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Reminders of the abject in teaching: Psychoanalytic notes on my sweaty, pedagogical self

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the question of what, in the context of university teaching and in psychical terms, the appearance of my sweat might be a reminder of. With reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, I argue that my sweat represents a threat to the unitary pedagogical self, as it also serves as a reminder of the condition of teaching as one of primal and primary dependence: that, as teachers and professors, we are never whole unto ourselves. Though my tendency to sweat profusely may be an unwelcome feature of my personal, genetic inheritance, I also argue that, in teaching, we each have our own unique breed of abject reminders that, if thought in relation to our own incompleteness, can serve as a prompt for the development of ethical relations.

> There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.
>
> (Kristeva, 1982: 1, p. 1)

Hey David!

It was a pleasure getting to know you and your trusty bandana.

Kind regards, Vanessa Q.

(From an email sent to me by an undergraduate student)

1. Introduction: the sweaty body of my teaching

I enter class on time. I breathe easy. I take off my jacket, set up my computer, and smile at the students who are eagerly awaiting some sign that things have now officially begun. It's the first day of class, and I think I feel confident, I think I feel prepared to share my lecture notes and discussion questions, and I think I'm excited to teach this class and meet these particular students. Yet, almost immediately, I begin to sweat profusely, and as I introduce myself and describe the class, brashly stepping into "the obscure plot of the disturbed soma" (McDougall, 1991: 11), I sweat so much that my brow begins to drip and I have to reach into my pocket and pull out my "trusty bandana" (as a student has called it) or "sweat rag" (as I call it) which, over the session, my students will come to metonymically associate with my body and with my teaching; the sweaty body *of* my teaching.

As I sweat and I can't stop sweating, it seems that I'm sweating *because* I am sweating, because I am anxious, fearful and worried about how I'm exposed and what my sweating reveals – that which cannot be hidden – about my anxieties, fears and worries. My handkerchief is now well saturated, yet I continue to dab it against my brow, my nose, and my hair, in a futile attempt to stop up what cannot be stopped, to forget what cannot be forgotten, to mute what simply cannot be silenced. My sweat is like a little screaming reminder that speaks no discernible language, and which only I can hear, as it is also an elusive though penetrating "question [which] does its obscene work in advance of – and irrespective of – the answer it elicits" (Walsh, 2014: 15). As my fear of inadequacy and insecurity reverberates in each dabbing gesture I make, I'm also reminded of the fact that, as a professor, I am inescapably dependent on the inquiring faces staring straight back up at me.

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It's almost as if before I entered the class I was a baby floating securely in the ooze of the bio-incubator that is their mother's womb, "blissfully merged" (Luxmoore, 2010: 26) in primal protection from the knowledge of dependency, relational insecurity, and the fact that, in teaching, we are never whole unto ourselves. Even when I stop sweating, I hang the limp rag – dripping with liquid reminders, liquid remainders of myself – to dry on the back of a chair or the side of my bag and, momentarily defeated, I see it continuing to threaten me out of the corners of my eyes, and I know – its very existence persists in telling me – that I am not, nor can I ever be, in actual control of my teaching. I am here reminded of the insecure knowledge that, as Alice Pitt (2003) tells us, "our pedagogical efforts set into motion experiences the outcomes of which we cannot predict and often enough do not want" (p. 114). In a sense, I am in this moment of dejection "reminded of earlier betrayals" (Luxmoore, p. 28), and keeping this question of reminders in mind, I will here theorize what my excessive sweating implies in the relational, emotional contexts of university teaching. Following William Cornell (2015), I consider the possibilities of the surely impossible task of "bring[ing] language that is adequate to the experience of one's body" (p. 1).

In this article, I explore the question of what, in psychical terms, my sweaty appearance might be a reminder of. Along with Cornell (2015), a transactional analyst who focuses on physical, somatic experiences in the context of psychoanalytic therapy, I maintain that "informed and sustained attention to bodily experience can provide an essential bridge between realms of the unconscious and our conscious capacities for understanding, choice, action, and vitality" (p. 1). With reference to Julia Kristeva's (1982) psychoanalytic theory of abjection (which indicates an elusive, rejected presence that works to disturb, while also sustaining, the unstable borders between self and other, life and death, chaos and order), I argue that, as it serves as a reminder of the condition of teaching as one of primal and primary dependence, my sweat represents a threat to the unitary, stable pedagogical self; "abject material" as Gustafson (2011) tells us, "rises to consciousness and challenges the subject's fantasy of a stable, ideal self" (p. 153). Though my tendency to sweat profusely may be an unwelcome feature of my personal, genetic inheritance, I also argue that, as individual teachers and professors, we each have our own unique breed of abject reminders. This is not, then, simply a story about a sweaty man who happens to be a university professor, but a gesturing towards a recognition of the ways that affective, abjective disturbances in teaching may teach us something significant about the mutually constitutive relations of educational practice. As Deborah Britzman (2006) writes about distressing disturbances of thought that manifest themselves in unwanted psychosomatic symptoms (of which excessive sweating is surely one): "All these signs telegraph a story" (p. 128); "In every case," McDougall (1974) adds, "*the symptom tells a story*" (p. 441). And importantly, as Cornell notes, "our bodies in their sensate and sexual capacities are powerful resources for psychic growth" (p. 1). In this article, I therefore position myself as a kind of storyteller of the movements (bodily and otherwise) of "incorporation and expulsion [that] constitute the underlying processes of subject formation" (Gustafson, 1995: 34) in pedagogical spaces.

In the following section, I describe Kristeva's theory of abjection – which, along with Henderson (2014), I regard as "the *dis*-organising concept of this paper" (p. 35) – and I consider what this theory may suggest about an educator's encounter with various forms of abject material. I then discuss the broader implications of what abjection, in its multiple guises and countless emergences, might imply for those of us working in spaces of schooling and higher education.

2. Abjection: neither subject nor object

For Julia Kristeva, the processes of abjection are first observed most clearly alongside the baby's experiences of primary narcissism, "a narcissism laden with hostility and which does not yet know its limits" (Kristeva, 1982: 60). In psychoanalytic terms, this is a crucial developmental stage where – in creating itself as subject – the baby manages its own sense of ego and difference, and separates itself from its mother, at times, through acts of unbridled aggression and hatred. As Nick Luxmoore (2010) describes this stage of psychic development:

> The theory goes that a baby is born, unable to differentiate between itself and its mother. The baby is everything and everything is the baby. This developmental stage is called 'primary narcissism', the baby seeing itself in everything and seeing everything as an extension of itself. But slowly the baby learns that other people are separate and exist in their own right. It learns that they're not extensions of itself, that it can't control them but must enter into relationships with them. (p. 92)

Importantly, then, from the very beginning of human life (and in stark distinction from those understandings that frame it as a kind of gratuitous selfishness), narcissism represents a significant developmental achievement, conceptualized by psychoanalytic theory as part of the relational process of recognizing and accepting the existence and worth of other people.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva theorizes abjection – referring to the feelings of repulsion and efforts at expulsion, a "sensation and attitude" (Gross, 1990: 87) that comes into play when expressing or perceiving the unstable borders between self and other – as an important component of this narcissistic stage. "Abjection," writes Barrett (2011), "is an archaic or very early process that arises from the infant's relation to the mother, even before birth, where biological processes are at work laying down the conditions for the child's separation from the mother" (p. 70). Abjection thus relates to both biological and psychic functioning and is, as Kristeva (1982) herself notes, "a precondition of narcissism. It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle" (p. 13). Inspiring such "brittle" conditions, the abject is often encountered where the borders between self and other are at their most moveable, tenuous and fragile. To emphasize such vulnerability, in the pages of *Powers of Horror* we are presented with a series of disturbing phenomenological descriptions – including vomiting, death, decay, excrement, semen, blood, urine, spasms, and expressions of food loathing – that help to describe the ambiguous and contradictory movements of abjection: "a vortex of summons and repulsion" (Kristeva, p. 1) that places the human subject "at the border of [their] condition as a living being" (p. 3). Paradoxically, while it may seem that abjection, or the process of expelling that which threatens our sense of wholeness and self, will help to stabilize our ego and our status as individual subject, because the expelled object refuses to disappear completely, in the throes of abjection we are actually located ambiguously, at the continuously shifting border between subject and object. As Oliver (1993) describes, "The abject is what is on the border, doesn't respect borders" (p. 56).

Hovering at this unstable border, the terms of subject and object appear as distressingly volatile and insecure, and given that our original experiences of abjection emerge from the pre-oedipal, pre-objectal and prelinguistic experience of separating from our mothers – "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva, 1982: 10) – it is no surprise that we encounter a confusion of boundaries and bodies when beset by the abject. For Henderson (2014),