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Moved to messiness: Physical activity, feelings, and transdisciplinarity

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on conversations that took place during a scholarly reading group on the sociology of emotions. The members of the group shared an interest in the body, movement, and culture, but our academic and 'athletic' backgrounds were quite varied. Our diverse socio-cultural understandings of emotions were complicated by our own (emotional) experiences of physical (in)activity, thus conversations cut a wide and varied path. One idea, however, continued to resonate throughout our discussions; we found the experiential, theoretical, and methodological notion of *messiness* to hold great possibility as it allowed us to avoid the urge to reduce diverse experiences to a singular voice (Christians, 2011; Cornforth et al.,, 2012; Ellingson, 2009; Noble, 2009). Consequently, our project here is twofold. First, we experiment with communal writing as a method for undertaking a study of physical activity. Second, rather than any one perspective taking precedence we use this practice as a way to demonstrate the potential of embracing messiness as a collaborative ethical and theoretical method for understanding the complexities of emotions in relation to (in)active bodies. Specifically, using a variety of disciplinary and theoretical lenses we explore physical (in)activity in relation to pain/pleasure, and the gaze and performance. The result is a conversation made up of traditional and non-traditional approaches to academic writing that work to reconfigure and to challenge traditional dichotomies and hierarchical understandings of the active body, understandings that potentially over-simplify and close-down our emotional experiences of physical (in)activity.

"Cultural interpretation is an ongoing, always incomplete process, and no one gets the final word" (Bordo, 1999: 29).

In 2011, the authors of this paper—colleagues at the University of Alberta with a shared interest in the body, movement, and culture—took part in a scholarly reading group on the sociology of emotion. Over the course of 8 weeks we read and discussed 14 articles spanning disciplinary boundaries and taking up historical, theoretical, ethical, and philosophical components of affect and emotion, with conversations paying particular attention to the ways different socio-cultural perspectives on emotions might help inform theorizations of the moving body.[1] Our academic backgrounds were varied: we were philosophers, critical disability theorists, phenomenologists, poststructuralists, and theoretical-fence sitters (inasmuch as these are distinguishable from each other). We also brought differing experiences of physical activity to the fore: we were high performance athletes, recreational movers, dancers, exercisers, and the sport-averse.

The range of experiences and knowledges resulted in conversations that cut a wide and varied path. But as we spent hours exploring emotions, the body, movement, and culture from often quite different theoretical and experiential places one word continued to resonate with all of us, as a descriptor of our own experiences of physical activity, but also as the flavor of our shared conversations. That word was *messy*.

Messy (adj.): untidy or dirty; confused, disordered, careless and slovenly; cannot eliminate attitudes, emotions, values, and desires; multiple; difficult to deal with, full of awkward complications (Barber, 2004a,b; Gove, 1993b, 1418). The etymology of messy, from mess (n.)—meaning a communal meal (Gove, 1993a, 1993b; Barnhard 1988)—reveals a connection with the communal work we have undertaken here. It was messiness that allowed us to

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[1] The original reading list is available at www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com. The reference list at the end of this paper includes additional readings drawn on to inform our work here.

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consider emotions beyond traditional theoretical boundaries and which moved us to be continuously engaged with new experiences of emotions and physical activity. Furthermore, our emotional experiences in different facets of physical activity past and present, our creation of the experiential writings that comprise the 'data' for this paper, our analysis, and the activity of writing this paper were all messy processes—complicated, emotional, and communal (Barber, 2004a; Gove, 1993b). Upon reflection, we agreed that it is, in fact, the messiness that brings the entire process together. Put another way, the idea of messiness enabled us to imagine together the ethical, the theoretical, the methodological, the experiential, and the emotional. We were, so to speak, *moved to messiness.* Consequently, our project here is twofold: first, we experiment with communal writing as a method for undertaking a study of physical activity; second, rather than any one perspective taking precedence—or, borrowing from Bordo, getting the final word—we use this practice as a way to demonstrate the potential of embracing messiness as a collaborative ethical and theoretical method for understanding the complexities of emotions in relation to (in)active bodies.

1. Messy ethics

In this paper we argue that messiness can be understood as an ethical engagement with varied experiences and knowledges. Following Christians (2011), Ellingson (2009), and Noble (2009) we argue that adequately reflecting diverse and potentially contradictory experiences—rather than reducing them to a singular Truth or voice—can be understood as an overtly political and ethical project. That is, "through dialogic encounter, subjects create life together and nurture one another's moral obligation to it" (Christians, 2011: 150). Denzin (1995, 1997) furthermore, advocates for the ethical and methodological potential of "messy texts," which Inckle (2005) describes as ones "where the borders of truth and knowledge, fact and fiction, self and other are blurred" (228). In disability studies, messiness has been articulated as a crucial aesthetic, activist, and methodological movement (Kuppers, 2004, 2010; McRuer, 2006; Peers et al., 2012), while feminist and queer theorists (e.g., Davis, 2007; Halberstam, 2012; Kuriloff et al., 2011) have also drawn on 'messy texts' in representing their research and promoting diverse social justice practices.

Within sport studies, the use of messy texts has been far less common. Denison (2010), for example, provides one of only a few examples within the field of sport coaching. According to Denison, "messy texts" are important critical tools for qualitative sport and coaching researchers especially in a context where "the push from governments and universities has been for qualitative research to erase the messiness from their results in devising more evidence-based practices" (157). Messy texts are thus particularly important within fields of sport research that largely privilege "hard evidence" and knowledge informed by the sport sciences. In these fields, they hold potential as tools to resist the way "the politics of evidence operate within sport" (157), as well as the way that dominant sporting discourses work to depoliticize the production of evidence, coaching, and sporting 'truths.' That is, embracing messiness may move individual coaches and coach educators to question their own relationship to "evidence," ensuring that it "doesn't just serve as an uncritical problem solving technology" (157), and that they comprehend the potential problems associated with applying evidence-based research without taking account of contextual factors.

We argue, along with Denison (2010), that messy texts act as resistance to an unproblematized evidence-based model for studies of sport. Further, sport, exercise, and dance provide strong examples of the ethical potential of messy representations; experiences in physical activity, regardless of type or level, are messy things, despite efforts in dominant discourses of sport, exercise, and physical activity to promote them as simply 'healthy', 'fun' and available/accessible for all (Bigelow et al., 2001; Canadian Sport for Life, 2012; Hawkins, 2008; Rintala, 2009). Moreover, there has been a significant growth of research into emotion in sport and exercise psychology in the past decade, with a particular interest in the connection between emotion and sport performance (Friesen et al., 2013). We share the concerns of critical and poststructuralist sport researchers who articulate the need to move beyond positivist and humanistic theoretical frameworks to theorize sport, exercise, and physical education (Gard and Meyenn, 2000; Gard and Wright, 2001; Tinning, 2002; Lauss, 2010; Pringle, 2010). Reliance on these frameworks may function to mechanize and depoliticize coaching and sporting practices while individualizing the various effects of these practices and experiences.

Messiness also enabled us to explore the transdisciplinary nature of this collective project. It is inherently messy to bring the disparate together and in doing so create something new (Leavy, 2011). What we attempt to illustrate through our work here is that embracing messiness allowed us to remain collaborative through all aspects of the project; the idea of messiness provided a starting point to work from (and to return to) ensuring each of our voices could be present and represented. Put another way, embracing the idea of messiness allowed us to move forward collaboratively, knowing that each of our ideas would be valued and would contribute to the overall project in equitable ways. In this place of messiness we were able to re/imagine, communicate and creatively, ethically, and thoughtfully cross/blur disciplinary (and theoretical) boundaries. As a group, we negotiated a process—within the comfortable discomfort of messiness—where we did not seek out consensus or shared resolution to our questions and ponderings around physical activity and emotions but rather considered the multiple ways that we might think about these two things and their potential relationships to one another. Like Ahmed, we began and stayed immersed in "the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into the world" (Ahmed, 2008: 10). We invite you to get (un)comfortable in the messiness with us as we make our way through the quagmire of physical activity and emotion.

2. Theoretically messy

How do six diverse people[2] theorize movement and emotion? How does messiness translate to the ways that we understand and frame our experiences? How can we challenge and transform ourselves by way of a shared conversation? These questions were perhaps further complicated by the short duration of the reading group (i.e., 8-weeks) and limited readings covered on each topic (i.e., 2–3 texts per topic). This short reading list provided our common starting point for discussion although each member brought his or her varied knowledges, perspectives and experiences to the conversations that ensued—adding yet another layer of 'messiness' to the project. Our discussions spanned neurosociology, Foucauldian-influenced studies of emotion, phenomenology, Deleuzian theory, and queer and feminist theories of affect. A frightening menagerie to say the least, but it was, in fact, the intersections of such diverse fields, a transdisciplinarity, that brought the richness and messiness of emotion and movement to light. Nevertheless, there were a few theoretical perspectives,

[2] For more information about the six collaborators please see our biographies, particularly as they relate to our academic-active selves, available at: www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com.

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because of our varied backgrounds and expertise, that resonated most strongly.

With Foucault (1995, 1978) and his successors (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983; Zembylas, 2007) we were able to explore the disciplinary systems through which our bodies are constructed, classified, and hierarchized, and through which we are made to police and discipline ourselves. Our experiences with physical activity also resonated with Foucault's "limit experiences" (1978). Those moments of absolute pain that blend with absolute pleasure, acting as a "destruction of the self from itself" (Zembylas, 2007: 139). Our varied allegiances to Foucauldian poststructuralism left us to understand the ways that even the most physical of sensations (like those caused by a dislocated hip, or a baseball bruise, or a long run in the hot sun) are always already discursive: they are felt through the experiences, hopes, desires, and languages available to the feeler.

Phenomenology (Heidegger, 2010; van Manen, 1997) pushed us to think beyond discourse to the lived details of experience—to the *material* of emotion. It allowed us to imagine movement not unlike Tahhan's (2013) conception of 'touching at depth' (i.e., as the phenomenological entwining of emotional, subjective, and intersubjective). The sweat that forms on the upper lip in the moment of anticipation before a game, the way movement seemingly suspends moments in time, and the way the body dances not according to form, but from an all-consuming urge. Each of these show that although we may not be able to make sense of our emotions outside of a discourse that is already in operation, our "modes of experiencing feeling originate in the body's encounter with the world" (Freund, 1990: 459). This experiential focus brought most of the Foucauldians among us to new ways of thinking through how we *are*—how we become, and how we come to understand, our 'selves' in and of the world.

We were also moved by the so-called affective turn, also described as the emotional turn: a set of theories intent upon thinking through not only the power of emotion, but its effect within society (Ahmed, 2004; Clough et al., 2007; Fitzpatrick and Longley, 2013; Sedgwick, 2003). Within queer theory, the affective turn is indicative of a politicization of emotions and embodiment: as in Cvetkovich's (2007) reading of a queer performance artist in relation to the "textures and tastes, the sensuous feel" of the movement and, importantly, its political effects and affects (463). Blending with, and diverging from, this approach, Deleuze and Guattari's (1994) philosophy of affect indicates that affect is less the impact of our environments on our *selves*, but the proliferation of emotions on the world: the butterfly effect of our movements as they ricochet, echo, and produce effects in the world around us: "[affects] are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them … [they] are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived" (164). The sweat on the upper lip is itself an affective force, it has a life, an activity of its own. The taste of salt after a long run contracts years of running, the body remembers the rhythm of the breath; for another this same glistening sweat brings her body to a shudder, it is uncomfortable, hot, and sticky.

Each of these frames stretched around our anxieties and joys of the body's movements and affects, encouraging and challenging us to think discursively, pre-discursively, experientially, materially, and theoretically. Something in the way we moved through such a transdisciplinary quagmire of experiences and expertise exploded the possibilities and meanings of movement. In a sense, our conversations created a "vision of hope and possibility that doesn't foreclose despair and exhaustion" (Cvetkovich, 2007: 467): an affective echo of the way feelings—hard and gentle, painful, and joyful—are participants in the ontological and epistemological frames of our embodied lives.

3. Methodologically messy

We sought to mobilize in text (as much as possible) the spirited conversations we had about the relationship of emotions to sociocultural contexts, and the experiential and relational dimensions of emotions in the context of physical activity. One of the challenges in such a task was our method: how does a group as academically and athletically diverse as ours relay our different perspectives, organize them into a readable paper, all the while honoring our multiplicity of voices?

We decided to think of method, not as a set of prescribed techniques, steps or practices, but rather as *methodos*, which from its Greek origin expresses *meta*—pursuit of knowledge and *hodos—a way*. That is, it is a way to pursue knowledge (Barber, 2004b; van Manen, 1997). We also took as a point of departure the writing of John Law (2004) on mess and method. Law argues that we need to re-imagine traditional methodological approaches to reflect the complexity of life (and life-world experiences). He refers to this approach as "method assemblage," writing that:

> Assemblage is a process of bundling, of assembling, or better of recursive self-assembling in which the elements put together are not fixed in shape, do not belong to a larger pre-given list but are constructed at least in part as they are entangled together. (Law, 2004: 42)

Without even realizing it, the 'bundling' or 'assemblage'—which is perhaps the best wording for what we did—began in the context of the reading group itself, in relation to the connections and contradictions between the different readings and our widely differing experiences. This then translated to our approach to 'data collection.' We each wrote and circulated an experiential piece on our engagements with physical activity. Our approaches differed greatly, including poetry, experiential description, vignettes, and reflexive prose. The forms of physical activity on which we wrote were equally diverse, spanning soccer, softball, rowing, figure skating, wheelchair basketball, dance, spinning in a field (i.e., twirling), triathlons, and gym class.[3]

The different topics and forms of writing brought us back to the messiness of our collaboration; an undertaking not unlike that of Cornforth et al. (2012) who used themes of intersubjectivity, environment, context, and emotion to shape their collaborative research process, thereby providing space for an inclusive interdisciplinary practice. That said, while our project began in similar ways to this collective of authors vis-à-vis disparate backgrounds and—as they put it—"getting lost with one another" (2012, 158) in memories and writing, we did not have as our goal the melding of our voices/texts into a collective voice/text from which analysis and discussion would occur. This decision and commitment left us, however, with the challenge of analysis.

We found it helpful to explore methodological approaches adopted by scholars doing group autoethnography. Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang, for example, refer to the process of "data analysis and interpretation" (2010, 8) as a stage in collaborative research that includes individual review and reflection on texts produced by the members of the group and shared amongst the collaborating authors, followed by group meaning-making and theme-search. In our scenario, the tasks of meaning-making and theme-search were undertaken without a specific objective of 'looking for something,' although arguably because we were all

[3] Excerpts from each of our narratives are included throughout this paper; the full texts, and brief biographies from the authors are available to read, engage with, and comment on at www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com.

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involved in the project from the beginning, there was likely some predisposition to focus on parts of the texts that reflected in some way the broader theme of this project—emotions and physical activity.

In our group discussions we found multiple commonalities and shared themes that emerged despite our quite different academic/active/athletic backgrounds. In this paper we focus on the conversations around the themes that resonated most strongly with us, including: messiness, pain and pleasure, and gaze and performance. That said, these themes are neither unified, nor mutually exclusive, rather they overlap in a myriad of, well, messy ways.

This form of representation is not intended as a verbatim transcript of our meetings, but rather a fictionalization of the broader dialogue that occurred throughout our work. Reflecting the transdisciplinarity of our group, we agreed that 'fictionalization' might have different disciplinary definitions but shared enough commonality as to be a useful concept for us. For example, within the phenomenological tradition texts are frequently fictionalized in the (re)writing process in an attempt to elevate meanings embedded within the original texts and point to the experience as it is lived (see van Manen, 1997). Poststructuralist theorists and artists, such as Winterson (1997), use fictionalization to refer not only to the ways we write texts, but also to the ways that we construct our selves and our worlds. This follows from Foucault's idea of fictionalization both as method and inquiry in which "fictions work within truth, of introducing truth-effects within a fictional discourse, […] of fictionalizing a politics that does yet exist starting from a historical truth" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 204). Through this approach we aim to show both the depth of the material but also the way that transdisciplinarity allows the collaborative creation of a path, something that would not be possible without the connections afforded by the shared conversation, cognizant of some definitional skirmishes along the way.

4. Conversing on pleasurable pain and painful pleasure

Danielle: The group seems eerily quiet today. I guess I understand. It is kind of hard to wrap your head around the idea of pleasure and pain co-existing.

Zoë: These readings (Cvetkovich, 2007; Probyn, 2000; Sedgwick, 1993) really resonate with me. I mean, I think there is often a mix of pain and pleasure, pride and guilt and longing associated with the disciplined high-performance sporting body and experiences. This is a theme that runs through my writing.

> Passions are life's fire. Meaning and purpose
>
> If so, why do I feel so dead inside? It's too late.
>
> Blinded and bound to this singular track
>
> My passion is a runaway train and I am dangling on

Rachel: (laughing) I don't understand the love of it, the passion. I have never had that moment of "this is satisfying" in sport. *I feel like anyone who loves it is lying.* I have only one memory of pleasure in sport, and it definitely also involves pain.

> The ball's impact stopped time. I heard nothing, felt nothing, saw nothing. It wasn't until the pain licked at me like a flame, coursing through the broken blood vessels, the fractured cheekbone, and the raw, bruised flesh, that I jolted back from time's suspended grip. As my vision blurred over and I realized that my right eye could no longer focus, a smile crept to my lips … As they carefully lifted my weakened body to the stretcher and took me off the field I felt the waves of relief wash over me. A euphoria I had never felt at the blessing, the joker in my back pocket that meant I would never again have to play another ballgame.

(laughter).

Zoë: I think it is ironic and interesting that despite differences in contexts, recreational versus elite, I also experienced this paradoxical relief of being injured and thus of being able to avoid organized sport. I experienced training practices as very stressful and often not enjoyable within my specific high-performance training context and I was similarly often very relieved to be injured and off the hook.

Danielle: I was never happy to be injured, maybe because I had to spend so much of my sporting career on the sidelines due to various injuries and complications. But I deeply understand the feeling of pleasure and pain coexisting while playing sport. I loved playing, but sport was always accompanied by a large degree of pain.

> First, I squeeze my butt and dislocated hip into the vicegrip of two metal sideguards, roughly one inch tighter than my hipbones themselves. Second, I strap my hips, knees, and feet in against the titanium chair with ratchet straps: ratcheting them past pinching, into numbness. Some days I long to play ball again: a visceral craving of sumptuous physicality, which I cannot fully explain. Its absence carves into me like the pain of a dislocated hip, or a lost championship.

Nicole: My overwhelming feeling upon reading Danielle's piece was one of tensions—those that should not go together crashing into one another. The violence that finds extreme pleasure and extreme pain together; there is something strikingly euphoric and almost perfect in the physicality: in the body. A perfect moment of extreme bodily pleasure and pain. I feel like that is part of what is being sought—this pleasure/pain. And when it is all over, it is that violence that is missed.

Danielle: Yes, but importantly this is not just true of sport. I now live a life that is almost never devoid of pain. I move through a body that most people imagine themselves resenting. What most people can't account for is that I have no less pleasure, or desire, or life force than I did before. If anything, a greater, deeper sense of pleasure and possibility has emerged from this embodiment and its related experiences.

Lindsay: My conflicting experiences in depression really bounce off your comments. My body can feel intensely heavy, moving slow and thick as cold molasses. And yet, a smile can flash across my cheeks, a tickle rises in my belly. Fleeting, but there. It seems impossible for anyone to imagine that in the deepest darkness a light might twinkle, if only for a moment. We have a tendency to erase one by the presence of the other. If you are depressed, there can be no joy. If you feel joy, you can't be depressed. This is not my bodily understanding; I hold both together.

Rachel: This strikes me because all this time I have been trying to make a definitive line between pain and pleasure. *All this time.* I still, still, still, want the body to be a linear, contained, entity. With distinct needs and drives. *And it is not.* There is no 'sense' to it. There is only affect, lines of flight, movements that hurt and do not. To think about being a body that has *no moments* without pain, as Danielle pushes me to think, is to think about a Deleuzian world where we are always already contractions of the past and the future. Pain means nothing (and everything); it is a name given to a particular affect. Which is not to say that it doesn't *matter.*

William: One term that kept coming to me when I was reading each of the texts, was 'juxtaposition'. Pain versus pleasure; joy versus sorrow; winning versus losing; healthy versus unhealthy;

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family/team versus enemy; all versus nothing. I return to this idea of juxtaposition and realize that we didn't necessarily write them in this way but this was the way I took them up, something that likely results from my own desire to categorize and juxtapose, a desire undoubtedly shaped/produced/reproduced by Western discourses which I have been immersed in/hailed by Weedon (1997) since probably before I was born.

Danielle: I suppose these are only juxtaposed or paradoxical moments because we see pain and pleasure as opposites and perhaps because we understand them as some kind of pre-discursive biological sensation—one an evolutionary carrot, the other a proverbial stick. Its like we have this essentialist, moralist kind of relationships to these feelings: more good feelings for more people is morally good, while more pain for more people is morally bad. It just seems like we have made these opposite ends of a coin when maybe they are just different. Or perhaps even not so different.

Nicole: I am really struck by how when we look at the experiences as we lived them, that is in a phenomenological way, that they rarely show the dichotomies we've talked about, and are so used to seeing, such as good/bad, pleasure/pain and so on.

Rachel: What if we think about the body beyond ability/disability, unhealthy/healthy, injury/wellness? What if we retell the past as assemblages of multiple experiences and not progress narratives? What kinds of futures could we open up?

William: I largely agree with all that is being said, but I nevertheless find myself continually reverting back to my temptation to categorize things. I wonder if there aren't ways to read each of our texts in terms of shame (Cvetkovich, 2007; Probyn, 2000; Sedgwick 1993). Probyn (2000) writes that:

> shame as a very bodily affect has the potential to focus attention on the body as a vehicle of connection….[Sporting bodies] remind us of the visceral dynamics of pride, shame and bodily affect in ways that have been notably missing within much feminist and cultural analysis. (14)

This might prove useful to us in terms of emotional pain—anxiety, nervousness, suffering, embarrassment, and shame. Shame in our inability to execute skills, shame in the ways we reacted to certain things that might have been 'outside' of cultural expectations, shame of the ways our bodies were judged or the ways they performed (or failed to perform), shame in our (dis)interest in certain activities. At the same time, these moments of shame also seemed to provide moments of 'resistance' (or the potential for resistance at the very least).

Danielle: Resistance? Perhaps. But pleasure? Most definitely! I am drawn to William's writing where he says:

> I am 18. I have just qualified for my third national championships in figure skating. At our weekly public weigh-in, my coach tells me I'm fat and draws a pig face beside my name on the chart for all to see. I am 5 feet, 10 inches and weigh 150 pounds. I start smoking the next day as a weight loss strategy. And as a way to say, "screw you." Pleasure.

Lindsay: William's writing moves me to consider the ways that shame might push us to creative, political and pleasurable possibilities that would not exist without it.

> I remember finding my father dead. Naked, cold, blue. Overcome with an all-consuming urge, I move. I explode and collapse into dance. Alone. I shake and jerk violently: jumping, over-extending, jamming my knees, hips, elbows, shoulders, ribs for lack of proper technique. I run into things. I stumble and trip. I break. I am naked. Self-conscious. Conscious. Ashamed. Judging my movements uncoordinated, sloppy, ridiculous, embarrassing. And then, sights and sounds fall away. All I sense is the weight of my body, the rolling intensity of grief spread through my chest. I revel in what I had judged ugly, shameful. I want to be disjointed, unformed, messy, hurting.

Nicole: Within Lindsay's piece I find angst, dark, pain, tightness occupy the space of before. Movement compels her. It offers relief/release. The movement is the light/warm/alive/expressed/communal/connected and the before movement is the dark/dead/cold/alone. They exist together, however. The movement cannot exist without the before-movement. The dancer is engaged and in/out of their body and the movement feels like many things: joy, rage, pain, and so on.

William: Lindsay's work keeps bringing me back to a quote that Danielle has raised a few times that I was initially resistant to (at least in part) and that is the idea of a utopia that "includes hardship and violence and that offers strategies for survival" (Cvetkovich, 2007: 467). Why do we have to make these experiences so tidy?

Danielle: Glad I've won you over, William! For me this quote speaks to the political potential of thinking through not only the pleasure of sport and physical activity, but also the hard feelings that surround it, and the relationship between these pleasurable and painful feelings. These conversations may move us to recognize how 'seemingly-negative' affects like pain, depression, shame and despair can be politicized, politically productive, catalysts for identities (and dis-identifications), communities, and creative possibilities. In thinking and feeling in these different ways, what kinds of futures could we open up?

5. Conversing on performance and the gaze

Lindsay: It seems like there is an important part of emotion and physical activity, which runs through many of our discussions and experiences, but hasn't been in our readings. Performance: high 'performance' sport; performative sport and dance; stage fright on the field; performance anxiety in private; scintillated by a sexy stare; shamed by a judging gaze, even if it's our own. We have been speaking evocatively and directly about performance and gaze.

William: As a skater and later as an Ironman triathlete, performance has really been central to my experience.

> I put my hands on my slick thighs, bending over at the waist. I hear a voice: "Isn't it a bit too hot to be running?" I look up and smile: "It's the way I like it" I reply. He smiles back at me and I can't help but notice his eyes flick quickly up and down my body. My friends think I'm crazy to run when the heat and humidity are so oppressive but I tell them that the extra challenge makes me tougher, more prepared for the Ironman itself. What I don't tell them is that I really, really like being noticed, being watched, being admired. I could run many different routes in the city (and sometimes do) but there is nothing accidental about choosing this one on this day, wearing only *short* running shorts and shoes. Gay men cruise for sex in this park pretty much 24/7. Pleasure.

Lindsay: I itch at the thought of performance in dance. I burst onto the stage, my trunk, limbs, head carve through space with a sensuality that is electric. I am warmed to flush by the pulse of attention from the audience. Much like William, I find a gripping sensuality, bordering and sometimes spilling into a luscious sexuality when performing for an audience. That audience might be of one or many, but movement for the gaze of another is intoxicating, pleasurable.

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Nicole: If not for being 'seen' would William have pushed himself to perform at such a high level in both figure skating and then again in Ironman triathlons? It seems a lot of the pleasure and satisfaction achieved in sport comes from the gaze of the other.

Rachel: For me, there is nothing pleasurable about the gaze of others in sport.

> I take tiny steps backwards every time my coach looks away. I'm so far out in left field that no twelve-year-old's ball will reach me. But still, my feet creep further and further from the choreographed scene taking place on the diamond ahead of me. I want to run for the trees that surround the field. Get myself away from my friends who love the rush, who are exhilarated after every play. Away from the expectation. The pure terror I felt every time I was posted on base, my glove outstretched with uncertainty. The expectation I felt walking up to face a pitcher, the bat too heavy in my arms, my chest tight with the anticipation of my failure.

Nicole: I found a deep sense of obligation, expectation, and dread present in some of our writing/reflections.

Lindsay: That resonates. From what she shared, Rachel performed from a very early age, and her performance was masterful. But it was neither high-performance sport, nor performance on stage. Quite the opposite. She performed the socially and familially scripted character of someone who should desire to play sport.

Rachel: Yes! In elementary school I feigned stomachaches so I could be sent to the library to read instead of having to play dodgeball. On the way to my first baseball tournament, I cried out that I was sick, had a headache, was nauseous, had too much homework to play. Anything to stop the full body tremors that overtook me at the thought of being forced onto the field.

William: Isn't it interesting that Rachel feigned illness to avoid having to participate? I find the irony of that quite delicious given the dominant promotion of sport as something people should do to get healthy.

Nicole: These conversations make me think of transgression through the subversion of expectations. There is also an element of secrecy—there is pleasure found in 'pulling one over' on those who are thought to create the expectations (such as coaches, judges, 'society,' medicine/doctors).

Danielle: I agree! For me, high 'performance' sport was about how I performed *as* a wheelchair basketball player, but also about how well I performed the role of 'inspirational wheelchair basketball player.' It was a very self-conscious performance.

> Play as though losing doesn't terrify me. As though winning doesn't terrify me more. As if both won't lead to months of heavy hollowness. Play, I implore myself, like the medals are made of something other than gold-colored tin.

Zoë: This really bounces off of William's stories about his move from high performance figure skater to Ironman triathlete and my own experience as well, the continual 'disciplining' of the body even after 'retirement' from high-performance sport. There remains a continuous push—pull movement between the pleasure(s)/pain(s) of performing the familiar sporting body as disciplined, linear, effective, and the desire to be, like Lindsay, 'disjointed, unformed, messy': *other*.

I can't help but think of Foucault's panopticon (1995) as the emblematic architectural symbol of a 'perfectly' disciplined society characterized by an induced state of permanent visibility. According to Foucault, modern disciplinary power or panopticism is marked by a shift from more evident means of government such as physical violence and coercion towards more subtle mechanisms and techniques. These disciplinary and normalizing techniques produce individual subjects, who willingly yet often unknowingly police and discipline themselves in accordance with various tightly defined social norms. I think this really speaks to how individual athletes' are disciplined and rendered governable in high-performance sport and can partially explain why so many former high-performance athletes experience retirement, injury or de-selection as negative and problematic.

William: When I was figure skating, we were under constant surveillance. Being formally judged in competitions aside, at the center where I trained we were subjected to weekly weigh-ins. We literally had to stand on a scale in front of coaches and other skaters and watch while our weight was recorded on a flip chart for all to see both then and throughout the week, until the next public weigh-in.

Danielle: Even at the highest levels of wheelchair ball, we never had that kind of weight-based surveillance, but the surveillance of our disabilities were very similar. We were constantly being watched, classified as disabled enough, based on how well we could perform the appropriate disability 'type,' and disability story. I would urge myself: Play like I am disabled enough to be pitied. Play like I am able enough to overcome, to inspire. Like the pity doesn't sting. Like the inspiration isn't asphyxiating. Play like my shame is only for the bodily losses. Play like I have no politics.

Lindsay: People tell my integrated dance group how they cry when they watch us dance. I had judged this as ugly. I fear their pity, their expressions of inspiration over seemingly broken bodies, over tragic lack, over triumphant overcoming, over disability. I fear I am reproducing, or re-performing, that violence with the choreographic choices I have made, scared that the audience might find inspiration in that violence. But what if tears are not that tidy. What if they cannot be traced to a single story? What if their tears, like our performances, are pulled from somewhere disjointed, unformed, messy, hurting, beautiful?

Zoë: This brings us back to the coexistence of pleasure and pain that we talked about earlier and, even more importantly, I think, to the creative potential that a critique of the modernist self as a linear, coherent, self-contained entity could open up.

Nicole: But is all physical activity performative? I recall fondly spinning and spinning around on the front lawn in early summer until I would fall over onto the dewy grass and then getting up and doing it over again. And I remember the solitary practice of rowing.

> I can feel the boat jerk forward as we reach the catch. My wrists turn and I drop the blade into the water. I stare forward at a point on the horizon and see nothing but stillness and an early morning haze. It is completely silent except for our synced breath.

Are these panoptic moments? I don't feel like my pleasure in these moments comes from performing or the gaze of someone else.

Lindsay: I can't speak for everyone, but I feel all of these kinds of performance omnipresent in my body as a dancer: the panoptic gaze of teachers and coaches; the vigorous high performance training; the deeply pleasurable reveling for an audience on stage; the performances of able-bodiedness and disability on and off stage. Then also the ways I judge my own performance, even in my dead father's living room, alone, reminiscent of Zoë's read of the panopticon. I often wonder if there is any movement that is not a performance of sorts.

Nicole: And I find myself wondering if performance is part of what it is to experience particular types of movement, you know, as they are lived. When I reflect on my experience of spinning around on the front lawn as a child I really feel like performance may not be part of the what-ness of that particular experience.

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Zoë: I think that my favorite writer Jeanette Winterson would agree with your last point Lindsay and perhaps challenge your idea Nicole: All movement is a performance in the sense that we are always performing within the discourses available to us; there is no authentic, 'true,' individual 'I' to uncover. In that sense it would become less about whether we are always performing than about consciously choosing how we will perform. This brings us full circle to fictionalization as an individual and collective political and ethical project:

> If we can fictionalize ourselves, and consciously, we are freed into a new kind of communication. It is abstract, light, changeful, genuine. It is what Wordsworth called the 'real solid world of images'. It may be that to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can. (Winterson, 1997: 60)

William: Ah yes, Nicole and Zoë's divergent views really demonstrate, for me, how messy all of this is that we're discussing. I keep returning to Scott's (1991) claim that experience is always already discursive. But then the idea of Nicole simply spinning on the front lawn with no one watching and remembering finding pleasure in that does perhaps speak to experience outside of discourse. But, following Foucault, is that even possible? At the same time, how to account for concern expressed by Thorpe and Rinehart (2010) that experience of the moving body is too often reduced to language or discourse or representation within sport studies? They suggest that, "despite a recent turn to the corporeal… academic work continues to privilege the disciplined, exploited, and controlled body…" (1268). It's all entirely very messy…but I suppose that's the point isn't it?

6. Concluding thoughts

The complicated and contradictory conversations that we had, moved us to interrogate many of the taken for granted assumptions we held about physical (in)activity and sport, pleasure and pain, performance and gaze, and messiness. As we shared memories and lived-experiences of joy and pain, we disturbed our own (and each other's) learned academic performances, allowing the ethical import of what we assume are only personal experiences to become affective forces in our collaborative understandings of physical activity. The variety of disciplinary and theoretical lenses ultimately became an ethics of messiness and multiplicity; the messiness of bodies, the messiness of emotions, and the messiness of human experiences of movement encouraged us to re-think and challenge traditional dichotomies and hierarchical understandings, which potentially over-simplify and close-down our emotional experiences of physical (in)activity. We struggled to find a neat and tidy conclusion to this conversation, a definitive landing spot so to speak. So we end where we began, with a conversation.[4] We asked ourselves how we were moved by this process and what, in turn, it moved in us.

William: I came to this reading group with my roots set quite firmly in poststructuralist thinking. However, spending more time with phenomenology encouraged me to think more about how we become, how we come to understand our 'selves' in and of the world. I'm thinking about my own experiences training and how I defined them as pleasurable. Now I am not so sure I would describe them that way. I remember attempting triple jumps and falling and crashing to the ice over and over and over again until my hip was so bruised that I couldn't find a comfortable way to sit, to lie down. Perhaps that is the perfect way to conclude my own thoughts—a landing spot that is not that comfortable but a landing spot nonetheless.

Danielle: Being encouraged to land playfully, albeit sometimes painfully, in the space of non-knowing has been a really moving pedagogical and theoretical experience for me. I am moved to think, write and feel in new and exciting ways, or at the very least, to ask different kinds of questions of the ways that I generally think, write, feel and move. There is a significant politics in that, for me: a new opportunity to imagine myself otherwise.

Lindsay: I feel really messy right now, both in this paper and in life, but I have come to realize that this might be an okay space to be in. I am moved by the fact that we were all messy, emotionally, at points in this paper and throughout the reading group. My landing spot is usually in movement: Any of you up for collaborating on a six-person dance-performance-ethnography of this paper?

Rachel: I'm in for dancing! Our conversations, sharing of experiences, and theoretical travels really opened up the import of physical activity for me. Particularly as I thought about those moments where the body exceeds comprehension, and listened to others' experiences of incommensurable joy as their bodies played, danced, and moved, the joys and sadnesses of my own experiences shifted. As a non-athlete, I came to realize that my own broken and painful experiences of sport were echoed even among the elite athletes of the group—all of whom had their own broken, painful, and joyful experiences.

Nicole: I have learned about different theoretical and philosophical perspectives some of which have changed the way I approach my own work. What I have taken away of greatest value in the end was through rather than about emotions. Engaging with and about emotions and affect in multiple, varied and complex ways opened up new and unanticipated possibilities for learning, coming-together-ness, community, interdisciplinarity, and growth. I am reminded here of the very recent work of Fitzpatrick and Longley (2013) who used their embodied, affective responses to a shared, interdisciplinary research project to better understand the ambiguities of undertaking collaborative work. Participating in this project with all of you has made me much more conscious but at the same time more comfortable with the ambiguity, the messiness of doing collaborative work. P.s. I could totally dance this piece.

Zoë: I gained a more complex understanding of the discursive fabric of our various emotional experiences, but also importantly of how we might creatively thwart and transform them, allowing for new possibilities and meanings to emerge. I am urged to consider how I might move my own work beyond problematization and think about, as Rachel would put it, an "affective force" for the development of more ethical power relations in coaching and sporting practices. I think our researcher-selves were not left intact by our collaborative work. It feels like it exploded our former understandings of what doing transdisciplinary collaborative research might entail, including its creative, ethical, political, and transformative possibilities.

As our reflections on our varied experiences of emotions in physical activity revealed, even the most seemingly 'perfect' scenarios of sport cannot easily be reduced to experiences of healthiness, fun and joy. Instead, we found ourselves discussing emotionally-charged moments that were filled with shame, joy, pain, pleasure, anxiety, sadness, happiness, ecstasy—sometimes many of these things at the same time. In other words, from high performance sport to recreational dance, there were numerous seemingly contradictory experiences and emotions between, and even within, each of our physically (in)active lives. Physical activity, experiences, and emotions are *messy things* and, as such, one might argue they *ought* to be thought through and represented in their complexity.

[4] We invite readers to join us in this conversation at www.movedtomessiness.wordpress.com.

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In committing to and allowing ourselves to remain in a messy space we were—we feel—able to produce a collaborative text that simultaneously draws from and adds to existing collective work on emotion in academic research (e.g., Cornforth et al., 2012; Fitzpatrick and Longley, 2013). We were moved to understand that emotion could be a "productive contribution to the research process and to research outputs, as well as an additional thread to be explored in the methodological 'messiness' of conducting research" (Smith et al., 2012: 75). If there is one take home message that we all came to agree upon through this collaborative process, it is that messiness can be an incredibly productive methodological, theoretical, and ethical undertaking full of unexpected and moving possibilities for the study of emotion and (in)active bodies.

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