

JOSEPHINE FLEMING

EATING BEAUTY: SOCIAL SCIENCE, CLOTHING MOTHS AND DISAPPEARING THREADS

The larvae of *Tinea Pellionella*, sometimes referred to as the webbing clothes moth, perform what CSIRO identifies as *a useful role in eating refuse matter such as feathers, hides, fur, beaks* (CSIRO, 2013) in addition to New Zealand sweaters, school blazers, cashmere coats, alpaca blankets, velvet skirts and so forth (Fleming, 2015). Despite assertions otherwise, *Tinea Pellionella* have clearly been identified as insects (CSIRO, 2013; Choe, 2013) and, furthermore, insects performing a vital role within the ecosystem (CSIRO, 2013). Although the term ‘pest’ has often been applied, it can be argued that there really is no such thing as a pest only “conflict in habitat use” (Susan Campbell quoted in Winston, 1999). There have been some recent attempts to understand the psychology of *Tinea Pellionella* (see for example, Trematerra & Fontana, 1996) but these attempts have often been frustrated by invisibility once the larvae have colonised a dark household space; or have been invalidated owing to researcher interference and bias often resulting in the death of the subjects under investigation. These studies raise serious ethical issues, although research has largely been mute on this point. It is now incontestable that *Tinea Pellionella* are in a growth phase, with most research pointing to increasingly cramped wardrobe conditions, fewer instances of good housekeeping and lower rates of cleanliness. Alderson (2013) has reported in some detail on this: “They eat our favourite woollens ... because they’re more likely to be a bit scuzzy. There’s nothing a moth larva likes more than a bit of sweat, garnished with some crispy skin flakes.”

An area of recent investigation has been the affect *Tinea Pellionella* has on those who come into close contact (Alderson, 2013), however these studies have tended to lack academic rigour and have relied on subjective reflection rather than real time objective data. It is incontrovertible that memory is at best unreliable. The current study redresses this imbalance by using the researcher as active participant, recording reactive and proactive responses on a daily basis throughout the research process. Although the research was initially intended to take place over a short period of time in order to track the process from discovery through to successful removal, circumstances transpired that extended this research into a longitudinal study, paralleling the recurrent lifecycles of larva to moth to larva and their resistance to removal. This altered the very fabric of the research. As a result the research reported here is ongoing but still of course objective. This invariably means that while it is possible to detect significant findings that warrant discussion

JOSEPHINE FLEMING

and which are the topic of this paper, themes and patterns may yet emerge from the data, in particular the full effects of the effect of the larvae on the participant researcher, that render previous findings immaterial. As such it seemed timely to make available the initial findings, because the ability to discuss the material rationally may be declining and hence, although still definitely objective it may become increasingly difficult to actually write an academic paper on this topic while maintaining objective composure.

Defining the research questions was relatively straightforward. Rather than a gap, a gaping hole was identified. A few woollen coats too many resembled poorly mowed lawns and recurrent explanations of worn fabric and dropped stitches in shawls and jumpers became implausible. A pattern emerged and it didn't take a literature review to formulate the questions. RQ 1: How the hell do you get rid of clothing moths? RQ2: Why do I care? A narrative approach was taken.

The Blind Leading the Blind

The larvae of webbing moths have no ocelli (eyes), they cannot see, they are blind. Yet they successfully find all manner of nutrients in the weave of fabrics. This researcher has eyes yet sees very little, blind to the meaning of the flutter of wings near the wardrobe and failing to see beneath the surface ... until it's too late. The realisation in a fieldnote:

As my fingers part the dense tufted pile of velvet, a hidden world of specks dislodge and float to the ground. As my eyes grow accustomed to the complexity of this fabric I see the full spread of the damage. It is apparent just how suited velvet is to these tiny 12-13mm long guerrillas. Beneath the surface a dark hidden world of moths and larvae exist, constantly on the move.ⁱ

Treatment #1 – The Big Freeze

Freezing as a means of removal has gained some acceptance and is more aligned with contemporary ethics protocols than alternative methods such as the oven. A family fridge, however, is not really practical when considering the size of an average wardrobe today. A professional hire was sought. Hiring a freezer, the researcher discovered, was complicated. There was particular sensitivity around the word 'infestation'; in fact it brought out a flat refusal that all manner of logic couldn't shift. The facts and the best choice of words are not always one and the same thing. In the end a larger freezer was purchased, hauled up a flight of fifty-three steps and a makeshift lab was established on the back deck. It takes weeks to process an average twenty-first century wardrobe at 10° Celcius for four days each load. Before it goes in it has to be washed and then afterwards it must be stored in sealed containers. The freezer, the electricity bills, the bags, the time, a new wardrobe is looking cheap. Except memories can't be bought and my subjectivity

was near lost as I rediscovered a little blue blazer that had been with me since my first day of school:

*A blazer hangs too long on arms that hesitate at the gates,
Turning around head tilted up to catch a smile that must be left behind.
Water seemingly blue catches the sun and breaks into diamonds,
Colourless, each wave differently arrives with a constant motion to trick the mind.ⁱⁱ*

In retrospect there was a problem with the method. In the weeks following Treatment #1 when the clothes were dragged out for inspection, it was impossible to know – was that hole there before or is it new? Is this garment still being eaten, did the larvae simply hibernate in the big freeze? The variables had not been accounted for in the design. A pattern wasn't emerging, it was disappearing, hole by hole.

Treatment #2 – A Fiery End

It seems that every time you return to the literature another layer is revealed. Suddenly it was all about heat. The first batch of clothes went in at 120°C, and came out crisper than intended, which was in fact not intended at all, owing to a conversion issue with the research instrument, i.e. the oven, or rather the instrument of the instrument, i.e. the researcher who confused Celsius with Fahrenheit. It is difficult to imagine that any being could withstand that heat, but with no signs anywhere of the culprits how does one tell? In went a cashmere coat that had been so damaged by moths and the first treatment that there was no rational reason for dragging it through another – it was so unlikely to ever be worn again. In fact ditto the shawl bought in Mysore, the cardigan from Peru, the skirt from New Zealand, the velvet jacket from Hanoi, the little blue blazer from Tintern ... the material evidence of a life was unraveling, and the project threatened to never end.

Now all data is resting in a sealed thick plastic bag, but at some point it must re-emerge, either completely ridden with holes, or stable and waiting for the next attack. And I will wait, and I will record and I will intervene and I will hope impermanence can at some future point in time be falsified. But for now the discussion of the findings is best left to Robert Frost:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.ⁱⁱⁱ

JOSEPHINE FLEMING

NOTES

- ⁱ Fleming, J., Fieldnote 18 December 2013.
- ⁱⁱ Fleming, J., Excerpt from *The day it all fell apart*, 7 May 2013.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Frost, *Nothing gold can stay*.

REFERENCES

- Alderson, M. (2013). *How to conquer the bastard moth*. Accessed 24 February 2014 at <http://www.high50.com/style/mission-20-how-to-conquer-the-bastard-moth>
- Choe, D. H. (2013). *Clothes moths: Integrated pest management in the home*. Oakland: University of California. Agric. Nat. Res. Publ. 7435. Accessed 4 December 2013 at <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PDF/PESTNOTES/pnclothesmoths.pdf>
- Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). (2013). *Guide to the control of clothes moths and carpet beetles*, Belmont: CSIRO. Accessed 15 December 2013 at <http://www.csiro.au/Organisation-Structure/Divisions/CMSE/Fibre-Science/CarpetPests.aspx>
- Fleming, J. (2015). Eating beauty: Social science, clothing moths and disappearing threads. In R. Gibson (Ed.), *The memory of clothes*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. *Note*: This reference is referencing itself. It's called delusional psychosis brought on by the larvae of webbing moths.
- Frost, R. (1969). Nothing gold can stay. In D. Sohn & D. Tyre (Eds.), *Frost the poet and his poetry* New (p. 116). York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Trematerra, P., & Fontana, F. (1996). Monitoring of webbing clothes moth, *Tineola bisselliella* (Hummel), by sex pheromone, *Journal of Pest Science*, 69(5), 119-121.
- Winston, N. (1999). *Nature wars: People vs pests* (p. 78). Cambridge: Harvard University Press..