

Writing the PhD Journey(s): An Autoethnography of Zine-Writing, Angst, Embodiment, and Backpacker Travels

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Abstract

Doing PhD is a “black box.” While inputs, outputs, and milestones are visible, there is a sizeable gap in our understanding of candidates’ lived experiences. This may cause some academic advisors to erroneously assume their students’ experiences are necessarily comparable to their own, and to proceed accordingly. But lived experiences vary enormously, and this autoethnographic study aims to problematize and pluralize the PhD experience by offering a look into the “black box” of one mature-age distance-education student’s lived experience in Australia. Methodologically, the paper innovates by blending reflective, autoethnographic writing with critical analysis of contemporary, self-authored travel zines (akin to low-tech blogging). This exemplifies a suggested middle way between Anderson’s evocative and analytic dichotomy in autoethnography. While the candidate’s development of criticality and confidence are evident, the zines also document confidence-crushing anxiety and burnout as underexplored embodied effects of PhD study, and intersections of candidature and embodiment are also considered.

Introduction

It is raining in Sydney and I’m at home on a Saturday morning, thinking about yesterday’s conversation with a PhD student. She feels overwhelmed, she says. She feels she does not smile so much anymore. She worries that she is not doing it “right” and that her writing, and therefore *she*, isn’t good enough. She is neglecting her friends and her family: she wakes up thinking about her thesis. She has started smoking again; she hates herself for that, she says, eyes down, but it helps. I take her hand and tell her I know how she feels. I do, I really do. I smile and bend down in my chair a little so she has to look me in the eyes; I get it, I really do. But she doesn’t seem to believe me. And so, this morning, I start to write her an e-mail and tell her about my own “PhD journey” to help her realize that what she is feeling is normal, that there is light at the end of this tunnel, and that the apparently confident academic that I am now, secure in my university office with a list of publications and a small clutch of awards, once felt exactly like she feels now.

The e-mail grows throughout the morning; it is still raining and I’m getting into the swing of this: it is cathartic, actually, to write my way through what I felt during the PhD process. I write about the role of travel and then I’m getting up, digging through boxes to find the travel zines I wrote during my PhD. Rereading them, the emotions, insecurities, and identity work spring back to life. I realize I want, I *need*, to write autoethnographically about all of this in order to make sense of it for myself and also for others.

As a PhD supervisor, working with people going through such experiences, I have an obligation to engage with candidature as an embodied, lived experience, different for different people. We all do. The experience is far bigger and more complex than something contained in meetings and texts. All supervisors, I think, must consider the lived experiences, and the demons, behind the process. This is particularly true for candidates who may be quite unlike the “typical” academic (if such a thing exists anymore). Like many, I am an atypical academic: first in family, more people-ish than theoretical, and until my thirties I had honed an entirely different identity, as a shoestring backpacker and itinerant English teacher. Doing a PhD, for me, was as much an identity metamorphosis as it was a piece of research and writing; any journey depends on its starting point. This is what I found myself writing about,

about intersections of the PhD and previous and current identities, and throughout a rainy weekend and in the weeks after, this paper came into being. Its purpose is to start conversations: among students, among supervisors, and among those who seek to understand the many, different ways of surviving and living, even enjoying, perhaps, a PhD.

Most academics have traveled the PhD “journey” and many academic jobs include the role of tour guide, showing others the way. There are also many books on the practical “how to” of the PhD (e.g., Dunleavy 2003; Marshall and Green 2004; Phillips and Pugh 2010; Rudestam and Newton 2007). With the “journey” as metaphor, these are “guidebooks”: where to go, how to get there, what to do. Such guidebooks proliferate in the domain of physical travel, too. But there is another well-established genre within travel, beyond the guidebook: travelogues, first-person narratives, travelers’ tales. While such texts proliferate around physical journeys, there is much less “travel writing” about the PhD “journey.” How does it intersect with “real life” (and what actually remains of real life when one undertakes a PhD)? How are we to find our way, and perhaps even find *ourselves*? Some work has been done on the intersection of successful academics’ lives and their academic and contextual influences and lifelong processes of intellectual development (e.g., Waks 2008; Weaver-Hightower and Skelton 2013). And van Mannen (2011, p. 75) describes a genre of “confessional tales” dealing with “how the fieldworker’s life was lived upriver among the natives.” These are process-oriented texts describing behind-the-scenes elements of research and theorizing. Similarly, Gill (2009) has written about the stress and burnout of post-PhD academic staff members; these experiences resonate with, but are somewhat different from, PhD experiences.

There is a comparative dearth of writing about what to expect in experiential and emotional terms during PhD candidature. This article presents an autoethnography of one such experience, with a twofold aim. The first is to expose the inner workings of one research experience at a deeper, more personal level than is possible in the PhD methods chapter. Experienced supervisors will know that PhD candidates often travel with the angst that they are muddling through, not doing it “right.” I want to show that this state of suspended messiness is normal, that getting lost along the way does not mean never reaching a destination, and that the destination itself may well be different from that which was imagined. My objective is to soothe but also to understand the transition process from one’s pre-candidature self to guided student to independent researcher; I want to open the black box flight recorder to make sense of the “journey.” Specifically, I am writing to as many PhD students and potential students as needed to hear this: here is my raw, emotional, embodied experience. If you are feeling insecure or lost, angry or hopeless, bored or rudderless, read this. If you are a supervisor and your students are struggling, give them this. (And read it yourself, too, either to remember what it was like for you or, more likely, to make sense of what it can be like for others who are utterly unlike you.) I hope to create a text from which I, myself, would have benefited during my candidature: while I was lost, I would love to have known that getting lost is part of finding the way.

My second aim, rather more ambitious, is to establish a genre hitherto largely absent from the academic literature: accounts of non-expert students’ research experiences, akin to travel narratives rather than guidebooks. Like travel narratives, such accounts would offer insights into the intersections of diverse identities and “the” (ostensibly singular) PhD experience, so that supervisors might become aware of issues and challenges that may be entirely different from their own. Because experiences depend on *who* experiences them and their backstories, just as journeys depend as much on the traveler as they do on the place. If we are serious about student equity, we need to know what *different* PhD “journeys” are like, rather than trying to socialize our various students with tales of only our own experiences, a practice that appears to be all too common as academics may reflect and rely mainly on their own experiences as a foundation for supervision. While most PhD candidates are not backpackers and itinerant English teachers, as I was, this account sheds light on the *process* of identity shift and the ways in which previous experiences and identities may interact with PhD candidature.

This is important. Academic discourse is, notoriously, inaccessible, both to read and to write. Conventions and convolutions abound, and often the aim appears to be obfuscation rather than clarification. (As in this paragraph. Translation: academic texts are difficult. Academics do weird, complex things in their writing,

and they all seem to do it in similar ways. It sometimes seems that the point is to confuse you rather than to tell you anything.) The complexity and conventions of academic writing work, in part, as gatekeeper: if you don't write like us, you can't come in. But while complex ideas and exact terminology certainly belong in academic writing, and complexity may be (a more legitimate) gatekeeper, I resist the perpetuation of normative, traditional, conventional writing *for its own sake* (and for keeping the riff raff out). There are plenty of other ways of being, and of writing. I hope that, as well as showing readers what one PhD experience is like, this paper also shows that it is possible to write in ways that are evocative, holistic, embodied, and person-centered, and that this is nevertheless a useful, legitimate contribution to academic understanding.

My story, here, then, is only one of many; I hope that others will write about quite different PhD experiences. My "journey" was one of identity transition, from backpacker to academic, and is also a story of growing confidence in my own theoretical understandings and analytical skills. I struggled with the embodied journey: as some people smoke to cope, I fell back into disordered stress-eating, a demon against which I had battled for many years and against which I thought I had won. Addictions and PhD candidature are not often discussed. By bringing these issues to light I want to talk about how we cope with the pressure and how we may learn and grow as people as a result. I also want to acknowledge the embodiment that is easily sidelined when we discuss academic experiences: we are whole human beings and part of the PhD experience is, surely, a physical one (Ellingson 2006).

To repeat, the intended audience for this article is PhD supervisors and also candidates and potential candidates themselves. No two PhD processes are alike, but I hope that there is sufficient conceptual comparability to be useful. This is particularly significant as academics increasingly shuttle, virtually and in real life, between universities in different countries, between which the PhD model may differ significantly. The present article is a study of an Australian PhD experience, undertaken by distance education between two cities, and comprising no coursework and the guidance of only one supervisor. This may well differ from readers' own contexts, past or present: no committee, no courses, no cohort. But contextual differences are just one way in which PhD experiences differ, and it is the intention of this paper to allow for access to the "black box" (Haggis 2002) of PhD experiences, plural, *in their variety*, with the overarching aim of enhancing how we supervise diverse students. Instead of relying only on our own experiences and those of our colleagues and friends, I propose that by writing and reading about others' PhD experiences we can come to understand how it may be experienced by people very different from ourselves, including the students we may supervise.

In this paper, I first discuss autoethnography as a research method before, secondly, reviewing literature on the PhD experience. This I critique for a major gap in its coverage: while analyses of learning, identity, and community journeys are common, little has been written on the hermeneutic circle of how the PhD affects candidates' lives, and vice versa. In particular, very little has been written on the mutual interdependence of scholarly activities and human bodies: how do our bodies and PhD experiences interact? From there, in the third section, I explore literature specific to the analysis of my *own* PhD experience: literature on backpacker tourism and zines. Then, from the fourth section onwards, I present and analyze excerpts from my own zine texts as a way of making sense of my PhD experiences. The analysis is divided into five sections, covering the following areas: my use of backpacker travel as an *escape* from the PhD, my *developing confidence and criticality* as a result of PhD study, the *anxiety* I experienced throughout candidature, the *effects of PhD study on my body*, and the ways in which doing a PhD caused me to *learn more about myself*.

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography is an introspective method used to access "hidden" data that cannot otherwise be easily observed; it provides a unique "window through which the external world is understood" (Wambura Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010, p. 2). It is a firmly qualitative method, drawing upon the ethnographic tradition. What differentiates autoethnography from other types of qualitative research is its focus on the individual within a given social context: the "auto" within the "ethno" (Ellis 2004). It differs from biography (literally: "life-writing") in that the writing of the "self" is the means to a bigger picture: the cultural and the contextual (Chang 2008; Ellis 2004; Muncey 2010).

Epistemologically, autoethnography can be seen as the pursuit of “creat[ing] verisimilitude rather than making hard truth claims” (Grant 2010, p. 578) while it also, perhaps primarily, “seeks to elicit caring and empathy, [as] it dwell[s] in the flux of lived experience” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p. 431). This results in the appearance of quirky, unconventional texts far from the “standard boring writing of the academy” (Sparkes 2007, p. 541). So, for instance, animal totems are included in the following autoethnographies: “For my spiritual guide animals, I chose snail and turtle” (Boje and Tyler 2008, p. 179) and “I adopted puffins (*Fratercula artica*) as my guardian angels” (Nicol 2012, p. 6). In another genre-bending example, Ellis and Bochner present an article written as dialogue, about their emotional reactions to watching news coverage of survivors’ stories in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Ellis and Bochner 2006). In contrast to this vivid, visceral experience, Ellis says reading scholarly analysis makes her feel like “a detached spectator. I become only a head, cut off from my body and emotions. There is no personal story to engage me” (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p. 431). In autoethnography, then, there is textual playfulness and experimentation. This is also true of zines. The experience I described in the opening paragraph, of rereading my PhD-years travel zines and having the visceral, angsty lived experiences spring back into life, is why I have cited these texts to produce my autoethnography of the PhD experience. The zines were written in the moment or shortly after; the zines were closely based on my travel journals written throughout the trips themselves. They are used intertextually in the present paper to allow for the reader to engage with my personal, embodied PhD story very much as I experienced it, on my journeys within the (PhD) “journey.”

But in the (worthwhile) pursuit of creative, experimental, evocative engagement with lived experience, autoethnography can also be critiqued: memory is flawed, experience is subjective, texts are constructed, and narratives are performances of our chosen versions of ourselves. This is why the use of written-in-the-moment zines is so valuable, although, as texts, they are necessarily constructed, positioned versions of events. Because telling experience can be all too telling. So, for instance, when Carolyn Ellis recounts raising a glass of champagne to toast (her fellow academic, intimate and writing partner) Arthur Bochner in celebration of their decision to buy a new Mercedes sports car (Ellis 2004, p. 349), there is verisimilitude but also an uncomfortably telling insight into unexamined heteronormative, acquisitive entitlement. Learmonth and Humphrey (2011, p. 104) critique the lack of criticality in what Anderson (2006) calls evocative autoethnography:

In all evocative ethnography, identity work gets done, versions of desirable societies get constructed, and so on. But the processes are occluded if the tales appear to be just about “what really happened. . . . [H]ad there been a concern to link [Ellis’s] text with theory, the author may have become more aware of its possible ideological dimensions.”

So while such autoethnographic writing is engaging and evocative of lived experience, and while it may offer unique insights borne of witnessing or *testimonio* (Chavez 2012; Warren 1997), there may be a shortage of critical, analytical engagement with positionality, assumptions, and partiality and this, in turn, may result in a questioning of its academic legitimacy.

So what if we were to subject autoethnographic texts to the same kind of critical-analytical scrutiny to which we may subject other research-data texts? Anderson (2006, p. 387) describes analytic autoethnography, which differs from the evocative in that there must also be a commitment to such an agenda:

The defining characteristic of analytic social science is to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. This data-transcending goal has been a central warrant for traditional social science research. . . . [T]his means using empirical evidence to formulate and refine theoretical understandings of social processes. . . . Analytic ethnographers are not content with accomplishing the representational task of capturing “what is going on.”

In analytic autoethnography, Anderson proposes the theoretically oriented interpretation of autoethnographic texts. He then lists a set of criteria against which to evaluate analytic autoethnography, including the criterion that other people in the ethnographic milieu be consulted as part of the ethnographic process, resulting in “auto” ethnography that focuses, still, on the self, but that is perhaps as much “ethno” as “auto.” This may address the perceived struggles of evocative autoethnography to attain academic legitimacy, but it also seems to be a departure from what autoethnography actually is: a story (mainly) of the self.

What about a middle way? What about an evocative, verisimilitude-seeking, firmly “auto”-ethnography that focuses squarely on one’s own lived experiences but that also applies critical analysis and aims to formulate theoretical understandings, with the aim of creating understanding beyond the data itself? This is what various researchers have done, using scenes and memories from their own lived experiences to generate theoretical understandings and arguments (e.g., Bochner 2012; Crawley 2002; Evans 2007) and/or through intertextual analysis of ephemera sourced from episodes in their own lived experiences to add nuance to their narratives (e.g., Ettore 2010). This is neither evocative nor analytic autoethnography, following Anderson’s dichotomy, but is, perhaps, the best of both worlds. Instead of seeing analytic and evocative autoethnography as opposites, I suggest combining strengths of each: an evocative, creative, *testimonio* of lived experience that is critically analysed with the aim of grounding theory in the data to produce broader understandings that may inform people in conceptually comparable, but distinct, situations. I take this hybrid approach to autoethnography in this paper. It is important to note, too, what I mean by “theoretical understandings.” I mean inductive, data-driven theorizing, akin to grounded theory (e.g., Charmaz 2006), that finds, in the data itself, insights and themes that are helpful to people in conceptually comparable, but different, situations. “Theory” does not have to be external frameworks that are then “applied” to the data from the outside.

The PhD “Journey”

That said, while “theory” may usefully be inductive and data driven, it is also necessary to engage with what others have said about a topic before wading into the discussion oneself. In this section, I therefore discuss and problematize the notion of PhD as a “journey,” a very common metaphor. My Google search for the phrase “PhD journey” returned 12,700,000 hits; the metaphor of a journey, then, is well used for the PhD. This is because

the PhD journey, like foreign travel, involves the exploration of unknown territory and encounters with unfamiliar cultures. The experience is as much emotional as cognitive, and aspects of the journey may be exhilarating, frightening, puzzling, stimulating, exhausting or tedious. For many PhD travellers, the journey is aided, and sometimes hampered, by fellow travellers and people met along the way. (Miller and Brimicombe 2003, p. 5)

This excerpt, almost uniquely in the literature, recognizes the *emotional* “journey” along with the cognitive and social. But there is a severe imbalance in the research on PhD experiences. Students’ *learning* journeys are comparatively well researched, particularly candidates’ experiences of being part of an *intellectual community* (e.g., Lindéna, Ohlinb, and Brodinac 2011; Shacham and Od-Cohen 2009; Stracke 2010). And doctoral candidates’ professional *identities* have been considered (e.g., Archer 2008; Barnacle 2010; Teeuwesen, Ratkovic, and Tilley 2012; Wellington 2012). But there is a comparative paucity of work on PhD students’ emotional, embodied, personal experiences. This is, of course, comparatively difficult to research, as any individual’s journey is unique: particular to the person and their purposes, perceptions, processes, and performance (Nicholson-Goodman 2012, p. 243). So although anecdotes abound about the lived experience of doing a PhD, comparatively little appears on this in the academic literature and, indeed, even Haggis’s (2002, p. 213) article on the “black box” devotes less than half a page to the topic of “emotion.”

One recent study (Stubba, Pyhältöb, and Lonkaac 2012) bucks this trend, finding that a key rationale for undertaking PhD study was personal development. As such, participants in this study focused their research on areas they cared about, that engaged them intellectually and/or personally, that allowed for flexibility, and that they found personally meaningful. The researchers also asked participants to reflect on the PhD process and its intersection with their own lives, and produced some tantalizingly rich data from distinct participants:

You learn new things all the time; you don’t do one thing over and over again. I would say it is the sort of free and flexible feeling that you can decide yourself what to do and when to do it, decide the direction yourself.

The most enjoyable, most exciting thing is that you get to do something new, and when you understand something difficult, and you understand the causality in your own research . . . those “aha” moments.

The most enjoyable thing is that I can now question things. I won’t take everything for granted without thinking about it, like I might have done previously. . . . I have become very critical and questioning.

The “science-me” and the person I am in general, they are not separate things. Of course not. What I am as a researcher builds me as a whole.

(Stubba, Pyhältöb, and Lonkaac 2012, pp. 8–9)

These quotes are invaluable as they allow for glimpses into the black box: candidates appreciated variety, autonomy, novelty, success, and an enhanced criticality. The final quote is also very telling: the process is inseparable from people’s lives. So while the “journey” metaphor is common, in fact the PhD process is far from linear, and can be conceptualized as much as a “wandering” as a “straight” A-to-B line. However, some journeys *are* peregrinations rather than straight lines, and I think this is the type of “journey” that a PhD resembles most. There is a need, in all of this, then, for a much greater understanding of how the PhD and candidates’ own lived experiences influence and play off each other. In my own case, my lived experiences before PhD study included backpacker travels and zine writing, and in the next section I review literature on these.

Zine Writing and Backpacker Communities

Ware (2003) describes the genre of zines as a blend of personal and public writing: somewhere between a letter and a magazine. Usually photocopied in booklet form and bound with staples or hand stitching, zines are low-tech and low cost, distributed among friends and “zinester” (creative, participatory) communities without reference to or distribution by the publishing industry. One advantage is authorial autonomy: individual writers are their own editors, designers, printers, production and distribution teams, and this allows for tight control over meaning and for the production of texts that are significantly different from those in other genres of writing. Zines are often lavishly illustrated, with or without accompanying text, and the text is often unconventionally laid out and designed (see Figures 1, 2, and 3 for examples). This is particularly true in “perzines”—personal zines—which are autobiographical and often much more graphic, raw, and confessional than might be found in conventionally published writing.

Despite the appearance of online spaces for personal writing, notably blogs, zines remain popular as a form of life writing. As Ware notes, the focus of many zines is identity work: the performance and negotiation of identities. Many of these are somehow “other,” such as queer, marginal, and youth identities. My identity is not as marginal as some but it is somewhat unconventional: I turned forty this year, have never married or had children (and have little interest in either), and the longest I spent in any single city in adulthood is six years, and even then I left regularly. For twenty years, I have traveled independently for extended periods in most regions of the world and have lived in seven countries on five continents. My close friends are scattered, I play dress-ups in the borrowed robes of various languages, and I write about all of this in zines. Among the zinester community, and among backpackers, I feel at “home” wherever I may physically be.

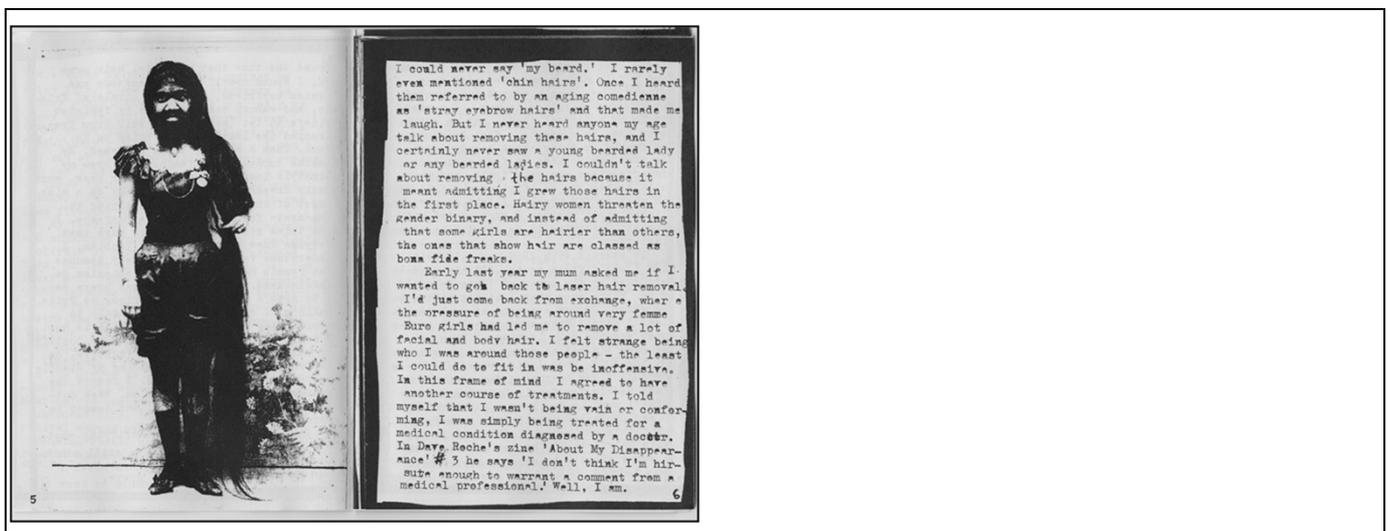


Figure 1. Inside spread from *Ladybeard* (Maddy Phelan, Wollongong, Australia, 2010) showing stylized typeface and use of borrowed, unattributed illustrations in zines (Photograph: Phiona Stanley 2013).



Figure 2. Cover of *Identiteit* zine (Han van Bree, Utrecht, Netherlands, 2009) showing example of text-free zine consisting of van Bree's own uncaptioned photographs (Photograph: Phiona Stanley 2013).

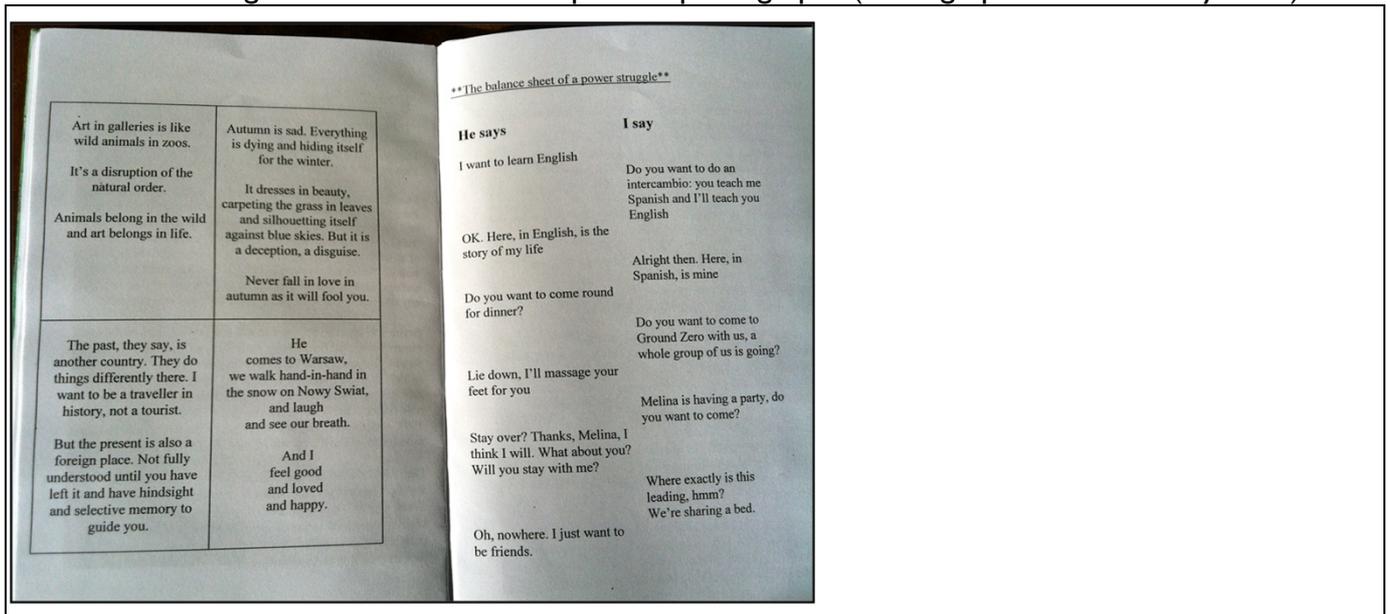


Figure 3. Inside spread from *Shorthaul, Longhaul* (Phiona Stanley, Bydgoszcz, Poland, 1999) showing use of unconventional layout and text fragments (Photograph: Phiona Stanley 2013).

In this sense, zine-writing is not unlike autoethnography: in both, writing is as much a process as a product. Writing perzines and autoethnography allows for catharsis, for exploration, for emotional disclosure and rawness, and for a bridging between “what happened” and “how I felt.” Writers of zines may find a sense of “belonging” among other zinesters much as autoethnographers flock together within the humanities; both enjoy creative, participatory communities.

I have been writing zines since the mid-1990s, when I was part of a circle of multi-language “zinesters” in Warsaw, Poland, where we produced and shared illustrated homespun booklets about our experiences of transnational living. Later, in Oxford in the early 2000s, I produced travel zines as the exception to a mainly fiction-focused writers’ group. I did not learn until 2006 that “zines” were the term for what I had been doing all along: in Adelaide, Australia, I met a circle of English-language zinesters and started writing and sharing zines again. The zines cited in this paper are from that third phase. I distributed my zines—almost all travel-focused perzines—through zine fairs, zine stores such as the Sticky Institute in Melbourne, and through a network of writer friends. Most of my initial readership would likely have been fellow zinesters, friends, and acquaintances. Each publication ran to about two hundred copies. I wrote them as Word documents that I printed into A5 booklets on a cheap photocopier at a stationery store; I then bound them by hand with a long-arm stapler. Both zines are now available in abridged form as eBooks on smashwords.com. This medium allows a wider distribution and although I still call them “zines,” this transition is a corruption (or perhaps a creative hybrid?) of the hard-copy zine aesthetic.

My zines are mostly about travel, and since my late teens I have self-identified as part of the backpacker community. This community uses the label “traveler” (as opposed to tourist), although there may be some slippage between this use of “traveler” and other, seminomadic subcultures in the United Kingdom and Ireland, including Roma people or “Gypsies.” Because of this, I use the term *backpacker* rather than *traveler* (although *traveler* is the emic term). This is also the convention in tourism studies, where backpackers have been most comprehensively studied (e.g., Hannam and Ateljevic 2008; Howard 2007; Maoz 2007; Richards and Wilson 2004a, 2004b; Sorensen 2003). There is a small but growing literature on backpackers and this resonates strongly with the identity I have appropriated and, arguably, perform. This identity emphasizes mindfulness of time and place: being in the here and now. Ironically, however, backpacker identities and “road status” (Sorensen, 2003) are often negotiated with reference to *other* places visited, and there is skepticism about privilege as well as the “authenticity” so often claimed in tourism (Desforges 2000; Murphy 2001; O’Reilly 2006; Richards and Wilson 2004a). So although I call myself a backpacker (just, still), it is a problematic label and a disparate community. The reason I outline “backpacker” as an identity label is to provide context for my zines: throughout my PhD I struggled with the identity of fledgling (failing, struggling, marginal?) academic and retreated into my backpacker self: I traveled a lot during my PhD, both for data collection and for fun, and I consider here the role of alternate identities as a salve to the feelings of struggling as an academic manqué.

My (PhD) Journey(s): In the Moment

On that rainy Saturday in Sydney, digging through boxes of treasured ephemera, the two travel zines that seemed best to “tell the story” of my PhD experience were *A Zine of a Trip* (2008) and *Travels with Facebook* (2009). The first of these documented fifty days spent in Japan, China, and Mongolia in 2008, doing fieldwork in China, taking trains around Japan, staying in city youth hostels, and hiking in the mountains of Western Mongolia. The second described a Canada/USA visit of 2009, in which I reconnected with friends from different phases of my life. Both zines blend personal memoir with descriptions of and reflections on places and experiences. In this and the subsequent sections of the paper, I cite and analyze sections of these two zines to demonstrate how the texts helped me write autoethnographically and how this sheds light on the five themes around which this paper is structured: escaping from the PhD, developing confidence and criticality, anxiety throughout candidature, the effects on the body, and the PhD as a catalyst of personal growth.

The zines were written from travel journals, and between the various texts there is a progression from raw note-taking (journals) to constructed recounts (zines) to curated and analyzed findings (this autoethnographic paper). The zines, then, provided a stepping-stone between the experiences themselves and the way the story is later told. Notable is what is said, what is emphasized, and what is elided. Rereading the zines, the first thing I noticed were the moments of gleeful exuberance, and this is the finding discussed in this section: travel was, and is, for me, a “pure” form of enjoyment, unmediated by the (over)analysis that dogged my PhD “journey.” Throughout, I used backpacker travel as an *escape*. This is the theme of this section:

It pours rain in Nagasaki from the moment I arrive to the moment I leave. I go straight to the museum, the reason I’ve come all this way, then find the way back to my soulless youth hostel on a tram whose windows are so steamed up from the rain that I struggle to see out. It is dusk. I am drenched. I don’t want to go out again later but I’m hungry. So, no guidebook, no phrasebook, I go into a tiny, nameless noodle shop near the tram stop. It is cosy, and a fug of warm air hits me as I enter. I sit at the counter; I am the only customer. The woman chef smiles; I smile; we have no words in common, but she suggests “*champon*” (after a brief impasse in which it is clear I am a dumb tourist) and I dredge the word back up from having read it in the guidebook earlier . . . it is a Nagasaki specialty of pork and seafood noodles in soup. Fine, yes. More smiles. The noodles arrive and are delicious; I order a beer; a gameshow plays on a TV in the corner. The woman is working on something under the counter and I am reading Jiang Rong’s *Wolf Totem*: the woman gestures that, wow, it’s a thick book, which it is. I pay and go to leave and she gives me what she’s been working on: a pressed flower bookmark for my thick book. She shows me what it’s for. More smiles, and thank you, I say it in Japanese, *arigato*. I love this travel thing.

A Zine of a Trip (2008)

I arrived in Montreal and I took a taxi to [my friend's] place/Je suis arrivé à Montreal et j'ai pris un taxi à la maison [de mon ami]. While I knew that Montreal was Francophone, I don't think I was fully prepared for that reality. My crappy French, rarely used, had me tongue-tied (and laughing). While it's true that most Quebecois speak at least some English, my cabbie from the train station was from Benin. But we did it, my lousy French et mon chauffeur Beninois, we made it to [my friend's] place despite some convoluted directions involving a market (le marché), a cross street (la petite rue?), and the street number (whose French rendering I dredged from some forgotten cupboard of memory).

Travels with Facebook (2009)

[From] Beijing airport [I] take a cab, pretending all the while that my Chinese is more fluent and my sense of direction better than is the case. Sometimes travelling is all about faking confidence till you feel it.

A Zine of a Trip (2008)

For me, these are moments of “pure travel”: the joy is being in the moment. All are successful intercultural encounters (as well as warm, friendly; transactional-turned-slightly-interactive encounters), and in all of them my interlocutors and I struggle, and ultimately succeed, in making meaning without many words. In these excerpts I am somewhere, and with someone, (to me) exotically “other”: Nagasaki, Benin, Beijing. The shared understandings—the thick book, the flower bookmark, the laughter at my rusty French, zooming through the Beijing night—all of this reminds me that people are people wherever you go, that a smile is often sufficient to connect, and that good experiences leave lasting memories.

Yes, I realize how lucky, how *entitled*, I might sound in these excerpts. I was in China for fieldwork, but the Japan and Canada trips were self-indulgent holidays: adventures far beyond the means of many students, and likely beyond the means of my three interlocutors. I worked hard in professional jobs before and during my PhD (which I did in my 30s) precisely so that I would not have to live as a “student.” But I was also lucky enough to have been working in Australia, whose dollar was overvalued throughout my PhD (2007–2009). This meant very lucky exchange rates (for me): more yen and yuan. Also: perhaps as I zoomed through the Montreal and Beijing nights my drivers were rather less enamored with the “interculturality” of the “moment.” Probably I was just a fare. But for me these experiences were an escape back into the “traveler” self that I had had to move away from, deskbound and locked down in suburbia as I was throughout much of my PhD. And it was a joy to be back in those (in *the*) moment(s).

My (PhD) Journey(s): Confident Criticality

[An Australian woman I meet in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia] tells me she's been working in the Solomon Islands, trying to solve the problem of tribalism. After a beer she describes the many Australians working there: there's the expats there with mining companies, and their jewel-encrusted wives: very lah-di-dah, they're having nothing to do with the development community, who they regard as unwashed hippies. Then there's the [Australian Federal Police] blokes—bogans the lot of them [she says], there on fat salaries to sit on their bums and drink beer—and they want nothing to do with either the development folk or the expats. I suggest that perhaps the problem among the Australians there is one of tribalism.

A Zine of a Trip (2008)

In Beijing I go to the Bookworm, a library/bookshop/café/meeting place. . . . At a nearby table a loud white guy with self-consciously sculpted sideburns is code-switching, speaking Chinese and English combined, with a group of Chinese people who clearly speak better English than his Chinese. He is dining out on being oh-so-fluent, but I notice he searches for the Chinese words for “bicycle” and “body,” eventually saying them in English. Wanker. Even I know those words, and I don't pretend to speak good Chinese (I can get around, shoot the breeze, that's it). But he is showing off his cultural capital—here in China, a foreigner (crap sideburns or no crap sideburns) speaking Chinese is worth something: cross a border and the social value of this skill drops dramatically (as I'm about to encounter, suddenly mute in Mongolia). If only on borders there were currency exchanges for cultural capital as well as leftover currency.

These excerpts speak of my developing ability to critically analyze, which was also part of how I experienced the PhD “journey”; this is discussed in this section. I read Pierre Bourdieu and others, which gave me the vocabulary, and confidence, to apply theory to lived experiences. I engaged with the Australian woman in Ulaanbaatar and (silently) with the Bookworm code-switcher in Beijing much as I had with my data: analytically and critically. Would I have recognized the irony of “Australians fighting tribalism” before I started my PhD? Perhaps not. How might I have engaged with the unearned privilege of Western men in China (Stanley 2012b) before I spent my PhD years grappling with criticality as an analytical paradigm and gender studies as a disciplinary lens? Living in China before starting my PhD, I had certainly recognized the gendered differences and “China-capital” differences in the attributed identities of Western transnationals. But it was only through deeper engagement with these issues that I was able to articulate a coherent rationale for the visceral discomfort and rising anger I felt in Beijing’s Bookworm when overhearing the code-switcher and articulating, in my head and notebook, the harsh judgement, “wanker.” By 2009, I had spent long enough with my data and with Bourdieu not to let sleeping assumptions lie, and this example chart the development of both confidence and criticality. Looking back now on these encounters, I realize that my thinking was deepening and developing. And with that came confidence.

My (PhD) Journey(s): Travels with My Angst

I agonized [about whether to travel in 2009]. I can’t afford this trip. I’m in the final throes of my PhD, it is insanity to travel until it’s finished. . . . I was channelling Woody Allen, angsting and fretting. And then a strange calm descended, and I thought, “do it.” And so I did. I got on Facebook. Connected up with [friends in the USA and Canada]. . . . With diary and atlas I worked out a route; booked trains, planes, and one automobile. . . . With near-military precision, I organized a trip where the me-time would be train-time, and where catch-up time would be most of the time. Normally I’d plan a lot more slack and have more time for staring into the middle distance, but I’d been spending so much time with myself, with my PhD, and with the frustrations and mindchatter that comes of it; I needed a break from my internal monologue and from having my ideas-generator always turned up to eleven.

Travels with Facebook (2009)

As it was, it was a fairly angsty trip. My [trip] journal is full of “what if” and “another idea” as I struggled to switch off the PhD stuff and, in some ways, yearned to be back at my desk finishing it. But to prevent burnout this trip was exactly what I needed, and not before time. I completed a whole, almost-there draft a few days before leaving and sent it [in sections] out to readers—trusted friends and my supervisor. While they read, I boarded a 747 bound for LA. I was wracked with doubts about the fact of travelling at this point, but I told myself it felt great to be hitting the road again. But I had no idea what I felt.

Travels with Facebook (2009)

A PhD is exhausting because you are never not doing it, it is always there in the back of your mind. I did mine in two years and ten months, and during that time I also taught for ten months fulltime (or its equivalent) on [intensive adult education] courses, spent four months data collecting in China, and wasted some time, gloriously, backpacking in Turkey, Mongolia, and Japan. So the time I did spend in front of my computer was quite intensive, to say the least. . . . Of course this is self-inflicted—I chose to travel and work so much, and to get the thing finished in record time. I’m quite a mono-tasker when the mood is upon me, and I don’t cope well with long, drawn-out deadlines.

Travels with Facebook (2009)

The key words and phrases from the above excerpts are:

agonize, can’t afford, angst, fret, time with myself, frustration, mindchatter/internal monologue, struggle to switch off, burnout, yearn to be at my desk, wracked with doubts, no idea what I felt, exhausting, always there, intensive, long drawn-out deadlines.

These are the phrases to show to anyone considering doing a PhD; these are the dark places, the badlands. In this section, I consider the anxiety and loneliness that traveled with me, the emotional “journey” of the

PhD. I was a distance student—my home city a ten-hour drive from my university—so the contact I had with my peers and supervisor was limited. I had no idea if what I was feeling was normal. My setup was enviable (in a way): I lived alone, had an established, professional job that I could do part-time, and had no family responsibilities. I could, and did, devote 100% of my time to my PhD. Health-wise, I was fine, and this allowed me to indulge, regularly, in several-day writing benders of 16-hour days and hardly going out. I neglected my friends, spent far too many hours alone, and listened to hip-hop on constant loop. But while the absence of outside obligations allowed for ruthless single-mindedness, it also meant never *having* to step away, never feeling someone's warm arms pull me away from the computer screen, never having the validation of success, or importance, in any other area of life. My PhD sustained me and, when something went badly, it tortured me: all my eggs were in its basket. It may be assumed that students can count on support at home—emotional as well as practical—during the PhD, and, indeed, the role of husbands, wives, children, and other home-based family is never far from the narratives of many students (Brown, forthcoming). But for those like me, unpartnered and living alone in a different country far from parents and siblings, and studying off campus far from peers, the loneliness can be palpable and is never more powerfully felt than when anxiety and exhaustion strike. As I wrote, I internalized the voice of every potential critic. I felt their nagging—is that right?—is it good enough?—am *I* good enough? It was exhausting (hence the pressure I felt to get the damn thing done and dusted as quickly as possible, I realize now). It was satisfying, ultimately, and I did very well. But it was not enjoyable in and of itself. I beat myself up, a lot, and I would hate to repeat the experience.

And, as always, travel was my salvation. On previous trips, I had enjoyed the luxury of unstructured days and weeks. (This is the privilege of Western backpackers in developing-world playgrounds: when you can earn \$40 an hour at home and have no family to pay for, it's very easy to save for \$40-a-day shoestring travels.) And so although I did get away a few times during the PhD—trekking in Turkey and Mongolia, vagabonding in Japan and north America—the time was necessarily much more structured as (short-ish) vacations rather than (long-ish) journeys. And in photos of these various trips another, slower, effect of my binge-working became obvious: I put on weight. The next section considers embodied experience as integral to the overall PhD story.

My (PhD) Journey(s): The Body

To [my friend in Montreal], I hadn't changed much, although I *have* changed since Poland [where he and I worked together, in the mid-1990s], it's just that I've also changed back. I am like the postcards you see in Warsaw's old town, a triptych of photos. Frame one, 1938, sepia, Canaletto's beloved old buildings; frame two, 1945, harsh black and white, a pile of rubble, the Zygmunt statue from Plac Zamkowy broken among boulders; frame three, today, colour, the "old" buildings are back, pristine, rebuilt after the war like nothing ever happened. The old town *Stare Miasto* is defiant in its moniker. I am Warsaw. In Poland I was fat, then for seven years I was happy and slim, and now, with doing the damn PhD, I have lived on biscuits and other rubbish, working 16-hour computer-front days, and I am fat again. Sure, this is weight that can again be lost, and will be, but when [my Montreal friend] saw little difference in me, I sighed.

Travels with Facebook (2009)

Late that evening, at the ranch [of some friends, in southern California], once everyone had gone to bed, I stayed outside a while in the full moon. The light was simply incredible; my skin glowed pale blue. The sky was navy blue, the hills in the distance were grey, and against both were silhouetted much closer trees that appeared black. A million stars competed with the moonlight, but the moonlight won; it cast long moonlight shadows. It was utterly still; a perfect temperature. The air smelled clean and fresh and pure. One of the dogs came and leaned against me, not fussing and flapping, just standing there, serene like the scene, acknowledging the perfection of the moment and sharing it silently. My PhD-induced mindchatter was much quieter there. . . . I also realize I should have taken better care of myself.

Travels with Facebook (2009)

A farmer friend once told me that the best way to fatten pigs is to tie them up to a stake so that they cannot move around much, and then provide unlimited food and a reason to eat, such as boredom (and

maybe also anxiety, although for pigs I hear this has the opposite effect). If you were trying to fatten a human being, a PhD done the way I did mine would be ideal. Staying at my desk for hours and days on end, feeling guilty about stepping away from writing (and so neglecting most of the exercise I had done previously), and adding layers of boredom and anxiety that necessitated, for me, at least, the soothing and self-medication of buttered toast and endless cups of coffee; the result of all of this was that I got fat. I had battled body image and weight for years and I tend to eat when I am anxious. I had previously dealt with this in small-town Poland. Having lived in Warsaw and Krakow, I made a “good career move” to a lonely management job in an overlooked, industrial city (that caused most of my Warsaw friends to raise one eyebrow and ask, “why there?!”). I was bored and unhappy. I ate. So I should have anticipated that this would be an issue for me during my PhD. People who have quit smoking may return to the habit; others—perhaps those with fewer soothing vices—let the anxiety overcome them and they throw in the towel. I had battled disordered eating for years, and during my PhD I forgot I was an embodied human being. I became a head in an increasingly large jar.

My (PhD) Journey(s): In Search of the Self

I’ve been in Shanghai doing PhD stuff for a few weeks . . . squeezing in interviews and observations, and generally being a sticky beak. It’s hard to be in a place to do [ethnographic, grounded theory] research because absolutely everything just might be relevant, and you can’t afford to ignore anything at all. And lots happened: one of my participant teachers was fired from the uni, others had various dramas. Then I flew to Beijing [and] today I don’t have to be anywhere or do anything. Breakfast is lazy and in a plant-lined courtyard: dumplings, and strangely-good instant coffee.

A Zine of a Trip (2008)

In *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck writes that different journeys have different personalities. I agree. Mine was an awkward, inward-looking, anxious journey that grew up, slowly, becoming still, calm, connected, and happy. Steinbeck also writes, of journeys, that: “The life span of journeys . . . seems to be variable and unpredictable. Who has not known a journey to be over and dead before the traveler returns?” . . . So it was with my journey. It ended at the ranch, where I switched off and began to feel playful again after months and years of grim determination. Inconveniently, my journey ended when I was far from home. . . . [On the way back] I wasted some time in San Francisco coming down with a cold, reading the newspaper, poking around in Berkeley bookshops. . . . [Then] I took a cab to the airport for my return flight, speaking Spanish all the way with the delightful Bolivian driver. And Qantas, bless their hearts, upgraded me all the way to Sydney. And then I was home.

Travels with Facebook (2009)

If I have painted the PhD as a type of purgatory, I do apologize. This section reminds readers that it was far from a *bad* experience: difficult at times, certainly, but entirely worthwhile not least as doing a PhD enabled me to learn a lot about myself. There were many “aha” moments of understanding, clarity, and realization, and once I got into the writing I found the creative “flow” carried me along with minimal biscuit breaks. I also adored going back and forwards to China, where my study participants were welcoming, friendly, and fascinated by my research on their lives, and most of them remain my friends to this day. My PhD also got me to where I am now, in a job I like very much in a city where I am happy. Since then, I have re-joined a gym, have stopped defining health and happiness by body shape, and I realize I have learned a lot, life-wise, from the process of the PhD. Specifically, I handle anxiety much better now and I’m slowly learning how to eat intuitively rather than bingeing as self-medication. Looking back, I understand that doing a distance PhD is probably unwise unless you have a good support network. I also realize, looking back on my zines, that part of the purpose of travel, for me, is the distance from “real life” that allows for such transcendent moments as those described above: free time for leisurely breakfasts, the feeling of playfulness among friends in nature, and unstructured time in bookstores and reading newspapers in cafes. These are small luxuries that can be found almost anywhere and while I still adore traveling and find it restorative, I am making an effort to seek out these experiences here in my adopted home city too.

Conclusion: Writing into, and out of, the “Black Box”

Where do we go from here? These zines provide diary-like insights into one person’s process, of doing a PhD. Other candidates will have quite different takes on it, and part of the purpose of this paper is to pluralize the experience. While supervisors themselves will have undertaken the PhD “journey,” it is doubtful that their own stories will be quite like these, or quite like their students’ stories. This is especially true if supervisors have moved between universities and national systems, or they did their own PhD a long time ago, or they were a more “typical” student: on campus, perhaps, or partnered, or younger, or grappling with entirely different demons, addictions, and identity labels. But I hope that readers will nevertheless bring to my texts what Willis (2004) calls “compassionate listening,” particularly when I write about anxiety and difficulties but also when I suggest that, as privileged as my own PhD journey certainly was, it was no cakewalk.

I finished my PhD at the end of 2009, and so the hindsight of four years has allowed for reflection and analysis. Applying this to contemporary process-oriented texts—the zines—I have illuminated the “black box” of the PhD process from the perspective of one very committed if rather anxious candidate in what are perhaps atypical circumstances but which showcase the very varied nature of PhD candidature. Rereading the zines now helps me make more sense of the “journey” and I hope that by writing about and analyzing what I went through I might help someone else make sense of their own process or that of their students. This paper has modeled the process of drawing out themes from one’s own lived experience but also the process of turning the analytical lens on oneself and engaging, critically, with one’s own writing and positionality. Certainly, the conversations that drafts of this paper have sparked with PhD students, other academics in my department, and academic reviewers for the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* suggest that this paper is both a starting point for discussion and also a road talisman: even though the journey may be hell at times, the destination can be reached.

One thing that is notable in all my travel zines except *Travels with Facebook* (2009) is just how little I actually mention my PhD; it was an all-consuming process at the time and yet travel and zine-writing were, for me, an escape. It is also worth saying that I still very much enjoy writing, both academically and creatively, although I increasingly see the two genres as compatible and convergent. In 2012, for instance, I published both an academic monograph (Stanley 2013) and a forty-thousand-word eBook about crossing the Sahara as part of a “banger rally” (Stanley 2012a). In the academic text I found flow by writing more “creatively” than the average dry, stilted, academic prose, and in the zine I wrote more analytically and more politically than is common in travel writing. I suggest, then, that the source and analysis texts in this paper are closer in form and function than might be supposed, and that intertextual autoethnographies, like this one, offer both the potential for understanding the contents of the PhD “black box” but also a new genre-type, akin to travel writing, that offers insights into the “journey” of novice researchers’ lived experiences.

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