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Research Article

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Home and Exile – Dancing in the Mess of Contradictions

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Abstract: This is a meta-reflection on the methodological and epistemological challenges of doing ethnographic theology in a context outside the church or religious communities. Particularly, it argues that in a multi- or inter-disciplinary setting theologians are placed in a precarious position when it comes to use of language, theories and concepts if they want to speak simultaneously to the people they encounter in the field and to their “own” scientific community. The article asks how a researcher can do theology in a secular environment without doing violence towards ones interlocutors and still be considered to “belong” in the theological community? Based on the lived experiences of ongoing research and particularly concerning the gathering and telling the stories of Women in the Natural sciences, the author weaves together Eileen Campbell-Reed’s and Sarah Coakley’s methodological frameworks in order to present her own method of contemplative dance. The author uses rich metaphors and the sensory experience of “Home” and “Exile” in relationship to the movements in a foot to bring forth her embodied insights about dancing in the messy entanglement of ethnographic research.

Keywords: ethnography, theology, dance, contemplative method, feminist, embodied knowing, multidisciplinary research, practical theology, systematic theology, pilgrimage

In a dance class with my Nia teacher Ann Christiansen, we explored what it means to move with dynamic ease in unstable times. She explained that the body’s design tells us that the feet that carry us through life have three main points for connection to the earth. The foot’s outer arch and the side are needed when we spring-loadedly leap into the air or land on our feet. The bone of the big toe is the place of balance. When it co-operates with the outer arch, we can, for example, propel forward or land into a bow stance. Finally, the heel bone is designed for resting, for bringing the whole body into relaxation and peace.

This essay will explore these same three dynamics in a multidisciplinary research project. I will argue that theological ethnography is a practice that, metaphorically speaking, at its best, teaches the researcher to dance in the mess of contradictions. Simultaneously, I will also argue that, at least for me, as a dancing theologian, this is not only a metaphor. When I can sense the movements transplanting themselves from the calcaneus, through the edges of my foot into the big toe, propelling me forward in motion, this is the sensory articulation of moving from the landing in a metaphorical space of “Home” into the exilic experience of not belonging and finally continuing into a pilgrimage walk into the unknown. If each sensory experience of this motion is articulated well, I may grow on my path of moving in the mess of

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contradictions.¹ To learn how to dance in a multidisciplinary research setting, more emphasis needs to be placed on the long-term continuity of becoming intimate with the described phases of this *Theology in via*.²

1 Introduction

In the autumn of 2019, I was brought into a multi-disciplinary research project to study communication and ethics through participatory ethnographic research.³ In this essay, I will reflect upon the methodological challenges created by such a project. In her “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” Eileen Campbell-Reed states that the kind of “meta” reflection about the messiness of ethnographic research, which I attempt to do in this essay, is often kept in the margins.⁴ In this essay, I wish to bring it to the core of what I am writing. Secondly, I want to start formulating an answer to how the ethnographic research that I am conducting could be considered theological research. The question how my research is theological is not just an arbitrary one. It has been brought to my attention both in review processes and from colleagues in the field.⁵ For that task, I combine my own experiences in the field with theoretical frameworks provided by Eileen Campbell-Reed and Sarah Coakley. My goal is to develop how Campbell-Reed’s and Coakley’s thinking can be ethically applied to a non-church ethnographic setting.

A somewhat easy solution to why a theologian might be invited into a project where people from biology, chemistry and physics study cell communication is to emphasise the ethical dimensions of the researchers potentially “playing god” with the parameters of life, death and health.⁶ Although there is much to be said about the statement “playing god,” I found out that there was very little explicit talking

¹ This essay’s frequent use of I is not primarily a consequence of an essayistic style. Instead, the language choice stems from a deeply held ethical decision related to knowledge production at universities more generally and particularly the ethnographic method as a research process. For the epistemological and ontological views, feminist standpoint theory by Sandra Harding and Thomas Nagel’s “The view from nowhere,” are but two of many examples of critique towards the traditions of research conducted at universities where objectivity is “secured” by supposedly detracting the researcher from the arguments and materials through reverting to a falsely made claim of neutrality. Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” 437–70; Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, speaking from the I does not make academic writing useless in its subjectivity. Instead, well used, it is a way to go beyond superficial constructs of distancing to more deeply relevant recognition of the limits of our positionality. Notably, within the field of ethnography – with an acknowledged history of violence – where the supposedly detached and objective positions have been used to demarcate “the Other” as racially, intellectually and emotionally inferior, I find it highly problematic to write in a manner where the observer is removed from the depiction. As will be further elaborated in this essay, simple reflexivity is also not the answer to some of the questions raised by this critique. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Dreyer, “Knowledge, Subjectivity, (De)coloniality, and the Conundrum of Reflexivity,” 101–4. What I instead aim to achieve with the use of I in my writing is both transparency around my reflections and an invitation to my fellow researchers to engage in dialogue and share their experiences of the phenomena at hand.

² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 88.

³ My definitions on the differences between inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary research are taken from: Choi and Pak, “Multi-disciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, and Transdisciplinarity in Health Research, Services, Education and Policy,” E224–32. They are further explained in forthcoming articles.

⁴ Idestrom and Kaufman, *What Really Matters*, 310, 78. Simultaneously, Campbell-Reed is known for well-articulated meta reflections about theological ethnography also in other places. Campbell-Reed and Scharen, “Ethnography on Holy Ground,” 232–59; Campbell-Reed, “Feminism and Fieldwork;” Campbell-Reed, “The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research,” 33–59.

⁵ Throughout this essay, I will be using the simple statement of colleagues, fellow researchers or team members when I refer to the researchers in biology, physics and chemistry that are part of the research team where I am doing my ethnographic research. The way I perceive the work of an ethnographer – which will become more apparent throughout this essay – prevents me from referring to my team members as informants. Even though we are two theologians in the overall research project, I am the only one working in the field. In contrast, when I write “colleagues in the field,” I am referring to the broader community of theologians and researchers in religious studies.

⁶ This is something even the people I work with have pointed out to me quite recently. (2021.11.11.115). The coding system I am using here are references to my NVivo project which stores the ethnographic materials I have gathered between September 2019 up to the present.

about ethics in the research project I had entered.⁷ More importantly, though, the researchers do not see themselves as “playing god” even though they frequently speak about their research aiming at deciding cell fate in time and space. Interestingly enough, whenever my colleagues expressed that “Now we are delving into ethical issues,”⁸ I – as the supposed expert on ethics – often found those discussions lacking deeper layers of significance and ethical relevance. In congruence with this, when I thought that “now we have finally arrived to the ethical dimensions of the research,” my colleagues from biology, chemistry and physics seemed to be oblivious to the sources of my interest. Such discrepancies deserve further elaboration. I will thus need to address this in a future article. At the same time, they also actualise the central question of this essay: What, apart from the discussions where ethics and theology may meet, makes my research theological in the collaboration I have been invited into?

2 Background

The actual project description that I was given when entering this study has the following goal: “Testing and developing criteria for better sensitivity for internal and external research ethics, societal concerns/expectations and responsible communication.”⁹ The task I was given was to follow the communication and ethics in the group to identify things that are not working and then provide solutions to how such problems could be changed.

Again, returning to some more traditional forms of theological research in the Nordic setting, one possible strand of thought which might explain how my participatory observations are “theology” would be to claim that I am conducting a form of worldview or “outlook on life” study.¹⁰ When I follow the way the researchers communicate with each other, one potential obstacle for understanding might be that their worldviews are so different from each other that their communication falters. There are apparent language barriers and communication challenges between the researchers from the various disciplines. These make themselves even more prominent, particularly when the researchers want to make their research known to a broader public.¹¹

More explicitly speaking though, I was not invited into this study to research the worldviews or outlook on life the researchers are carrying. There might, of course, be well-stipulated reasons to bring in the theories of worldviews when this is an appropriate lens through which some of the researched materials become more clear. Simultaneously, I would find it deeply unethical to start formulating a research paper solely around a topic that my colleagues never understood to be the ground of our collaboration.¹² Changing the focus of my research topic to “fit” more traditionally known topics of theological discussion – as reviewers have suggested – would not just stipulate a breach of trust. It would also break the informed consent agreements that I have signed with each of our research team members. In the tension of this question arises one of the unexpected insights I have gained through this project. I realise now how messy it is not so much to conduct theological research in a multidisciplinary research project. Instead, the challenge lies in finding a theoretical framework through which these findings make sense both to the field of theology and to the fellow researchers with whom I have been placed to do the research. Is it even possible to dance between these fields?

⁷ As the practice of ethnography does allow for bringing up also implicit practices in the field, this does not completely exclude writing about them.

⁸ From weekly meetings and discussions only the following occasions have explicit references to ethical concerns, dilemmas or questions: 2019.09.09.01; 2019.10.25.09; 2019.11.18.17; 2019.12.10.20; 2020.02.17; 2020.04.27.23; 2020.06.10.33; 2020.11.03.61; 2020.12.09.78; 2021.01.18.04; 2021.04.12.39; 2021.04.16.42; 2021.04.21.44; 2021.08.16.79.

⁹ Research Plan.

¹⁰ For more recent articles on the differences between worldview and “outlook on life” studies in the Nordic setting see: Gustavsson, “Begreppet Livsåskådning I En Historisk Och Nutida Belysning;” Gustavsson, “Existential Configurations,” 25–35.

¹¹ These topics I have discussed in previous articles.

¹² I will return to this topic further ahead.

3 Ethnography

Stipulated in another way, one could argue that my colleagues in biology, chemistry and physics did not primarily ask for a collaboration with the field of theology. Instead, they wanted an ethical and institutional ethnography partner in their project, and the person who was skilled to do this work happened to be a theologian.¹³ This means that a further layer of messiness and contradictions that I have faced is to clarify the difference between ethnography and theological ethnography. In this work, I find the writings of Sarah Coakley and Eileen Campbell-Reed to be helpful.

One of the challenges of our project is to develop ethical sensitivity and responsible communication both in a community and in relation to a larger societal setting.¹⁴ Studying such a complex and multi-dimensional question as ethical sensitivity and communication in a research group, Campbell-Reed's arguments about case studies come well in hand. She reminds us that case studies are not primarily made for generalisations.¹⁵ Rather, they reveal practical knowledge and single instances of deeply contextually embedded (something that cannot be grasped by dissection) phenomena, which may, at a later point, also be shown to be a larger pattern.¹⁶

To exemplify, in our project, the ethnographic research method was chosen as it has the unique capacity to pick up the nuances in language use and discrepancies between the spoken word and people's actions. People may say one thing and then act in a completely different manner. More importantly, most human communication is non-verbal. Differences in meaning may shift with the tone of the voice, the body's gestures, and how one conducts oneself in space.¹⁷ As a dancer, these are "cues" I am trained to notice and relate to in my interactions with people. Thus, following and gathering insight into all of the above, not just the spoken dialogues and written communications, has been the materials through which I gathered insight about the communication and ethical sensitivity present in our group.

Other essential topics Campbell-Reed brings to the table concerning case studies and ethnographic fieldwork are their unique capacity to highlight the relational nature of knowing and how these examples can be used to teach practical wisdom to those who will face similar situations as the fieldwork describes.¹⁸ I was brought into the research team because ethnographic fieldwork was something I had been doing in my previous research. Additionally, the social and institutional patterns of different forms of interaction that the team wanted to gain insight into are something that institutional ethnography is well equipped to be able to detect.¹⁹ Ultimately, there is even a goal that our research might write recommendations to other multidisciplinary research teams at our university about communication and ethics.

4 Home

Historically institutional and ethnographic research in theology is often conducted within practical theology, focusing on church or hospital settings.²⁰ Eileen Campbell-Reed explains that after the "turn

¹³ This is not the whole truth. Simultaneously though, it is a fact that the partnership was based on other factors than a thorough understanding from the people in physics, chemistry and biology of what theological research is about.

¹⁴ I refer to our project here, as we are two theologians connected to the project. However, I am the only one conducting field work and actively engaging with the rest of our team.

¹⁵ She also points out that case studies can be used for generalisation. Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research," 33–59. The mechanism of this is however slightly different than what my colleagues in the team would understand to be generalisation.

¹⁶ Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research," 33–59. She exemplifies with the often referenced practices of Barbara McClintock who first were scorned and later won her a Nobel Prize. Raami, "Intuitio3."

¹⁷ Flick, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, 664, 38.

¹⁸ Campbell-Reed, "The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research," 33–59.

¹⁹ Lund, *Doing the Ideal Academic*, 29–42.

²⁰ See examples of this in Ideström, *Spåren I Snön – Att Vara Kyrka I Norrländska Glesbygder*; Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption*, 268; Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*.

to practice” in the 1990s, also a growing number of systematic theologians and ethicists started to adopt the tools of anthropology and sociology in the way they did qualitative research. A critical insight in the field was that anthropology’s colonial gaze, which exotified the other by emphasising “objective” distance and personal detachment, was replaced by the willingness to enter into relational patterns of interacting.²¹ Campbell-Reed explains the work of current day ethnography to be a process of entering into the familiar and making:

the “familiar strange” in order to understand more and then make it newly strange to my readers, so that they might learn more about the situation as well.²²

Entering into the familiar, landing at “Home,” is very much how I see the starting point of our teamwork. In my previous research, the community I landed in was that of dancers in the Church of Sweden. I am not a member of the Church of Sweden, but I am a theologian and a dancer, so a connection was established. The institution I am now conducting research in is a university, and the setting is a research team. I was not familiar with the world of biology, physics and chemistry, but I have been working in a university and done research in a space where many disciplines meet. Furthermore, I was counting on the possibility of human connections.

In Campbell-Reed’s description of theological ethnography, the traits needed in a researcher to conduct good ethnographic research are very much concerned with the capacity to relate. She explains how sharing stories together in a deeply embodied manner – where her training as a pastor merges with her training as a researcher – has ended up with her even becoming friends with the people she interviewed.²³ From my previous study, I also knew that my research depends on the level of trust created. With landing at “Home,” I am thus not thinking of a merging of people that we all think or feel the same or the need for us to be somehow similar.

In contrast, this relational aspect of my research may be in stark opposition to particular views of the objectivity and neutrality of a researcher that my fellow team members carry in relation to how they see that research needs to be done.²⁴ Simultaneously, I always felt warmly welcomed by my colleagues in the team – sensing that we created bonds of trust relatively easily – even when they had a hard time understanding exactly what my research was about.²⁵

Home is, thus, for me, a sense of connecting. I and my fellow researchers’ touch base – if only for a short moment. It can be the gaze of our eyes meeting, standing side-by-side when looking at a horizon, “knowing” that we are part of the same team when entering a lecture hall full of people from other research communities. Experiencing that we have walked some miles in front of each other’s faces – seen our good and bad days.²⁶ A particular form of this connection is made visible when I have one-on-one discussions with people in my team. Sometimes they even ask me for personal advice – as they “know” that I have seen and heard what has been going on in the room.

As long as this sense of “Home” is a wordless interaction, I do, from time to time, wonder if my fellow researchers also sense, feel and perceive connections. It would be foolish to claim, with certainty, that we sense the same things. And yet again, attachment theory and research on attunement also stipulate that even this kind of wordless connection can be measured.²⁷ More importantly, though, when I receive the trust of my fellow researcher, or we embark on a joint challenge together, it shows that there is enough

²¹ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 80–5.

²² *Ibid.*, 85.

²³ *Ibid.*, 79–91.

²⁴ This shows in their amazement of my use of I in articles and their fascination with the fact that I am not searching for repeatability in my “experiments” etc.

²⁵ See forthcoming article.

²⁶ Levinas and Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity*.

²⁷ Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 432; Milligan et al., “Maternal Attachment and the Communication of Emotion Through Song;” Gottman, “The Science of Trust;” Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

relaxation, peace and contact between us for the next movement to be possible.²⁸ I can be critical of the type, form and range of our connection – as a researcher should be. And if I bring only suspicion into the relationship, the connection is undoubtedly lost.²⁹

5 Outer side arch

As I see it, this sense of connection and landing in a rare moment of “Home” is a gift. As soon as I try to grasp it or control it, it will vanish. Similarly, when I am asked to stipulate what makes my research theological; when I need to relate to my “finding” in the fieldwork; or to answer my fellow researchers about what I have noticed in the group, I am pulled into a movement away from “Home.” Bengt Kristensson Ugglå describes that at the core of what words, language and concepts bring to dialogue is the fact that they break things apart.³⁰ Furthermore, as Eileen Campbell-Reed already suggested, the task of ethnographic work is to make things “strange.” Researchers are supposed to bring cultural critique into a situation that the researcher herself is part of. Talking about this cultural critique – making the familiar seem strange – is what I will be doing for the remainder of this essay. The question of critique has many layers to it.

First of all, there is what I (along with others) have called the “violence” of language use.³¹ In the movement from “Home” and connection to the outer arch of my foot, where a critical stance lies, there is a risk (some would argue, an inevitable consequence) of doing violence to my fellow researchers. Such a risk is neither eliminated nor alleviated by emphasising the relational aspect of ethnographic work. Building relationships is important, but humans harm others even when they do not mean to.

In very concrete terms, the historical establishment of a race-biological institute in Uppsala exactly 100 years ago was built on ethnographic fieldwork. What is even more disturbing is that the relational aspect of connections that priests, teachers and sometimes doctors had made with the indigenous Sami population (not excluding the current investigation against atrocities made towards other minorities in the North) were at the core of what enabled the establishment of a race-biological institute.³² The gathering of measurements and “data” of the influence of “foreign races” on the “purity” of the Swedish nation was built on the relational trust that was created between different types of “agents” in the field.³³

Obviously, the power relations between my fellow researchers and me are not similar to that of the theologically schooled people and the indigenous populations described above.³⁴ Simultaneously, this does not take away the fact that I also may easily violate the trust that has been given to me if I would decide to start conceptualising the experiences I have been gifted with in my fieldwork in a strongly religious or theological framework when my fellow researchers never expressed themselves in such terms. The kind of “strangeness” I thus apply to conceptualise what we experienced in our research group needs to be aligned with some level of relatability amongst my fellow team members. Furthermore, the relational aspect of the work makes it more complicated for me to know when a conversation is part of or may be included in research and when that is not the case.

²⁸ Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that this theme is expanded upon theologically with a basis in studies from the social sciences, in the following book: Goto, “The Grace of Playing.”

²⁹ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*.

³⁰ In his Swedish version of Kristensson Ugglå, *En Strävan Efter Sanning*, he uses a play of words, which can be translated into words divide things in order to be able to share them. (60).

³¹ In Bouvrie, “Exploring the Craft of Exilic Thinking/Becoming,” and other works by Nicikes des Bouvrie this thinking is further explored.

³² Persson, “Rasforskare I Det Nordliga Rummet – Föreläsning Om Den Homogena Nationen.”

³³ For more details about the topics mentioned above see: Lindmark and Sundström, *De Historiska Relationerna Mellan Svenska Kyrkan Och Samerna*;³⁴ Persson, “Då Var Jag Som En Fånge;” Persson, “På Disponentens Tid.”

³⁴ Just one concrete example is the fact that the Sami peoples were never told what the measurements would be used for or why they were coerced into denegrating actions or being photographed and measured in different ways.

As a consequence of these reflections, in the movement of finding a connection with the outer arch of my foot, I would rather exile myself from the theological community of expected terminology than violate the relationships I have built with my fellow team members. From the body's point of view, such an articulation – the movement away from the heel into the outer arch and side of my foot – happens in me. The ethnographic researcher should not leave themselves behind. If they do so, they will lose the only possibility of staying connected with the work. Simultaneously, there is an uncomfatability – a lack of stability and rest – in the moment of transitioning to the arch. More importantly, though, placing oneself into the arch of the foot is not a movement that the human body is designed to stay in. The tension that arises in this position will, if suspended for a long time (as when women walk in high heels), lead to injuries and tears.

The second aspect that arises with the question of cultural critique is what I will turn to next. Campbell-Reed reminds her readers that a commonly held critique brought towards single case studies is the question of the researcher carrying in their own implicit bias into the study instead of revealing something apart from her own viewpoints. This is related to what I already brought up about language use, yet it goes much deeper than that. The human capacity to see what we are looking for or to notice what we have been exposed to is a genuine scientific concern – however, it is not only a problem facing qualitative research. The difference is that the way ethnographic fieldwork meets this challenge is very different from many other areas of study.³⁵

Theologically, Campbell-Reed calls the way she approaches questions of bias a combination of “relational humility and prophetic critique.”³⁶ This is described as a practice that can bring the hidden into plain sight, enabling political and public reflection about topics that otherwise might have been lost in their familiarity.³⁷ Also, Sarah Coakley emphasises the importance of ethnographic methods in theology for their capacity to bring awareness to topics relevant to actual human beings that otherwise could have lost their importance in the theorisation of academia. She argues that messy entanglements are treasures that enable us to overcome false divides between thought and affect, belief and practice, body and mind, etc.³⁸

However, the main difference between Coakley and Campbell-Reed is that when Campbell-Reed emphasises what she calls the prophetic, this is a language use that I am unsure my fellow researchers would be fully comfortable with me using in relation to the findings of our collaborations. If I would start applying the concept of prophetic critique to my excavation of our secularised university setting, I suspect this would surely raise some eyebrows.³⁹ Similar to my examples concerning worldviews, and maybe in a more poignant way, the language of prophetic might become an obstacle to the trust and sense of community that has been created.

This example concerning terminology raises the question of how I should speak about my research task and findings in a way that would fit both the natural science community and fellow theologians. I find this particularly challenging when it comes to making distinctions concerning how my research differs from “normal” ethnographic work? When I use terms specific to the theological framework, my fellow researchers might feel betrayed or pushed into a story where they cannot recognise themselves. On the other hand, when I leave out the theological vocabulary, reviewers have asked what makes this a theological article? Most importantly, one of the underlying ethical questions in this dilemma is the question of violence already adhered to. How can I do justice to the stories shared with me and the experiences that our research group is having without imposing my theoretical concepts and theological language on these situations?

³⁵ Campbell-Reed, “The Power and Danger of a Single Case Study in Practical Theological Research,” 33–59, 51–2.

³⁶ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 82–5.

³⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 90–2.

³⁹ Thank you for the anonymous reviewer who pointed out that many university institutions actually are founded on religious or theological grounds and that this might open up new dimension to the messiness I am entangled in. Even though there is a school of theology also at the origins of our university, it is beyond the scope of this article to bring in such dynamics into the current arguments. Today our university setting has no explicit religious or theological affiliation.

Somewhat provocatively, Sarah Coakley shifts the attention away from the research to the researcher. Applying this tactic, one could say that what makes my research theological is that I am a theologian. One could also add to this the language Sarah Coakley has re-formulated from Evagrius of Pontus into the current academic theological settings: “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.”⁴⁰ To make the language of prayer more accessible to a scientific community, Coakley states that contemplative methods are open to all who seek to foster them.⁴¹ Contemplation is, according to her, a method of “undertaking a radical attention to the Real.”⁴²

In contrast to Campbell-Reed, who, to my knowledge, only conducted research in settings where theological language is part of the practices of the observed community, Coakley has conducted research together with evolutionary biologists and in multi-disciplinary projects.⁴³ In relationship to those collaborations and as a step to relate to a broader public, she developed the terminology and meaning of the language of “undertaking a radical attention to the Real.”⁴⁴ Relating to my work, I think that it would be somewhat confusing to my fellow researchers if I started to talk about my method in the words of contemplation. Simultaneously, the *praxis* of “undertaking a radical attention to the Real” may not be as foreign to them as many may presume.⁴⁵

On the other hand, Eileen Campbell-Reed criticises Coakley not for using contemplative methods in her inquiry. Instead, she points out that Coakley is simultaneously too uncritical toward applying methods from the social sciences and not applying them critically enough. Campbell-Reed implies that theological researchers need to be less willing to just go out into fieldwork, “borrowing social science tools, gathering data, describing findings, and *then* reflecting theologically”⁴⁶ about them. Instead, ethnographic theologians need to reflect theologically on the research methods from the start. Campbell-Reed also argues that Coakley is not attentive enough to the critical voices that she finds in the field and how these may change theological paradigms.⁴⁷

6 The balancing act of the phalanges bones of the big toe

I have chosen to write this particular essay in relation to the critique stipulated by Campbell-Reed. Coakley’s approach of “undertaking a radical attention to the Real” is more appealing to my current research project. And, I acknowledge that I cannot leave my stipulation there. I also want to engage more deeply with what it means to be an embodied human being dancing in a world of contradictions. For me, being a theologian means, like Coakley states, that I may approach research situations with an attentive openness of a whole self – including intellect, will, imagination, feeling and bodiliness.⁴⁸

Ultimately, as I understand Coakley, what is meant by undertaking radical attention to the real is a practice which shows in my research work in at least two ways. The first one is the choice of staying connected – relational – with the people I interact with by constantly choosing to listen deeply to what they are stating and experiencing. This relational part can also be combined with the classical feminist

⁴⁰ Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 160, 118.

⁴¹ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, See parallels to Simon Weil’s writing, in Hellsten, “Dance as a Contemplative Practice – The Space of Distinction and Union,” 117–34.

⁴² Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 88.

⁴³ Nowak, *Evolution, Games, and God – The Principle of Cooperation*; Coakley, *Spiritual Healing – Science, Meaning and Discernment*.

⁴⁴ Coakley, “Lecture 1;” Coakley, “Lecture 6.”

⁴⁵ See for example the stories shared with Asta Raami about how scientists use and develop their intuition. Raami, “Toward Solving the Impossible Problems,” 201; Raami, *Intuitio3*.

⁴⁶ Campbell-Reed, “Feminism and Fieldwork,” 249.

⁴⁷ Campbell-Reed, “Feminism and Fieldwork.”

⁴⁸ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 88.

quest of showing interest in the particularities of individual life stories.⁴⁹ Thus, in writing an article, it becomes important to me – that the words I use and the descriptions I give are such that they feel authentic to the language of the person I am describing and faithful to the situation we were caught up in.⁵⁰ In my choice to relate, I will at times even voice stories that I do not fully agree with. Even when the movement together draws me to the discomfort of the outer arch of the foot, this does not make me lose balance or disconnect. A sense of “Home” may not always be carrying me. Yet, there is a force from underneath and behind that reminds me that I may also land on the bone of the big toe. Being at “Home” and balancing between “Home” and “Exile” are two different things – and both are part of the movements of our feet.

Furthermore, as a dancer conducting ethnographic research, the movements in and out between leaning into and relating to someone or something while later moving out from and keeping or creating a distance is a way to be in the flow of movements in a room. This motion in my feet depends on the balancing act where the big toe comes to my assistance. Balancing on the ball of the foot, I can easily change directions and adjust my body to the interaction in a room. “Reading” sensory and sometimes emotional expressions or “cues” are second nature to how I navigate life within a community of beings.

Researchers like Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold have emphasised that in an ethnographic study, not only the humans in a community are of importance to understand a particular setting; even matter will carry agency.⁵¹ For me to emphasise the agency of non-human beings in the descriptions that I give of our workspace might at the outset be incongruent with the idea of adapting language that my colleagues feel comfortable with. However, in this case, I would not see such terminology as violating their experiences. Particularly, the idea that the research community would be affected by the equipment of the laboratories, the quality of the microscopes in use, the technical assistance that their institution might provide them with and the cleanliness of the petri dish, is an ethnographic observation they will hardly argue against. Thus, using the conceptual statement of “agency of matter” could, in this situation, actually be the needed language that will transform the familiar into strangeness so that it can become something that highlights a collaborative learning process and creates needed dialogue. (I will shortly exemplify this in more detail.)

Similarly, the “readings” of the interactions in space and related embodied insights that I have sensed do not need to become “mystical” and weird theological “lingua” that make no sense to my colleagues in the research team. When we have created a sense of trust with the group’s members, what has instead emerged are situations where I am asked to lead a communication exercise by guided movements. My colleagues bring to my attention how specific bodily gestures and physical spaces help them think and perform their research differently. Particular individuals have even asked me to prepare how to play with their embodied sense of self in an interview situation.⁵²

I interpret these situations to be such that the relationality I have offered – in physical, emotional, intellectual/mental and spiritual attentiveness – now opens up a space.⁵³ The space has been created precisely through the “dance” I conducted by being attentive not just to the human interactions but the agency of matter itself. In this third space, I may now provide advice and solutions that would never have been given room if my approach had been one of distance, detachment, disembodiment and suspicion towards the scientific world of biology, chemistry and physics. When meeting in this third space, the perceived quality of such an encounter, to me, is that there is space for both distinction and similarity, without one eating up the other.⁵⁴ Furthermore, I sense that this space was created by me exercising a contemplative dance *praxis*.⁵⁵ Phrased in another way, the space relates to the contradiction of me being at

⁴⁹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*; Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, 45–51.

⁵⁰ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 92–3.

⁵¹ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Ingold, *Being Alive*.

⁵² 2020.09.16.45; 2020.09.17.46; 2020.09.18.47; 2021.10.11&13.103; 2021.11.12.116.

⁵³ Hellsten, *Through the Bone and Marrow*.

⁵⁴ Bouvrie, “Exploring the Craft of Exilic Thinking/Becoming.”

⁵⁵ I want to acknowledge that such a praxis is not unknown to theology even though earlier Black scholars have not formulated it in relationship to an ethnographic method. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, For similar examples in relation to practical theology see: Goto, “The Grace of Playing.”

“Home” in my body, with my *praxis* while simultaneously sensing an exilic space where there is room for the other to join into a space of dance, play or exploration.⁵⁶ In conclusion, I sense that the third space is created in the ongoing movements of letting my feet transport me from the heel to the outer arch and into the big toe, creating continuous locomotion.

However, more than just continuous dancing is needed for a third space to appear. Coakley speaks about being open to the creation and the possibility of the “interruption” of the unknown.⁵⁷ This may be what Campbell-Reed means with a prophetic voice. However, applying that language to my discoveries and dancing in the field make me quite uncomfortable. Let me exemplify with a situation I encountered recently.

7 The power of naming

When Eileen Campbell-Reed writes about the task of the theological ethnographer to engage in cultural critique, she states; sometimes the task is to also raise uncomfortable topics and provide “constructive proposals to the situation they study.”⁵⁸

In one of our group meetings, in the summer of 2020, one of the male professors told me about a recent “scandal” in Chemists’ international society. He thought that what had occurred might be of interest to me. He referred to the publication and quick withdrawal of Thomas Hudlicky’s essay in the renowned journal *Angewandte Chemie*, which had happened two days before our discussion.⁵⁹ At our meeting, I was not told the author’s name or details about the event. Instead, what was discussed and criticised was a male professor who had been allowed to publish a text arguing that diversity is bad for science. More specifically, the argument presented was that including women and ethnic minorities in large quantities in research teams jeopardises the research quality.⁶⁰

When I arrived back at my office and checked these statements, I could not access the original text but could instead follow the communication arising in the scientific community around this incident.⁶¹ I noticed a lively debate and started to wonder how common the experiences of women in the Natural Sciences are to be singled out as either problematic or “second grade” compared to their male colleagues? Did the women in my research group also have to deal with explicit or implicit discriminatory actions at their workplace?

What is essential, for the sake of the argument I want to make here, is that I had no “agenda” with my research to aim at “exposing misogynic” actions. Of course, I had noted the lack of women in the department of physics at our university. I also noticed the large pool of doctoral and post-doctoral fellows at the faculty of Science and Engineering that arrive from abroad and have precarious work conditions due to our government’s laws and practices around immigration. The bottom line was still, that I had been called by a colleague to look into a topic of interest and decided to go ahead and interview the women in my group about the theme. I was somewhat baffled, due to the widespread knowledge of the inequalities of women and minorities – in the fields of Science and Engineering – about the responses I received.⁶²

The complete uncovering of those interviews is a topic for another article. However, what caught me by surprise was that only a few of the women I interviewed were willing even to consider the challenges they

⁵⁶ Kristensson Uggla, *En Strävan Efter Sanning*, 386–9; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

⁵⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 88.

⁵⁸ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 84.

⁵⁹ Hudlicky, ““Organic Synthesis – where Now?” is Thirty Years Old. A Reflection on the Current State of Affairs.”

⁶⁰ 2020.06.11.34.

⁶¹ Howes, “Essay Criticizing Efforts to Increase Diversity in Organic Synthesis Deleted After Backlash From Chemists;” Sydnese, “The Hudlicky Case – A Reflection on the Current State of Affairs,” 42–4.

⁶² Ford et al., “Women From Some Under-Represented Minorities Are Given Too Few Talks At World’s Largest Earth-Science Conference,” 32–5; Ceglie, “Underrepresentation of Women of Color in the Science Pipeline,” 271–93; Cseresgelyne, *Science Career Plans of Adolescents*,

have encountered through their careers to be related to the fact that they are women. When I was going to write about these interviews, I was caught in the dilemma of language, and potential violence described earlier. How to express something that simultaneously is true to the experiences of the women I interviewed, accurately represents their descriptions and language, while also taking into consideration that the particularities of the stories that were shared with me sounded very similar to what has been detected in feminist writing as power techniques, oppressive structures and patriarchal culture.

I knew, from Sarah Ahmed's work *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), that becoming a feminist is always a story of discovery. She writes:

We encounter racism and sexism before we have the words that allow us to make sense of what we encounter. Words can then allow us to get closer to our experiences; words can allow us to comprehend what we experience after the event. We become retrospective witnesses of our becoming.⁶³

Ahmed further states that becoming feminist is not only the recognition of the sensation or feeling that something is wrong, that we have been wronged, which through the practice of sense-making turns into words for what is wrong. There is also a constant struggle in the practice of continuing to notice what is wrong and not turning away from the wrong. It is a practice of recognising tendencies and making sense of the wrongs that have been done to you.⁶⁴

Even with these insights in my pocket, I still questioned how to articulate the stories that had been told to me. First and foremost, I asked myself, what is the justification for bringing up a gendered and racialised narrative? If the women I interviewed did not recognise themselves as feminists nor articulate their struggles in a feminist or racialised framework, did I have the right to bring that language into the article?

Talking about the possibility of raising cultural critique Campbell-Reed writes:

Although we do indeed each have relationship with our surrounding culture, those relationships may for many people remain deep in the background of their awareness. Showing people culture, or the situation in which they operate, can be like showing fish water.⁶⁵

What this means is that bringing to the foreground cultural critique is complicated in a variety of ways. First of all, we ourselves can never detach from the culture we inhabit. Secondly, the thoughts we give voice to might feel foreign to the people we are engaged with. The experience of alienation does not have to be a sign of "untruth." It can also be due to a lack of reflection over the water one swims in.

By definition, having an implicit or unconscious gender bias is not something only the "others" have. Meaning that non-white people can carry anti-black sentiments, just as women can be blind to the structural oppression they have assimilated.⁶⁶ On top of this, Ahmed points out that even people who call themselves feminists might want to use other words than sexism and racism to describe things they have encountered, as the language itself makes them uncomfortable.⁶⁷

At the same time, in the worst of cases, it could be the other way around. Me – the ethnographer – offering "critique" that was not aligned with the experiences shared with me. Instead of me revealing "hidden truths" I might end up placing the shared experiences in a framework that is not in congruence with the lived reality of my interlocutors. Such violence is not something I want to perpetuate.

Campbell-Reed further explains that particularly in the social sciences, but also within a theological framework that strives towards being "counter-cultural" there has been a tendency to pick an ideological

⁶³ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 33–9.

⁶⁵ Campbell-Reed, "Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice," 94.

⁶⁶ Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*, shares a strong story about how he discovered that he, as a black man, carried racist stories about other black people.

⁶⁷ "Words like racism and sexism are heard as melancholic: as if we are holding on to something that has already gone. I have heard this viewpoint articulated by feminists: that focusing on racism and sexism is an overly negative and old-fashioned way of relating to the world, a bad habit or even a knee-jerk feminist response to traditions that we should embrace with more love and care." Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 155.

strand of thinking and then depict that as the critical voice in one's research. Each school has their favourite utopian visions, idealised values and cross-cultural aspirations to promote while debunking the cultural stories of consumerism, war, poverty, ecological crisis, etc.⁶⁸ I am not stating that there is anything wrong with researchers raising cultural critique. However, as Rita Felski has brought forth, suspicion for the sake of suspicion is already past the point of critique.⁶⁹ As informing as the texts on racism and feminism are, reading more of them would still not grant me the answer to my question: How would I know if this particular case was an instance of “telling the fish about the water they swim in” or me critiquing from a cultural lens that I have taken for granted and which would violate their experiences?

In such dilemmas, as portrayed here, I have been taught that what will “save” me is a kind of reflexivity created with my community. I have opted for creating informed consent agreements where I always give access to my fellow researchers to read and comment on the articles and texts I have produced before they go into the press. Thus, I proceeded with writing an article and did my best in retelling their stories so that there was both room for the women to identify wrongs done to them and space for doubt about how exactly to frame the phenomena. I wondered much about which kind of feminist framework – I played with several ways to communicate the events – would make the stories most justice.

I trusted that once I had written the article and sent my text to be read by my colleagues, they would respond to whatever might have been misaligned to their experiences and give me feedback to clarify the most fitting frameworks. Little did I expect that what I would receive back were primarily grammatical corrections. I had gone – over my way – with assuring that I would be attentive to the comments of my colleagues.⁷⁰ I had even written into the framework of the article itself how I aimed at transparency concerning the publication of eventual remarks in their own formulations.⁷¹ Interestingly, most of the comments I received were simple: “Good” or “Very Good,” and the intended dialogue fell almost entirely through. My presupposed ideal around shared agency and transparent reflexivity, in the article itself, never came to be.

Simultaneously, in one email, I received the following comment: “Thanks so much for sharing with me this really interesting document that allowed me to put my thoughts into a wider and much more structured and culturally relevant perspective. I really learnt a lot!”⁷² This gave me the trust that maybe I had been able to name something that earlier lay hidden. I also initiated a follow-up correspondence email (due to the covid restrictions, we could not meet face-to-face with all the participants).⁷³ In one of those emails, another woman wrote: “I realized that you want keep things in a non-conclusive way and lay down the complex nature of human interpretation of situations. I really respected.”⁷⁴ From this, I can conclude that I have been able to formulate my text in a way that reflects the “multiple possibilities” and “demands of a situation.”⁷⁵ This is what Campbell-Reeds describes to be the antidote to writing social critique that blindly follows one of the schools of “counter-cultural” critique.

⁶⁸ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 94–5.

⁶⁹ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 17–22.

⁷⁰ In my initial email I stated: “I have finally managed to write the first out of two articles that will come out of our interviews last summer. I will attach it here and would love to hear your feedback on my text. The ideal, would be for me, that you wrote comments directly into the manuscript and actually engaged in dialogue with what I am saying and if/when that resonates or NOT with what you wanted to convey.” 2021.04.25.

⁷¹ In the article text I stated: “To combat this bias of Western scientific ideas, researchers are instead invited to co-construct the accounts together with the people they are engaged with. As a step towards such a communal approach to scientific inquiries, I have asked each interviewed woman to read and comment on the first draft of this article and directly interact with the text by their written remarks. These will be published in italic without any alterations from me and hopefully deepen the dialogical nature of this paper's content.”

⁷² 2021.04.26.

⁷³ “Thank you so much for the thorough read and corrections! You did not have any further comments on the content at this point. Please do let me know if anything what-so-else comes up. Also about the “benefit” of getting to read a text like this about your own work – or about having to read texts from a completely different science field and the way it operates.” 2021.04.28.

⁷⁴ 2021.05.05.

⁷⁵ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 95.

8 A praxis for moving forward

What Campbell-Reed calls the prophetic voice, she also formulates as a practice of unearthing something that lies hidden and is asking for our response.⁷⁶ So even when I am still hesitant to name what I had written in the article as a prophetic voice, I did start to sense that I had noticed something which was asking for my response.

The ability to unearth something that lies hidden and to decipher what awaits a response are actions that arise to me from what Coakley suggests with the contemplative method. Giving radical attention to the real requires waiting. She speaks about sitting in the silence and noticing when voices arise that come from the ego, that call to fear, unhealthy criticism and envy, even cynicism or deteriorating optimism.⁷⁷ In the process of conducting my fieldwork and writing the article, I moved from a stance of landing at “Home” to an exilic space of touching at a critical standpoint that is found only when moving away from the heel towards the side arch of the foot. When this motion from “Home” to “Exile” was balanced up by also including the landing and taking off from the big toe, my whole body movements created a space where my fellow researchers could be heard and seen. Repeated continuous movements of this kind created a third space where unknown things could appear. However, to be able to listen to what exactly asked for my response, I also needed to stand still and just wait. In doing so, things would arise.

The first step is one of discernment, and then there is a slow purging away of that which is not for life. Campbell-Reed’s writing further helps to clarify one way through which we may know which is a prophetic voice – that of identifying when harm is done to individuals or life itself.⁷⁸ Once we have practised attentive listening, we might start to recognise the small dissenting voice that calls for action. Of course, it can at times also be a loud voice or only an intuition without words. The new insight for me in this particular situation is that I needed to start moving forward without a very clear sense of reassurance that I had come to the end of discernment. I was pulled to continue the dancing, and simultaneously I knew that a much stronger purging would happen if I had made the “wrong” call. It was only by choosing to acknowledge the praxis of being a pilgrim and *peregrinus*⁷⁹ – a person without the security of a “Home” that I might eventually find out that what I had sensed would lead to some kind of good fruit.

It was only months later that other interviewed women in my group have started to refer to my text when we speak about issues pertaining to group dynamics and gendered experiences in our team meetings.⁸⁰ Maybe, what had been my fear of placing foreign language and non-familiar framework into the stories that were shared with me, actually had been the feminist work of giving people words? One way to phrase what happened through my article is to call it a potential situation of becoming. Sarah Ahmed says that becoming a feminist is not a topic that is efficiently dealt with only by offering an educational package. She states:

Feminist and antiracist consciousness involves not just finding the words, but through the words, how they point, realizing how violence is directed: violence is directed toward some bodies more than others. To give a problem a name can change not only how we register an event but whether we register an event. Perhaps not having names is a way of turning away from a difficulty that persists whether or not we turn away. Not naming a problem in the hope that it will go away often means the problem just remains unnamed. At the same time, giving the problem a name does not make the problem go away. To give the problem a name can be experienced as magnifying the problem; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise would remain scattered experiences into a tangible thing.⁸¹

Basically, the real work does not start with only learning to name the wrongs; it is about learning how to live with and transform them once they have become known to us. Ahmed offers a toolbox with several practices that those willing to become a “Feminist Killjoy” may start to use. There is no space here to go deeper into her Killjoy Survival Kit.⁸²

⁷⁶ Ibid., 95–6.

⁷⁷ Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 160.

⁷⁸ Campbell-Reed, “Reflexivity – A Relational and Prophetic Practice,” 96.

⁷⁹ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 82.

⁸⁰ 2021.11.11.115.

⁸¹ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 34.

⁸² Ibid., 235–49.

Simultaneously, the ethical dilemma I found very little talk about in theological ethnography, is, what do we do, once the potential problem is named!? For me, the most ethical thing to do in this situation is to continue supporting the individual women I interviewed and the whole team in a practice of sense-making. What such support would look like is something that we, as a team, need to consider.⁸³ On the one hand, there is, for example, a clearly stipulated vision for our university, which states that gender and racial equality are part of the goals to be achieved in 2030.⁸⁴ Also, the leading funding agency, Academy of Finland, has stipulated that they support equality and non-discrimination.⁸⁵ These official strategies might mean that there would even be support for arranging educational programs that bring questions of sexism and racism to the forefront of discussions.⁸⁶

9 Conclusion

The *praxis* for ethnographic research suggested in this article describes how my work is theological even when I stay away from applying theological concepts to the analysis of what I experience in the fieldwork. The *praxis* of sensing and articulating the movements from heel to side arch and toe of the foot, in an embodied way, is a *praxis* of moving between “Home” and “Exile” – learning how to dance in the space of contradictions. This *praxis* requires building relationships – with our bodies, feelings, other thinkers and doers. It builds on creating communities that bring hope to each other and are engaged in deep listening. It also builds on creating vulnerable communities together – people willing to learn and grow. The process of learning requires much courage, as it requires that we are willing to see and acknowledge the hurts and violence that has been perpetuated. Ultimately, my suggestion for theological ethnographic research is to ponder how we can create long-lasting relationships and support structures that continue the healing needed in our communities and institutions. It is deeply unethical to come and unearth things not cared for. Instead of always going away, looking for something new, I would want to insist that there is much to explore at “Home.” More along the line of indigenous epistemologies, the feminist theological *praxis* that I want to envision for my future research centres on the relationships that have been given to us.⁸⁷ By exploring connection through our embodied realities and dancing in and out of spaces that become more and more familiar, meanings will emerge. I suggest that the more comfortable we become with the exilic space, more likely it is that we will uncover the unknown. This will further require that we offer contemplative attention to the details of our relationality.

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⁸³ I thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting the following resource for institutions and organisations wanting to continue this work: <https://c4disc.pubpub.org/pub/e5545yw1/release/2>

⁸⁴ Åbo Akademi, “Det Havsnära Bildningsuniversitetet Strategi 2021–2030.”

⁸⁵ Finland, “Promotion of Equality and Non-discrimination at the Academy of Finland.”

⁸⁶ After the article was written, our university has piloted an educational package addressing gender, race and sexuality. I will need to return to that in a later article.

⁸⁷ For indigenous epistemologies see: Guttorm, “Traditions and Traditional Knowledge in the Sámi Culture,” 65–75; Volt, *From Where We View the World*; Finbog, “The Story of Terra Nullius – Variations on the Land[s] of Saepmie 1 That Nobody Owned,”

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