

Comedy Cares to Think Trauma

Log in

by Ninette Rothmüller

This article is purposefully published bare of supplementary ready-made visuals in order to stimulate readers' creative capacity to provide their own images as they read. In this sense, the request made in this article to "readjust your phantasy level" is a request that includes the reader.

This essay is the first one of a triad to be published subsequently. All essays link autoethnographical "assemblage" (Denshire and Lee 2013) and anecdotal comedy as a means of developing socially critical questions from the 'place' of self-reflective humor. I use assemblage to free "boundaries between the individual and the social" (ibid., 221) and highlight the political relevance of intimate stories as tools for critical social inquiry.

This essay focuses on trauma and draws from my bi-national family's experience with long-term separation across borders, before and during COVID-19. It applies notions of post-digitality and investigates changing relationships with technologies through a concern with being human. In doing so, I study how three generations engage trauma in the digital, surveilled, and Skype-blue playroom in which my daughter and my parents play. As they do so, neither one of them acknowledges the presence of a screen between them. My essays will address the challenges and opportunities this attitude creates.

At the time of writing, decisions shaping my life, such as whether I will be granted the right to remain with my child, are out of my control. That's everything *but* funny. However, with seemingly loose fragments of my life's story, writing comedy establishes a narrative that is simultaneously safe, serious, and hilarious. I hope you laugh. Why? Because laughter relates us. It "can enact, disrupt, and reconfigure different relationships between bodies and space" (Emmerson 2017, 2082). If you laugh about me, you acknowledge that both of us exist. That counts. Moreover, laughter's openness to interpretation provides opportunities for people to define and relate within spaces, and this includes (virtually) bordered spaces. In its invitation to relate, humor transcends individual bodies and occurs across time (as in: you laugh long af-

ter my mother remembers why she did) and across space (Ahmed 2004). Thus, laughing radiates out and 'through' space and time. This is not to say that laughter and atmospheres it creates feel the same for all. Instead, as Ahmed (2007) emphasizes "what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival" (125). I do not know your 'angle of arrival', but I invite you to laugh about our family as we gather from a place of forced separation, in need of comedy's safety. As a means of retroactive self-censorship, comedy allows us to say, 'Oh, we didn't mean that!'

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Petar Jandrić (2020) called for academics to open "up as many 'reality tunnels' as reasonably possible" and I would add, to risk public scholarship and exposure (2). Telling my family's story risks exposure. It is the most ethically sound account I can offer and it serves as a 'reality tunnel'. The method of channeling employs autoethnography, "a research method in which the researcher's personal experiences form both the starting point and the central material of study" (Uotinen 2011, 1308).

Set the sails – meet the crew

As I write this in 2020, my daughter's school started teaching remotely and I am an IT deck cadet on my seven-year old's distance-learning vessel. We have no idea who the skipper is and we don't know where the trip is going, but the sea is rough and we seem to be caught amidst the Islands of Questions (Mama, what's dragging?).

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 my daughter and her Oma¹ and Opa² frequently play in their digital Skype-blue room, focusing on running a children's hospital together. In their play Opa plays a 3-year-old boy named Max. The only thing Max is good at is nonsense. (He reminds my mother and me of Opa, but that's another story altogether.) Max is loud, likes to dig for boogers, and gets my daughter from tears to giggles in a second. Oma simultaneously plays a nurse and a doctor.

1 Oma is the informal name for grandmother in German.

2 Opa is the informal name for grandfather in German.

Lately, the children's hospital also admits dogs – a dangerous policy! At age three, Oma watched her aunt be attacked by a German Shepherd, so she is severely phobic of all dogs. Any! Growing up, going for family walks in the countryside we adhered to a strict choreography: when an unleashed dog trotted towards us, we elegantly formed a close circle around my mother, effortlessly continued walking, never stumbling over each other's feet, thereby swiftly passing my mother's enemy. Of course, to form a protective circle around those feeling threatened is not a choreography that my family owns. Feel free to use it on the streets. Unfortunately, I am certain that opportunities for its use will arise. And no, understanding why someone is afraid is not a prerequisite to performing this choreography. Simply sensing that someone *is* afraid is reason enough to offer protection, if you ask me.

On our family outings, if the monster, wagging its tail, approached our circle and threatened the continuous performance, I was designated to execute a default setting: to shoot out, throw myself in front of the monster, hug its neck, pat its fur, and whisper dog words into its ears until its owner approached and shared, "The dog only wants to play." Now there's that. However, playing is easier without trauma than it is with trauma. By the way, this is an important thing to remember when playing together: never put my mother onto a team with a dog. What for? Just to see sweat pearls on her forehead? There are better ways to play. Exposing people to their trauma is not the playing that I mean. Let me explain to you what I mean and tell you what happened with my daughter and Max.

Stay put when shit hits the fan

My daughter – a fearless lover of animals – recently found her toy dogs again. Shortly after, she announced to Oma (aka, Dr. Schnuller and nurse Schnupfi) that as of now, the hospital would also admit dogs. Exclamation mark. It was not a question. It was an order provided by the local seven-year-old – and thus an order of the highest rank. I, of course, do not know when you last received an order given by a seven-year-old, but unless you really want to waste your time, I recommend that you just suck it up. An order is an order, so don't even dare to ask why on earth a children's hospital would admit dogs. Logic as adults know it is a lazy concept to start with, and it certainly

won't make you win any points towards a candy with a seven-year-old. Instead, roll with it. At my daughter's announcement, Oma's eyes widened. (Remember, she won't admit the presence of the screen.) Now, the screen could be a protective knightess' shield, with dogs on one side of the shield and her on the other, conveniently protected. But no. One of Oma's main features is that she doesn't make any compromises. Neither does my daughter. I just haven't figured out how that works when they play together. And God knows I have tried. If I could understand their secret, I could save the world – let's have fun together, no one needs to make any compromises, and no one gets hurt. Shall we?

"Yeah," my housemate grins, as I tell her of Oma's problem, "now shit hits the fan." She is rubbing the palms of her hands in happy anticipation. My housemate loves good entertainment. Before the COVID-19 outbreak she would go to concerts almost every night. Now that she is homebound, we are honored to have become her favorite entertainment. Knowing that my housemate is used to high quality entertainment, the pressure is on. Or said differently, we are responsible for my housemate's wellbeing. Yes, I know, that being responsible for each other's wellbeing is an essential condition of any humanistic society. It's just that between looking for coins for the launderette and cursing the mechanic at the car garage while calling your child's school to confess that you will be late for pick-up (when really, it isn't your fault), it's easy to forget the responsibility you have for each other's wellbeing. And frankly, isn't clean laundry just a smidge more important?

"What's Oma gonna do now?" my housemate asks. I sigh, "These are toy dogs," I explain with a 'gettit for dummies' voice. "No, they are not," my housemate affirms. "If the screen isn't a screen, these dogs ain't toy dogs! You need to readjust your phantasy level." She continues, "You are on level zero and will soon be hit by reality. That's the end of the game." Well yes, I have to agree that being hit by reality is the end of the game, for most people that is. In my daughter's room, I hear Oma shout, "See!"

How did I end up here, I wonder? I realize that, while my daughter and my mother play the same game, it exposes

my mother's fears in ways that differ from my daughter's. Whether ingrained in individual memory, or in the inter-generational memory of communities, past experiences matter to how we can play together. Let's just acknowledge that, shall we? I know it's common knowledge; except that it appears to me that it is not always instantly available. But then again, who am I to judge?

I enter my daughter's room, doubting that any IT troubleshooting I could provide can help. But my daughter and Oma have paused, as Oma instructs Opa/Max how to cut peppers and set the dinner table, so she can continue playing. Opa looks at his hands, looks at my mother, and looks at his hands again. My daughter watches him. Finally, falling into a lake of silence she drops her words, "Max," she says in a slow still-thinking-about-it-all way, "you are really good with dogs, aren't you?" My father nods enthusiastically: yes! Is his granddaughter just paving him a path out of making dinner? Whatever it takes, he will do it, as long as it does not involve cutting peppers and setting tables. Don't go there, the feminist inside of me thinks, as I watch my daughter's facial expression changing to delight. Don't you dare provide Opa with an excuse not help in the kitchen! For crying out loud, what's wrong with this generation of men? Opa is seventy years old and pretends to not know how to cut peppers. Really? (But again, that's a different story and it isn't that I don't pretend to not know how to do things, that I well know how to do.)

My responsibility in this game is solely tech support, and I fear that my daughter's antifeminist behavior can't be switched by technological means. I bite my lips and hear her say, "Max, Dr. Schnuller is afraid of dogs. He can't drive with the ambulance to the next patient. The next patient is a dog." "Ah," Opa sighs with relief. Changing his voice to Max's shrill timbre, he shouts knightly, "I can do it. I want to do it. Let me do it. I am saving Dr. Schnuller!" (Hear the galloping horse approaching?) He and my daughter giggle and Oma withdraws, relieved, to the kitchen to face the dangers of cutting peppers. Finally – I am a slow person, you know – the scales fall from my eyes. Had my daughter just killed two birds with one stone? Had she just saved Oma from having to face a trauma that is almost as old as she is? And had she just invented a new

feature for Max, so that he could finally, save the day (and actually save Oma)? Oma still has to retreat to the kitchen to cut the peppers and be saved. Can we put our feminist concerns aside, just for a split second? There we go! My daughter's solution was diplomatic and, at the end of the day, promised much more soundness than pushing Oma to do something she fears.

My housemate cracks up laughing, as I tell her what happened. As if holding cheerleaders' pom poms in her hands, she throws her arms into the air shouting, "Go, Max, go!" There you go, everyone is saved: Oma, Opa, my daughter's storyline, this essay and my housemate's entertainment. Later, when I ask my daughter how she came up with this idea, she tells me. "Easy. I know Max."

Yes, of course. I had almost forgotten. Knowing each other is a key feature of caring for each other's trauma. However, getting to know each other can be dangerous. Which brings us back to the interpersonal conditions of playing. My daughter understood that there was likely only one way to deal with Max: just love him. He won't go away just because you close your eyes!

COVID-19 won't go away just because we write another scholarly essay in the area of our expertise. Leave your house, go ponder. If you must, ponder carefully, so as not to walk into any traps. I promise: they are out there. In the case of our family, we adults all know that we are using a medium that records and subsequently owns all of our streamed footage. As this is so, even Max had to, upon my request, learn how to conduct self-censorship and learn how to discipline himself while playing together. Why did I request this of Max? Because, I am scared. That is why I am the technician.

Postscript

Today, I found my daughter kneeling over paper. She drew detailed, colorful pictures in numbered squares. "Oh," I asked, "are you making a comic?" "No," she replies, "I am making a 'how-to thing' for Opa." Ah, yes, I think, if you ask me, Opa needs quite a few detailed 'how-to things'. I ask her, "what does this how-to thing do?" I know my daughter; she doesn't waste her time creating things that don't do something. "It teaches Opa how to cut peppers,"

she replies, with a fat grin on her face, as fat as the Cheshire Cat's grin in Alice in Wonderland. YES, Opa! Through the mirror you must go, face new adventures, cut peppers for your wife. "That's a good idea," I tell her, proud of my feminist daughter. How could I have thought she would just let that one go – Opa not nourishing Oma. No way! "I am not using words for the 'how-to thing,'" my daughter continues to explain: "In case, Opa is Max when he looks at this." Ah, yes, lock the back door tightly, no sneaking out of the back door, Opa! And no sneaking out of the back door, any of us. As the intersectional virus that COVID-19 is pushes inequalities and inabilities into hypervisibility, it is our responsibility to care about that. All for all. I will see you after the intermission in the next edition. Don't leave before it's over!

I am deeply grateful to my parents and my daughter. I extend my gratitude to Rebecca Taylor for copyediting this article.

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