DIGITAL AGENCY AND THE AUTHORSHIP OF FAILURE

ANNA HICKEY-MOODY

In this chapter I intentionally problematize popular ways of valuing research and shift registers for what we might expect to see when reading 'research.' Empirical research assemblages call researchers to inhabit diverse forms of radically different worlds. These worlds can profoundly dis-organize and re-distribute us as ethnographers and people. Often, communication across and within worlds relies on algorithmic forms of mediation or digital platforms.

I contend that we need more academic work unpacking the politics of feeling like a failure in ethnographic fieldwork and exploring the complex agencies of research assemblages, which modulate the subjectivity of empirical researchers. I argue that digital agency is gendered and is part of the algorithmic worlds in which feminist digital researchers work. As such, we need to develop our own failure archives of the roles played by digital agency and digital failure in the production of experiences of failure in research assemblages.

Digital psychopaths?

Machines have no humility. Artificial intelligence and algorithmic assemblages have no feelings, no ethical conscience, no capacity to relate on interpersonal levels. In human terms, machines, algorithmic assemblages, forms of artificial intelligence, are, effectively, psychopaths. That is, if we take a psychopath to be a body (assemblage) suffering from an '(antisocial) disorder in which an individual manifests amoral and antisocial behavior, shows a lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships, expresses extreme egocentricity, and demonstrates a failure to learn from experience and other behaviors associated with the condition'[1], then a machine would be diagnosed as having psychopathy. This is not to reduce the complexity of mental illness or equivocate mental illness to a non-human characteristic, but to point out the fact that digital technology has no remorse (indeed no capacity for remorse) and a complete absence of empathy for others. Despite this fact, humans need to relate to and rely on digital technologies and the agency of digital technologies in ways that are comparable to the kinds of reliance we have on other people. Shared memories, information, thoughts, notes are held in this relationality.

Algorithms do not have personal relationships. They are designed to make money. There is an irony here, however, in the fact that algorithms have been developed to facilitate

---

1   Henry Hermann, 'Alternate Human Behavior,' in Henry R. Hermann (ed), *Dominance and Aggression in Humans and Other Animals*, San Diego: Academic Press, 2017, pp. 139-57.

personal relationships even though they do not have personal relationships themselves. Despite this, and through necessity, I outsource so much of my memory work, archival work, and research recording to machines, digital spaces, and algorithmically mediated platforms.

Building on my recent work on experiences of failure in the gendered research assemblage,[2] I argue that thinking critically about digital agency and digitally orchestrated failure really matters in supporting the work of emerging feminist digital ethnographers. This approach is important for understanding how, as researchers, our own experiences of failing in the field are produced. Losing data, being locked out of online accounts, electronic equipment breaking, being hacked, video and sound recording errors: digital technology brings with it a distributed network of increased possibility for failure. When we outsource memory and data recording we distribute the network we rely on for recall and recording and increase possibilities for failure.

I already suffer from forgetfulness. I have a clinical diagnosis of PTSD, which impairs one's memory, and I live with a significant level of professional stress which impacts memory. I often ask digital devices to help me retain information. However, as I have learnt, digital devices, algorithms, and mediated platforms can lose more information in one moment than I ever have (as yet). This is difficult to recuperate.

Jack Halberstam has suggested that forgetfulness can be queer, or queering; it can be a problematization of the known.[3] Yet as Halberstam[4] also reminds us, even forgetting can become over coded by capitalism:

> Forgetfulness is not always queer, of course; indeed in the early twenty-first century it has become a major trope of mainstream cinema. But while most forms of forgetting in mainstream cinema operate according to a simple mapping of memory onto identity and memory loss onto the loss of history, location, and even politics, a few films, often unintentionally, set forgetting in motion in such a way as to undermine dominant modes of historicizing.[5]

Even failing and forgetting can become a trope and can be purposed for financial gain.

Further, feeling like a failure in the research assemblage is an experience that is not often discussed in the literature on research methods, particularly in relation to digital methods. For example, Catherine Dawson's *A-Z of Digital Research Methods,*[6] Peter Halfpenny and Rob Proctor's *Innovations in Digital Methods,*[7] and Cristina Costa and

---

2   Anna Hickey-Moody, 'Three Ways of Knowing Failure', *M.I.A: Feminism and Visual Culture*, 4.4 (2019): 1-30.
3   Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
4   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* 74.
5   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* 74.
6   Catherine Dawson, *A-Z of Digital Research Methods,* United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis, 2019.
7   Peter Halfpenny and Rob Proctor, *Innovations in Digital Methods*, United Kingdom: SAGE, 2015.

Jenna Condle's *Doing Research in and on the Digital: Research Methods Across Fields of Inquiry*[8] respectively offer comprehensive examinations of digital research methods, none of which examine the extended possibilities of failure and loss that accompany the digitalization of research data collection and storage. Failure is seemingly not conceived as an embedded aspect of method, although failure is, in fact, embedded in everything we do. Women are often especially aware of this.

Women are consistently positioned as failing to achieve their gender successfully. Being too large, too loud, infertile, critical, or bossy are all qualities that are popularly turned 'against' women as examples of failure to achieve their gender successfully. This experience of failure is echoed in the research assemblage through concerns about developing a 'strong' or 'robust' data set, discussions of strong and weak data, and rhetoric recounting successful analysis. Gendered tropes of mastery prevail in how embodiment is policed, remade, performed, taught, and understood. Failing to achieve mastery, loss, emptiness, and forgetfulness are constituent aspects of the very ideas of mastery, achievement, success, achievement, and recall.

Contemporary research and communication assemblages have become entwined in digital platforms in ways that researchers are not able to avoid. There are intersections of the personal and professional that are mediated by digital platforms. In what follows, I offer an auto-ethnographic account of my own journey of digital forgetting and the loss of enmeshed personal and research data. This was an experience that made me reflect upon the extent to which I have come to rely on digital platforms as a form of professional and personal memory.

Outsourcing Memory and Media Rituals

José van Dijck has suggested:

> as memories are increasingly mediated and thus constructed by networked technologies, the boundaries between present and past are no longer given, but they are the very stakes in debating what counts as memory. Memory, after the connective turn, is a new mediatized memory that challenges currently dominant concepts of time and space.[9]

Andrew Hoskin also argues that contemporary memory is distributed through digital networks and embedded in socio-technical practices and calls for networked memory.[10] My own experiences of outsourcing memory and distributed media rituals supports these

---

8   Cristina Costa and Jenna Condle, *Doing Research in and on the Digital: Research Methods*, United
     Kingdom: Routledge, 2018.
9   José Van Dijck, 'Flickr and the Culture of Connectivity: Sharing Views, Experiences, Memories', *Memory
     Studies*, 20.10 (2010), 4. See also José van Dijck, *Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford:
     Oxford University Press, 2013.
10   Andrew Hoskin, 'Digital Network Memory', in Astrid Erll and Ann Rigny (eds), *Mediation, Remediation
     and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009.

arguments. On the 17th April 2012 in Shoreditch, East London, I made the first post to my current Instagram account. My previous account was lost to me due to a work email change when I moved to London to teach at Goldsmiths, and with it my access to control over the digital archive of my memories. In my new account, I posted a giant green flying bee or wasp painted on a historic wall in Shoreditch, the blue and white national trust plaque not quite readable in the top right-hand corner of the image. This was not a political statement— just an expression of a being-in-placeness of my contemporary moment. Images marking significant life events (finishing a book, getting married), experiences (*The Sisters Hope* show in Mälmo), places (London Pleasure gardens, the black heart bar, street shrines, Cambridge), populate my early timeline. Meeting my brother in Bratislava, spending time with him in Vienna, getting to know his wild, anarchist housemates and then heading to Paris for the *International Crossroads in Cultural Studies* conference are events only documented on my Instagram account.

Previous workplaces, homes, social events, desserts shared with students (one of whom is now dead), conferences organized, vows witnessed, romance. Teaching in the Louisiana Museum of Art (Denmark), time with family in Dublin, holidays in Milan. A cycling holiday with my girlfriend to Lulworth Cove. Keynotes given in Mälmo (Sweden), Aarhus (Denmark), Maribor (Slovenia). These are events I have no documents recording, other than those technically owned by Meta. I can't remember my password to download the data. I think it's written in a diary I have somewhere. I must remember to look when back from fieldwork.

Over the 10 years since I started this account, it has become my most significant archival practice for work (including research milestones and significant fieldwork moments), travel, significant life events. In retrospect, I realized that a lot of what I lost was generated through what we might call a media ritual: the marking of an important life moment through posting it on social media. In their book *Everyday Data Cultures*, Burgess et al. discuss 'media rituals'[11], drawing on Lee Humphries'[12] discussion of practices of documentation, which turn everyday mundane activities into what Humphries calls 'media accounts'. These media accounts add up to a public record of everyday life that have real meaning for people. Media accounts show us how people connect to and shape online identity in both personal and professional capacities. Often the two are intentionally blurred thorough the digital platforms they mobilize.

Some fieldwork data is only on my personal Instagram — snaps of artworks taken in the field that turned out to really capture a work or a moment very effectively. I have naïvely backed myself into a corner: so many things that matter to me are remembered and indeed owned primarily by a digital platform with no ethics, no relationality, no humility.

One day it was all deleted. Someone tried to hack into the account and Meta wiped it. I had outsourced my memories and the algorithm stole my past. I had archived my thinking

11   Jean Burgess, Kath Albury, Anthony McCosker, and Rowan Wilken, *Everyday Data Cultures,* United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2022.
12   Lee Humphreys, *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018, 35.

digitally, on Instagram, a platform owned by global corporation Meta, and my intellectual and emotional labor was destroyed. I was left wondering: what does this ritualized attention to a mutable and fallible memory archive say about memory in late capitalism? What does it mean for identity? After a couple of weeks I had the content restored, and have most certainly learnt my lesson that the content is not owned by me.

When we rely so heavily on digital platforms to retain, organize, and share the products of our labor, we also rely on them to record and memorialize our most precious moments. Simultaneously, we give these digital platforms the power to forget for us. Halberstam[13] suggests there are no fixed values between remembering and forgetting. Memory can be a disciplinary thing that makes one think about the past in certain ways, and in relation to certain disciplines. Forgetfulness has the potential to allow for new narratives to be created. There are conservative forms of forgetting — forgetting that is designed to allow a continuation of forms of the same. National memories of colonial countries are filled with forms of amnesia that have an ideological value for regimes that want to cover up bad deeds. However, what Halberstam is interested in is the possibility of queering family reproduction and traditional identity narratives through forgetting information, bloodlines, memories. Digital amnesia orchestrated through capitalist platforms has no political purchase or significance. It is mindless loss.

Digital Failure Archives

As I have noted, Jack Halberstam[14] suggests that failure is one of the ways that we can escape the normative constraints of 'success'. Implicitly, failure can be seen as a critique of the terms of success. Indeed, within failure is embedded a fierce critique of all that is embedded in normativity, as normativity *implies* success. Thinking back on my experience of working with digital technology to collect data for fieldwork, I can see an archive of failure; an archive of moments and episodes of loss. Video cameras not working, devices being used in the wrong way, children photographing strange objects, being locked out of digital devices, losing passwords. The internet now houses vast quantities of information I generated but can no longer access and information that I did not mean to generate but is digitally archived in my name, or stored on a profile I own. Children taking research equipment have generated a decent amount of the data I have generated but do not own.

This brings us back to the question of externalized memory on commercialized platforms. Data might be in our name, but often we do not own it. Further, what is our relationship to material generated by others on our platforms or that we have reshared? Digital archives documenting my research failures, or moments of failure in research which I organized, are collected in virtual spaces — only some of which I can access. What will happen to these digital catalogues of my fieldwork? Can anyone access them? Will they ever be able to be retrieved? I suspect these are questions which will never be answered. In contemporary research cultures, machines can fail for us.

---

13   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure.*
14   Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure.*

Conclusion

This writing is an exploration of intersections of experiences of failure in fieldwork. I am not looking to advance a specific pedagogical or conceptual point, but, rather, I see utility in creating space to discuss the everyday nature of failure that we experience. As Raymond Williams'[15] thoughts on structures of feeling have taught us, what 'feels' everyday is wrought with structural issues and politics. The intersection of this is our consciousness. Specifically, in this example, I want to start to think about the power to fail, and the power to create failure, that digital platforms now possess within our research assemblages.

Through drawing on my experience as a woman researcher undertaking digital ethnographic fieldwork, I am trying to normalize the articulation of experiences of failure. More than this, though, I am explicating how the distributed agency of digital platforms and algorithms exponentially increase the possibilities for experiencing failure in the field. Not only might I forget the occurrence of an event, but all documentation of the event may indeed be lost due to a technological error.

So much of the data I have worked to create is lost to me, but it still exists somewhere in the digitalized world where it may or may not be 'owned' and farmed in a capitalist system. This creates an interesting entanglement between queer failure as a resistance to capitalist heteronormativity and the capitalist mechanics of the world we live in. Is my failure feeding capitalism? My thinking here circles back here to the question of gender and digital agency with which I opened the essay: who 'owns' failure, or who (or what) fails, and how we can reclaim and articulate that experience of failure in a gendered world of research and digital media? Can there be an outside to digital failure that does not result in capitalist gain? In a move to 'do queer failure better', I want to be that outside.

Bibliography

Burgess, Jean, Albury, Kath, McCosker, Anthony, and Wilken, Rowan. *Everyday Data Cultures,* London: John Wiley & Sons, 2022.

Costa, Cristina, and Condle, Jenna. *Doing Research in and on the Digital: Research Methods*, London: Routledge, 2018.

Dawson, Catherine. *A-Z of Digital Research Methods*, London: Routledge, 2019.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Halfpenny, Peter and Proctor, Rob. *Innovations in Digital Methods*, London: Sage, 2015.

Hermann, Henry. 'Alternate Human Behavior,' in Henry R. Hermann (ed), *Dominance and Aggression in Humans and Other Animals*, San Diego: Academic Press, 2017, pp. 139-57.

Hickey-Moody, Anna. 'Three Ways of Knowing Failure', *M.I.A: Feminism and Visual Culture*, 4.4 (2019): 1-30.

---

15   Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review,* London: New Left Books,

Hoskin, Andrew. 'Digital Network Memory', in Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds), *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2009.

Humphreys, Lee. *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life*, Minneapolis: MIT Press, 2018.

Van Dijck, José. 'Flickr and the Culture of Connectivity: Sharing Views, Experiences, Memories', *Memory Studies*, 20.10 (2010), 4. See also José van Dijck, *Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Williams, Raymond. *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review*, London: New Left Books, 1979.