Beyond the crazy ex-girlfriend: Drawing the contours of a radical vulnerability

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Abstract:

In this article, I reflect on the process of understanding and my strategies of reporting in the context of a three-year ethnographic study on non-monogamous sex and relationships in Belgium, which included interviews and participant observation in various dating sites and in support groups for people in consensual non-monogamous relationships. I draw the contours of what a research ethics that creates space for the researcher's embodied learning, and learning through sexual-intimate relationships in particular, might look like, centralizing the concept of vulnerability. An ethics of intersubjective vulnerability not only has the potential to constitute an epistemological position from which to conduct critical analyses that aims at producing multidimensional and embodied understanding of power relations, it also constitutes a space of political contestation and a position from which to start to envision alternative possibilities to the neoliberal values that have pervaded society.

Introduction

For decades ethnographers and feminist researchers have embraced reflexivity as a methodological resource through which they interrogate their positionality and situatedness (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Hervik, 1994; Rose, 1997). Nevertheless, the perspectives of sex and the sexual desire of the researcher still often remain unacknowledged or limited to a brief reference to, for example, the researcher's sexual identity and relationship status. This erasure has increasingly been the subject of debate in social and human sciences (e.g. Bain and Nash, 2006;

Cupples, 2002; Goode, 1999; Kulick and Willson, 1995/2003; Thomas and Williams, 2016), problematizing (1) the a priori denunciation of the researcher's participation in sex in the field and (2) the systematic erasure of the sexuality of the researcher from the accounts of the conditions in which research is produced. This preliminary body of interdisciplinary work calls attention to both the causes of a purported academic fear of sex, and to how sex (or the abstinence of sex) and the sexual subjectivity of the researcher can become relevant in everyday research practice. These methodological reflections have made clear that the academic 'allergy' to sex and the general prudishness or 'squeamishness' surrounding sex in academia (Bell, 1995) is not only related to the ambivalent relationship to sex in society in general, but is also closely connected to the very epistemological foundations of academia that – even in the departments that have rejected objectivism a long time ago – still struggle with the researcher's body and emotions (see e.g. Bell, 1995; De Craene, 2017). Institutional research ethics protocols, in particular, do not allow for the messiness that might arise when the researcher becomes embodied, has desires, is desired by others, has sex, loves, or becomes emotionally aroused. While there is growing critique of an ethical framework that presupposes an emotionally detached and distant observer and the value of emotionally engaged research and reflection becomes more widely acknowledged, there remains a significant amount of ethical-theoretical work to be done to craft an alternative ethical approach that fits with a full reflexive paradigm.

This article aims to contribute towards filling this gap. Through the exploration of select moments of insight in the context of an auto-ethnographic study on nonmonogamous sex and relationships, the article explores what an alternative research ethics that includes embodied intersubjectivity between the researcher and the researched may look like, drawing on the concept of vulnerability. Many theorizations of vulnerability (Fineman, 2008; Goodin, 1986; Nussbaum, 2009) tend to treat the concept as markedly negative, equating it with susceptibility to harm, suffering, dependency, and incapacity. While they have contributed to a recognition of the normative significance of vulnerability and have placed the duty to protect the vulnerable at the centre of moral obligations, these theorizations tend to see vulnerability mainly as a

source of ethical problems, rather than an ethical resource in itself (Gilson, 2013).

This article, conversely, draws on understandings of vulnerability that move beyond accounts that consider vulnerability as a precondition to harm, but regard an ethics of vulnerability as a space of political contestation (Braidotti, 2008; Gilson, 2011, 2013; Logue, 2013). These understandings are informed by feminist engagements with rethinking core ideas of what constitutes moral knowledge, revaluing dependency, interdependency and the significance of care-giving and receiving (e.g. Fine and Glendinning, 2005; Held, 1990; Tronto, 1994). Central to these theorizations is Butler's work on precariousness, in which she argues that the denial of 'a primary human vulnerability to other humans' through 'a fantasy of mastery' fuels the instruments of war (Butler, 2003: 18). Her insistence that a mindfulness to vulnerability can become the basis for non-violent responses is a valuable point to begin to think about vulnerability as central to undoing not only violence, but also oppressive social relations in general (Gilson, 2011). It is this understanding of vulnerability that I aim to present in this article as a guiding principle for research and writing in the context of intimate ethnography, in which 'the personal and emotional suffuse the work at all levels' (Rylko-Bauer, 2005: 12). I argue that an ethics of vulnerability can constitute an epistemological position from which to conduct critical analyses. Acting and writing vulnerably enables an unpacking of power relations between the researcher and the researched and situates both within wider power structures to produce multidimensional and embodied understanding and eventually, generates an informed position from which to start to envision alternative possibilities to the individualistic, disembodied narratives that serve neoliberal logics.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section I describe the broader research project on which this article is based and more particularly describe the insider-position from which I conducted my research. In the second section, I argue that my learning through the emotional-sexual experiences I encountered during my research was crucial in gaining 'thick' understanding of the socio-cultural context that I studied and the power dynamics at play. To

illustrate this point, I draw upon one particular instance of embodied learning that occurred in what could be seen as the blurry zone between research and everyday life. In the third section, I outline some of the practical and ethical challenges and tensions that arise in the context of intimate auto-ethnographic research that include immersion in and writing about sexual activities and intimate relationships. In the final section, I explore a research ethics that is inclusive of the researcher's vulnerability as a step towards a relational and embodied research ethics.

Auto-ethnographic insider position

My study (2016–2019) was performed in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium and explored various non-monogamous sexual and relationship practices. Using multimethod anthropological data collection, the research included interviews, textual analysis and traditional and internet ethnographic methods. More specifically, I conducted ethnographic research in dating sites and Facebook groups that cater to people interested in non-monogamous sex and relationships, and participated in several informational and social meetings organized by consensual non-monogamy support and advocacy groups. In addition, I conducted recorded interviews with 28 people and conducted hundreds of non-recorded informal chats, face-to-face conversations and 'dates'.¹ My study included people of various genders, ages (20s to 50s) and sexualities and of various educational, and professional backgrounds. However, most people in the study were highly educated and belonged to the white ethnic majority and the dominant middle-class (secularized) culture in Flanders.

The research is at least partly conducted from an auto-ethnographic insider perspective (Butz, 2010; DeLyser, 2001). I use the term auto-ethnographic to refer to my willingness to intensely reflect upon my relations with research participants as a way to gain greater understanding of and illuminate the power dynamics that structure intimate relationships (Butz, 2010). My claim of an 'insider' position stems from the research design based upon my personal exploration of nonmonogamous relationships, not from the consistent identification as insider in the contexts under study. The selection of fieldwork

sites for participant observation was informed by my personal interest and the research process: I began the research through two dating sites in which I had previously been an active member. I also later joined dating sites and advocacy groups in which I considered myself a genuine participant. For instance, I became an active member of nonmonogamy advocacy groups, followed their Facebook groups, participated in meetings and actively contributed to activities of the organizations. My participation in the dating sites was 'real', in the sense that I never engaged in conversations or met people just for the sake of research. I presented myself as both a researcher and as a woman in her mid-40s in an open relationship and with children, with a genuine interest in finding friends and sexual-romantic relationships through dating. Nevertheless, this 'genuine' participation did not prevent me from feeling like an outsider at times. As previously pointed out by many auto-ethnographers (DeLyser, 2001; Griffith, 1998; Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Onyango-Ouma, 2006), the distinction between insider and outsider is unavoidably a fuzzy one. I participated, for instance, in adultery dating sites while, unlike most other participants, I was not 'cheating' on my partner. Also, I did not always feel like an 'insider' in consensual non-monogamy advocacy groups, unlike some members who tended to designate the groups as their 'tribe'. While I initially thought the term 'polyamory' would have the political potential through which I could identify, the apolitical vision of polyamory that seemed to prevail in the groups made me feel at odds with the term. Moreover, my membership claim was repeatedly questioned by some other members whose subtle remarks made me understand that a 'real' polyamorous identity could only be claimed by people being (or having been) part of an extended poly relationship network, not by a person whose factual relationship status is an open couple relationship.

My claim of 'insider' status particularly refers to the intentionality of my participation that exceeded research agendas. In that sense, my participation was, in the first place, 'genuine', irrespective of the extent to which I was able to feel 'at home' or make significant connections to other people. I did not refrain from entering into close relationships with other people in 'the field', yet 'the field' disappeared as soon as people entered my (real) life. This is not to say that these 'real life' interactions with other people would not enhance my own

understanding of the research process and add to the research project. In actuality, these 'lived' experiences provided some of the most intense moments of understanding that went beyond the rational and cognitive to also include learning that took place through emotions and the body. While the liminal status of this kind of 'data', between research and 'real life', usually prevented me from reporting on them, they inevitably nourished the process of analysis.

Embodied learning in intimate ethnography

In this section, I aim to document how deep and embodied understanding can be obtained through experiences in emotional-sexual relationships that are forged within the fuzzy boundaries between research and private life. I also claim that acknowledgment of and reporting on these instances of learning can significantly substantiate the reflexive accounts of how knowledge is produced. I illustrate my point by recounting how the break-up with a friend, to whom I will refer with the pseudonym Thomas, constituted a moment of embodied understanding of the power mechanisms at work. In what follows, it is my intention to unpack the scripts and discourses that guided actions, not to condemn the individual actors who drew on these scripts.

I had met Thomas eight months earlier through a dating site. At the time, he was in his late 40s and divorced with one child. He identified as 'ethically non-monogamous', a term used in the non-monogamy communities to point to a relationship style that is premised upon ideas of mutual respect and open communication. We became friends, and after about six months we became (from my experience) lovers. The following two to three months we spent many hours chatting with each other and occasionally I stayed over at his house. I experienced these months as exciting and fun, although I found it somehow difficult that he avoided talking about where he wanted the relationship to go. After we had spent a weekend together, the way he responded to my messages suddenly changed. He responded late (and then only briefly) or ignored them, and when I tried to call him a couple of times to find out if something was wrong, he did not answer his phone. Finally, he sent me a message in which he told me that he was just busy. Three weeks later and at my insistence, he agreed to talk over the phone. He repeated that he was still too busy, and after I asked him

more questions, he said that he found that the last time he was with me it did not feel completely right. This rather short telephone conversation confirmed my worries, yet I still did not understand what had necessitated this sudden break-up. For me, that last weekend had not been significantly different than our previous encounters. I remember that he had told me that he was extremely happy that I was there, and that I had enjoyed his company and was moved, for instance, by the passion with which he had shared detailed anecdotes about his favourite writers. While the extremely hot summer night had prevented me from sleeping well and had somehow affected my mood and energy on the second day of my time with Thomas, I had felt happy hanging out on the couch together and doing nothing. I had not seen it coming at all. One week after the telephone conversation, and after I had gone to his house, but he had refused to open the door while I was sure he was at home, I sent him a long email. In that email I extensively explained that I felt hurt and that talking tends to significantly reduce the time I need for emotional healing and asked him if we could meet. He replied that he was moved by my email but ‘really [did] not want this kind of stuff’. He added that I could not hold him responsible for my feelings, and that ‘things aren’t easy but [I] had to get over it’. He ended his brief response by sharing with me that he had nothing to offer and that we should keep a distance from each other.

What I found was most remarkable about this breakup with Thomas was that my request for an explanation after his sudden and dramatic switch in attitude towards me – which could be designated as somehow capricious and irrational – had put me in the position of an overemotional and irrational person. The way he dramatically and suddenly refused any contact made me de facto powerless to act upon the situation. He forced me into the position in which I had basically no other option than to just accept his unwillingness to provide any explanation and/or emotional help, as any alternative reaction would cast me in the stereotypical role of the crazy ex-girlfriend – the possibility of being stereotyped as such I felt most painfully when he refused to open his door. In other sexual and/or romantic relationships or encounters with dating partners during and in the years before my research project, I had also experienced how assertiveness on my part was easily met with suspicion and defensiveness, as if any initiative

from me necessarily constituted a potential sign of an obsessive nature. Moreover, my tendency to (what I consider) generously give in relationships (my time, affection and emotional support) was almost consistently interpreted as a desire to take (their time and emotional work). The repetition of these experiences, and the fact that in spite of my intellectual and rhetorical abilities, I seemed to be unable to make myself understandable and avoid being forced into gendered-stereotypical scripts, left me with feelings of anger and powerlessness.

Moreover, I found it interesting to see how Thomas somehow managed to establish himself as the one who had the responsibility to keep the situation under control through his telling me that distance was necessary. He not only managed to designate his uncaring stance and unwillingness to provide any emotional labour as 'normal' (which followed from his belief that he was not accountable for the potential consequences of his behaviour, despite my needs), but also claimed that his lack of care was necessary to enable me to cool down. Moreover, he seemed so convinced of correctness, that I had started to doubt the legitimacy of my request and started to question my emotional-psychological health. My doubts and loss of self-confidence made me realize that gendered power mechanisms were at work, and that they were intertwined with a prevailing neoliberal subjectivity, privileging the doctrine of detached individualism over notions of responsibility and care. I realized that the comments and advice of some of my friends and of members of the advocacy groups with whom I talked about my feelings, were also playing a role in the broader dynamics that reinforced this gendered neoliberal narrative of individualism and self-reliance. Many of their comments were embedded in the discourse of neoliberal self-help culture that tended to legitimize a narcissistic, self-centred style of living (Illouz, 2008). While many suggestions were well-intended and aimed to comfort me and included the notion that I should not let relationship failures deflate my self-confidence and self-love, many of the comments nevertheless encouraged me to look to myself for answers and to perhaps seek therapy. While most disapproved of Thomas' dominance and lack of care – in some cases attributing it to purported character flaws or psychological traumas – my angry and emotional reaction to being treated this

way was problematized and psychologized, and as such made me feel more trapped in the trope of the overemotional crazy ex-girlfriend. One person most strongly voiced a power-evasive understanding of the individual, that is, an understanding that dismisses the impact of structural power inequalities, in their explanation that being a victim is a choice, and that I am the only one who was responsible for feeling bad about the situation.

The incident also made clear to me how non-normative, non-monogamous relationships in particular also included power dynamics that structure traditional relationship models. While dominant relationship rules are consciously rejected, the renegotiation of seemingly traditional power dynamics on a case-by-case basis tended to create a battlefield of competing interests and perspectives. The context of non-normativity in which the relationship was initiated required a constant negotiation of its meaning. My self-doubt was certainly reinforced by my own critical stance towards traditional relationship values and expectations, yet was also the result of gendered scripts through which meaning unfolded. My emotions, thoughts and feelings of anger and shame – and how they were framed by others – helped me understand how values and strategies of relationality and care get discredited in the everyday context of intimate relationships, even in contexts in which a discourse of ‘ethical’ non-monogamy prevails.

My understanding and analysis of the incident cannot of course be separated from the other research through which I gained understanding, yet, as Lerum (2001: 481) explains, ‘it is the unarmored data experience that gives any analysis its “heart”’. Through the many chats and interview conversations I had with cisgender men on dating sites, I had already been able to identify a discourse that reflects a sex-oriented dating culture that expects participants to function as hedonistic and emotionally detached individuals, discharged from any responsibility to others. I have argued that this traditionally ‘masculine’ mode of interaction has obtained a hegemonic hold in dating culture and has thus become seen as interaction void of expectations and demands (de Graeve, 2018). Yet experiences such as the one I have just described, made me feel how this ‘no-expectations’ culture works and is sustained. My ‘real’ participation in

non-monogamous dating culture, as an ‘insider’ starting from a different set of expectations than the one upheld as self-evident – as I was searching for more meaningful and emotionally satisfying connections with men – made it possible to unpack the mechanisms which sustain the dominant framework, and which eliminate alternative trajectories. Experiencing and going through emotions was essential in gaining understanding of the subtle mechanisms that devalue emotional work and uphold a discourse that naturalizes an uncaring culture focused on individualized hedonistic satisfaction. Experiencing through ‘lived’ participation produced deep, embodied and passionate understanding that enabled me to move ‘from dry, detached writings and analysis to passionate writing that ultimately inspires critical analysis’ (Lerum, 2001: 481). In the next section I discuss the (moral) challenges and tensions that accompany intimate auto-ethnographic research and writing.

Intimate ethnography: Challenges and tensions

A substantial body of feminist work has debunked the myth of impersonal, independent, objective science (e.g. Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991) and has paved the way for a research practice that acknowledges the researcher’s inevitable presence in the research process. Following this body of feminist work, scholars from a variety of disciplines have pointed towards the role of researchers’ interpersonal and structural positions and the relevance of acknowledging and reporting on personal experiences to substantiate the reflexive accounts of how knowledge and understanding is shaped by the researcher. Among researchers using ethnographic methodology, and queer ethnography in particular (e.g. Rooke, 2010; Wekker, 2006), there has also been increasing attention for the researchers’ sexual, emotional and relational positioning. This field of scholarship holds central the researcher’s experience and embodiment in the field as a key feature. The appropriateness and relevance of sexual and emotional immersion – and reporting on it – have increasingly been the subject of debate among anthropologists and other social scientists (e.g. De Craene, 2017; Kulick and Willson, 2003), as the issue of physically and emotionally engaged participation in research continues to stir discomfort. While prolonged and intensive participant observation in everyday

activities – including rituals, work, and leisure activities – is widely lauded as an effective method for gaining deep understanding of the culture under study and grasping ‘the native point of view’ (Geertz, 1993: 55), the researcher’s participation in sexual(ized) activities and intimate relationships seems to be easily dismissed as unethical or even exploitative (see for instance the controversy fuelled by Goode’s (1999) account of his sexual encounters with research participants). When it comes to sexual activities and using data that emerges from participating in sexual activities or relationships, it seems that different standards arise.

I initially found myself feeling hesitant in my openness about the autoethnographic nature of my research and the participatory aspects of my research methods. In daily life, I am able to navigate between my being married with two children and my somehow more complex relationship life with varying degrees of openness and secrecy towards colleagues, friends and family, dependent on – how I estimate – the opinions of my interlocutors. Participating in practices that do not fit the ideological framework of ‘compulsory monogamy’ (Emens, 2004), however, require the researcher to provide private information for the sake of academic reflexivity, which forces her ‘to come out of the closet’ in both her personal and professional life. Despite being widely practised, non-monogamy largely remains a taboo subject, and being perceived as ‘promiscuous’ might endanger one’s respectability and professional authority. Moreover, women’s reports about emotional and personal involvement in the field might be more prone to be considered unprofessional, as women are often gender stereotyped as less rational (see e.g. Hubbard, 1990).

A second issue that emerged from my ethnographic research methodology is the issue of overtness of research. The total overtness that is prescribed by ethical codes would have required me to present myself in my dating site profile text as a researcher in search of people who wanted to talk about their dating experience.

This would have enabled chat interviews yet would have hampered participation. I therefore decided to start from a regular profile, in which I

uploaded a picture to show myself in a flattering way and in which I gave a short description of my personality and what I hoped to find in the dating site. It was only in the course of conversation that I informed people about my double agenda. Because of the gendered dynamics of heterosexual dating, it was usually the men who contacted me, and I only responded to those messages that sparked my sincere dating interest. Early on in the chat, I informed my interlocutors that my participation in the dating sites was sincere, yet also that there was the possibility of the interaction becoming significant for research. Some conversations, however, were too brief to bring this up. With the people with whom I had longer conversations, and whom I actually met and/or developed more intense friendships or relationships, I usually elaborately discussed my research methodology and analyses and I invited some of them to think with me and reflect on my writings. However, the development of friendships and relationships often made my position as a researcher invisible, and generated moments that only in hindsight could have been labelled research. I therefore concur with authors who have pointed to the dangers of simplistic moral evaluations of the covert aspects in research and argue for the need for a more 'pragmatic examination of why concealment arises in research' (Lugosi, 2006).

I believe that in any participant observation research setting, total overttness and continued informed consent from all relevant participants is quasi impossible. Even though while conducting participant observation, I took care to communicate my position as a researcher to as many people as possible it may have gone unnoticed to some of the group members. Moreover, as an ethnographer of predominantly western, middle-class contexts, I often noticed that – although I had explained my research methods – my interlocutors nevertheless assumed I was there to find research participants for surveys or interviews – in other words for what they considered to be 'real' research – and had not necessarily read my participation in activities as an act of research in itself. In contrast to certain populations who find themselves 'over-studied' by ethnographers and have the knowledge and skills of recognizing ethnographic methods, western people in privileged positions are typically not acquainted with being the object of ethnographic observation and might not see that their

acts and discourse are being researched. This reflection shows how overt research and consent are processes of constant negotiation and fluctuation and are highly dependent on the researcher's intentions, but also on the in- and outsiderness of the researcher, on the experiences and knowledge of the actors involved and on the intensity of relationships.

While it seems unhelpful to label 'covert' aspects in research as inherently ethical or unethical, it seems equally unhelpful to praise or dismiss immersion in sexual or emotional acts or relationships 'in the field'. Irwin (2006) rightly argues that the ethics of having sex with informants should not be the centre of the research ethics debate, but how we can avoid harm and exploitation. She suggests that we not only need to acknowledge differing structural locations that we and informants occupy, but also analyse the ways in which we enact inequalities, and how we resist or cope with structures (Irwin, 2006).

Towards an ethics of vulnerability and care

In this section, I try to sketch the contours of what a research ethics that is useful in intimate ethnographic research might look like. This includes an ethics that is sensitive to power inequalities in the field and centres the concept of vulnerability.

Ethnographic research is not easily captured in ready-made rules and universalized principles, therefore making it difficult to sync with institutional research ethics that typically aim to reduce complex human interaction in the field to a checklist of do's and don'ts. Any relationship in the field during ethnographic research is no less complex and riven by power dynamics and imbalances and requires the application of equally complex and nuanced ethical strategies. In the case of auto-ethnographic research in which the distinctions between research and personal locations have become particularly blurred, institutional research protocols become even less helpful.

In the course of doing the research and my immersion in non-monogamous dating cultures in Belgium, the concept of vulnerability became increasingly central to my understanding of human interaction and the power dynamics that

structure them. While vulnerability is a shared human condition, the extent to which one is able to protect oneself against others' violence is unevenly distributed through power structures (Butler, 2003) – making vulnerability an emblem of power and control. In heterosexual non-monogamous dating, the extent to which one is able to inhabit the subject position of the detached, autonomous and invulnerable subject seems an essential factor in one's ability to be 'in charge' of the situation. Ideals of masculine detachment and feminine relatedness differently structure one's enacting of that ability. The stereotypically 'feminine' desires that women tend to be forced into put women in a much more precarious position in relation to dominant dating culture protocols than the stereotypically 'masculine' desires that men are expected to inhabit. My repeated experiences of being hurt and dumped in the course of my research had created my awareness of this vulnerability. The mask of invulnerability that was often strategically used by the men I met (to mask their feelings of vulnerability or ineptitude), made me realize that this gendered 'fantasy of mastery' – to use Butler's (2003: 18) term – hampers the ability to connect to others – be it as a researcher or as a lover, a friend, a companion.

However, I believe that my desire to find close interpersonal connection fuelled my vulnerability and was reinforced by gendered power scripts, and simultaneously constituted a site for my resistance. The strategy of invulnerability in the dominant culture of non-monogamous dating is in line with a general socio-cultural overevaluation of invulnerability in neoliberal culture (Gilson, 2013). This positions the courage to be vulnerable as subversive and counterhegemonic, and as such, opens up a space of potential. Adopting radical vulnerability constitutes a position of epistemic marginality that can offer 'to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (hooks, 1989: 207). As Braidotti (2008) argues in her plea for an ethics of affirmation, vulnerability is not something that needs to be avoided, but rather to be taken as the starting point for ethical transformation. Acting vulnerably and carefully responding to vulnerability has the potential to disrupt the normative imagery of intimacy and relationships that is inhabited by a neoliberal discourse that privatizes (rather than shares) responsibilities for risk (Gilson, 2016). It enables making visible and unpacking

gendered and neoliberal power dynamics, the inequities on which they are premised and the kind of connections between people they enable/disable.

In addition, my vulnerability as a researcher constituted a deliberate act of resistance against normative ideas of emotional detachment as necessary for rigorous academic work. I acted vulnerably, both as a 'real' person and as a researcher – as I did not experience the two as being separated. Instead of attempting to be a neutral observer, I gave up the position of the detached researcher, fully participating in face-to-face and group conversations and being open about my experiences and opinions. As soon as I started writing about my research I discussed my analyses with 'participants in the field' (friends, (ex)lovers, advocacy group members), let them comment on my drafts, listened to their thoughts, and occasionally had fights or arguments. The animated conversations from these interactions invariably contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the research. While most participants adopted a rather apolitical, postfeminist stance and did not necessarily agree with all aspects of my interpretation, many confirmed my observations, yet helped me to include different perspectives and levels of analysis. Some participants provided me with insights into their own feelings of vulnerability and inability to resist gendered scripts, or into their strategies of trying to subvert or resist normative liberal masculinity (for instance through adopting high ethical standards in their relationships, which included care, empathy, responsibility and transparent communication). I concur with Lerum (2001: 481) when she argues that 'it is the combination of emotional engagement with one's informants (whereby informants can demonstrate their own interpersonal power and truth) and basic empirical verification that produces critical knowledge, which is both self-reflexive and able to critique the power relations between people, institutions, and culture'.

Behar, in her book *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996) passionately pleads for the researcher's right to act and speak vulnerably. Wekker (2006: 4) emphasizes that this right to act vulnerably and the acknowledgement of sexual subjectivity in particular is not 'a license for an unbridled, honorless exploitation of the Other on a more intimate level than has thus far generally been acknowledged'.

Nor is the plea for writing in a vulnerable way a plea for gratuitous self-exposure. I argue, with Gilson (2013), that an ethics of vulnerability offers a powerful counternarrative to the decontextualized principles, detached reasoning, and disembodied selves that characterize dominant ethical thinking in academic research. This envisioning of an alternative research/relationship ethics, or an 'ethics of intersubjective vulnerability', defines vulnerability as being 'open to being affected and affecting in ways that one cannot control' (Gilson, 2013: 2), and is also informed by a feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). The ethics of care, which came out of feminist moral philosophy, centralizes the 'relational self' (in contrast to the autonomous, disembodied knower), and therefore, a 'voice-centred, relational method' for 'attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility' (Held, 2006), in other words, the people we interact with in our research/life. A willingness to be vulnerable and to carefully respond to others' vulnerability opens ways to unmask and leave behind the ideology of emotional detachment, an ideology that mainly serves to protect power and privileges, including the power of academic privilege (Lerum, 2001). Or as Braidotti (2008) argues, 'one has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection and of immunization from potential harm by others'. While acting vulnerably (in research, in private life or in the blurry zones between the two) will not prevent us from hurting others or from being hurt, or escaping from our own entanglements in power relations, it can nevertheless constitute a radical political choice.

Conclusion

In her book *The Politics of Passion*, Wekker (2006) persuasively demonstrates how during her fieldwork among Afro-Surinamese working-class women in Suriname her intense relationship with a woman 40 years her senior contributed to her unique and 'thick' understanding of the functioning of power not only in the private sphere of building kinship and sexual subjectivities, but also in relation to the national and global arenas. By living 'with gusto, with passion, with curiosity', by meaningfully connecting 'with illuminated parts of [her] self and with significant others' (Wekker, 2006: 54), the boundaries

between doing research and living 'one of the happiest periods in [her] life and being funded to live it' (Wekker, 2006: 54) disappeared. Building her ethnography around her process of learning, Wekker vulnerably exposes her own multifaceted positionality within shifting power structures and relationships and elucidates how this shaped her understanding of the politics of passion of the women she studied. It is through her vulnerable interaction with others (in contrast to the position of disembodied, objective researcher) and her transparent, accountable and reflexive account of the different modalities in which she engaged with others (Wekker, 2006), that her ethnography cogently functions to deconstruct the dominant imagery of black female sexuality.

Wekker's ethnography is a particularly compelling example of how research and writing guided by an ethics of vulnerability may not only provide us with a 'thick' and rich description of the social context under study but enables the illumination of the complexity of discourses and power relationships in which the researcher and the researched are inevitably entangled. In this article, I have tried to draw a silhouette of these dilemmas of research ethics and possible ways forward. Recounting critical moments of learning and understanding in the course of my research on non-monogamous relationships and dating in Belgium, I have explained how the concept of vulnerability became a central concept to my understanding of the culture that I studied and to my methodological approach and research ethics. I described how my embodied experience of the prevalent culture of invulnerability (in both daily life and research), contributed to my assessment for the need to re-value vulnerability as a condition of ambivalent potential. Through this account, I have tried to show that an ethics of vulnerability has a political potential in the sense that it constitutes a strong stance against 'the subjectivity privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems, namely, that of the prototypical, arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master-subject' (Gilson, 2013: 312). It is an ethics that has the potential to make visible and unsettle the power, violence and closure that is enacted through that model. As Behar (1996: 174) argues, vulnerable and reflexive acting and writing opens up the ability 'to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion

and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life'. It is an ethics of vulnerability that ultimately enables passionate critical thinking and processes of (activist) envisioning of a different social reality.

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1. Interviewees were recruited through participant observation activities and via a call for respondents that was disseminated through non-monogamy Facebook groups. The criterion for selection was that the person was or had been involved in non-monogamous relationships. Interviews occurred after a consent procedure was completed with each participant. In chat interviews, where interlocutors remained anonymous and a signed consent agreement was impossible to obtain, consent was achieved through chat conversation. Also in offline interactions I was always open and honest regarding my research. Through discussions about the research and methods, both in one-to-one conversations and through presentations and workshops, I aimed to ensure ongoing informed consent from the group members. For participation in Facebook groups, I announced my presence as a researcher to the administrators and/or through a post on the group wall.

In addition, I always asked explicit permission from the authors of a particular post or comment for using excerpts from it in presentations or publications. I also informed interviewees and chat interlocutors (except when they had remained anonymous) about the use of excerpts of their words. In all cases, I took utmost care to respect my interlocutors' confidentiality and protect their anonymity.

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