual challenge, and that part of our role as educators is to help build resilience within supportive environments. There are myriad arguments over the actual or perceived effectiveness of trigger warnings in the first place—will students avoid reading or engaging at all upon encountering a trigger warning pertinent to their own experience?

As a creative writer I can't help but think also of the fact that trigger warnings can be accidental spoilers for a text's core movements, twists, and turns. The safety and health of students trumps spoilers, of course, and I find myself generally 'spoiling' texts for students frequently as they do not always finish their reading before the relevant class discussion despite fair warning. Still, I feel that based on our explorations into Affective Ambush 'spoiling' the unexpected emotion of a piece may well disengage students from the core learning an author intends. Additionally, it is difficult to anticipate all potential triggers for all potential readers, for academic and non-academic texts alike. Some texts simply contain too many layered ideas and traumatic narrative elements, and some triggers may be unique enough that we don't recognise them in the first place. Just as we discussed earlier, the 'trip wires' we encountered in our experience of Affective Ambush were also, at times, unexpected.

Emotions will find us, and our students, inevitably, in the process of researching. We cannot prepare ourselves, or our students, to be armoured against every potentially upsetting or affective narrative. Do we want to? Are we actually able to? The conference paper I spoke about presenting earlier *did* including a trigger warning—which I described as a 'content warning' at the time, regarding death and bodily descriptions —and yet still audience members were ambushed. We hope that Affective Ambush might be rendered informative and methodological rather than only phenomenological through knowledge of its existence. Could learners and listeners—peers at conferences and students alike—be better prepared for Affective Ambush by prior knowledge of its existence in any academic text they read, as well as the memoirs and other narratives they're often more explicitly prepared for?

We have a kernel of an idea; we believe that introducing students in life narrative studies to the concept of Affective Ambush, and specifically the idea of 'trip wires'—whether or not trigger warnings are provided—may better equip them for embodied learning. We might posit Affective Ambush as a phenomenon which they are likely to encounter in the course of their research lives and one which they might prepare for through mindful reading practices, support networks, and the acknowledgement of emotions as part of the process. We are hoping to plan a series of workshops to investigate this with undergraduate cohorts and look forward to exploring it further.

Conclusion: bringing research 'back to life'

Both of the stories told here explore instances of affective ambush as sites of encounter that yield insights about our research subjects. Each of us explores this phenomenon

differently in regards to the detachment of the academic project and its personal stakes. Emma, in her story, is validated by her lived pain as recognised in others' research and stories, a process that is cathartic if destabilising while Marina is troubled by concerns that the personal has become instrumentalised or functional in the aim of completing a research project. We have suggested that the spaces instigated by affective ambush and subjective reflection on them form rich sites of data and knowledge creation that contest and supplement disembodied forms of life narrative research that focus chiefly on texts and theories.

In the writing of this essay we asked ourselves: what does a retreat from affective and embodied modes of engaging with research close off? We think it closes off possibilities for both enriching one's research and for facilitating a broader acceptance of modes of researcher subjectivity and identity beyond the masculinist norm of the detached observer. Part of our motivation for writing this article is to open up space for researchers to acknowledge and reflect on their own experiences of 'feeling while researching'. If it were more broadly accepted that emotional responses play an important, or at least useful, part in the research process we wonder what new knowledge and methods might begin to develop. Our experiences of connecting with one another about this phenomenon tell us that there are rich avenues for possibility in a scholarly community encouraging of dialogue about such affective phenomena.

Affective ambush can be useful because emotions are entangled with knowledge. But embedding emotion as knowledge in unexpected places is also a recognition that researchers, their subjects, and their readers are interconnected. Employing affective techniques of reading and writing that bring research 'back to life' reminds us that we are human and so are our research subjects. Even when researching something not immediately related to lives and people, it will always have some sort of relation to or impact on people of one group or another, and this is especially true for life narrative scholars. The human factor and the humanity of our work matters. Integrating affective modes of reading and writing can serve to remind us that our research is part of humanity rather than above it.

Notes

1. The idea of a disembodied or detached self reminds us of dissociation, a bodily response to trauma which can be experienced by those with PTSD and other mental health conditions. Although is beyond the scope of this initial phenomenology, we are interested in examining the potential relationship or overlap between academic detachment and trauma-triggered dissociation in future works.
2. For a fuller exploration of the connection between "corpus" and how voice is established as authoritative within academia through a "body" of work see Maguire, Emma. "Docile Bodies (of Work): Coaxing the Neoliberal Academic via the Online Researcher Profile," *Career Narratives and Academic Womanhood: In the Spaces Provided* edited by Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle, Routledge, (2023, 36–53).
3. See Deller (2023) on continuity between academic personas and personal lives.

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