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# The Anthropocene, Affect, and Autoethnography?

Gale, K

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## The Anthropocene, Affect, and Autoethnography?

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Freedom is not simply something that can be stood outside of and decided upon in terms of *freedom to* or *freedom from*. Freedom is fluid, dynamic, and ecological, existing where, in the volatility and unpredictability of the act, difference can be made. In the practice of experience making that Stewart<sup>1</sup> refers to as “worlding,” there exists the processually differentiating capacity to bring to life encounters and events in which the energy of the future lies in the speculative force and living potential of the always not yet known. Autoethnographies are not to be considered epistemological groundings that assert what they mean, or to state what they are or might be in some metaphysics of the future. Working instead with “futurity,” autoethnographic *doing* is at the forefront, present in the possibilities of the more-than and the always new possibilities that might be just around the corner. The future is never fixed and always lives within the unexpected not-yetness of each new encounter. In the constant processualism of practice, there is a need “to be willing to surprise yourself writing things you didn’t think you thought. Letting examples burgeon requires using inattention as a writing tool.”<sup>2</sup>

In these first processual steps there is a sensing of Haraway’s advice about “staying with the trouble.” She asks, “What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?”<sup>3</sup> Haraway indicates that within “the bonds of the Anthropocene and (the) Capitalocene”<sup>4</sup> we live in worlds that are dominated by the ethics, values, and practices of neoliberalism. The ways of institutionally organizing economic, social, and cultural behaviors and practices constructed to support this involve highly individualized and forcibly individualizing forms of doing and making ways in the world that have become characterized predominantly by practices of self-making—what she calls “autopoiesis.” Autopoietic systems act as “self-producing autonomous units with self defined spatial and temporal boundaries that tend to be centrally controlled, homeostatic, and predictable.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, our inquiries, our ways of doing, and our ways of living in the world can also be described, again through the use of Stewart’s term, as “worlding,” and need to be addressed through wholly different ways of being. The self-making, individualizing, and

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self-producing forces of “autopoiesis,” therefore, need to be challenged, replaced or, at the very least, ameliorated by, what Haraway terms “sympoiesis.” She cites “sympoiesis” as “collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and have the potential for surprising change.”<sup>6</sup> Ways of doing in the world do not simply involve ways of “self-making” but are more concerned with bringing about sympoietic ways of “making with.” As Haraway says, “Staying with the trouble requires making ‘oddkin’<sup>7</sup>[—]that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. Affectively, we become-with each other or not at all.”<sup>8</sup>

Again, with relevance to the processual dynamism of futurity, Deleuze argues that we are in “situations which we no longer know how to react, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, if “the phenomenological hypothesis is perhaps insufficient because it merely invokes the lived body,”<sup>10</sup> this indicates that autoethnographic practice and inquiry in futurity need to break free from, what Haraway describes as the “self-producing” and “self-defining” autopoietic features that might have characterized some of its practices in the past. Whilst autoethnographies need to continue to work “as a process of collaboration-with other scholars as well as with the persons we love, work with, and study,”<sup>11</sup> they also need to engage in forms of “theorising *as* practice”<sup>12</sup> and more than simply human modes of activity. Significantly, St. Pierre’s post-qualitative approach to inquiry encourages “concrete practical experimentation and the creation of the not yet instead of the repetition of what is.”<sup>13</sup> Therefore, autoethnographic practices need to pay cognizance to Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that “concepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies . . . They must be invented, fabricated, or rather, created, and would be nothing without the creator’s signature.”<sup>14</sup> “Theorising *as* practice” and concept making as inquiry must also be animate in encouraging autoethnographers to engage in practices in which each new concept is an event. Sensing with Manning that there is “always more than one,”<sup>15</sup> it is therefore clear that the smallest unit is not the simply human body; it is the assemblage of multiple human and nonhuman singularities that, contingently and heterogeneously, are constantly in becoming. Massumi has succinctly described this as “creative-relationally *more-than human*.”<sup>16</sup> Bennett provides a graphic illustration of the ways in which coming to terms with the smallest unit as the assemblage and not the autonomous individual of neoliberalism and Cartesian rationalist thinking when she talks about her writing practices in the following way:

The sentences of this book . . . emerged from the confederate agency of many striving macro and microactants: from “my” memories, intentions, contentions, intestinal bacteria, eyeglasses, and blood sugar, as well as from the plastic computer keyboard, the bird song from the open window, or the air or the particulates in the room . . .<sup>17</sup>

This exemplification offers a clear way forward in helping to engage with the event/fulness of concept making, not as a simply human activity, but one that is, in Haraway’s terms, “sympoietic” in the *making with* human and nonhuman others and that is also actively attentive to continual movements and moments in futurity. Bennett describes here an “agentic assemblage” of “in-formings”<sup>18</sup> and comings together, clearly illustrating

the operation of collective collaborating forces beyond the individual of human-centric and phenomenological thought. The “thing power” present in Bennett’s observation shows that nonhuman as well as human bodies have vitality; they exist together in affective relationality and, most importantly, they do things. In Spinoza’s words, they have the capacity to affect and to be affected.

These theorizings *as* practice and concept making as event will clearly involve autoethnographers in moving toward practices that are less interpretive, judgmental, and representational and, therefore, toward those that are more creative, speculative, and experimental. Consequently, it is clear from Bennett’s example that it is more important to look at these “agentic assemblages,” less in terms of what they might mean, and more in terms of what they actually do. Totalization can never be achieved when attempts are made to map events. In short, in futurity, every new event differentiates, and so, in every encounter, difference is made. Events occur in multiple movements and moments and, in the potency of these capacious rapidities, they have a tendency to take us with them. This offers challenge to the orthodoxies of conventional qualitative research practice, including autoethnography, which continue to be largely concerned with essentially individual human beings, imbued with consciousness, thoughts and emotions. Aware of the not-yetness of these speculations and with a move toward further experimentation to the fore, what might autoethnographies look like if these moves are followed? Stewart’s work as inquiry into “ordinary affect” suggests

... an experiment, not a judgment. Committed not to the demystification and uncovered truths that support a well known view of the world, but rather to speculation, curiosity, and the concrete, it tries to provoke attention to the forces that come into view as habit or shock, resonance or impact. Something throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation . . .<sup>19</sup>

In the sympoietic engagement with these forces the potential for speculative and experimental inquiry is vibrantly becoming in the freshness of appearance. The shared collective capacities of Haraway’s “making-with” offers becoming in intensity and animates a kind of wonder in which the repetition of well-worn truths must give way to the fabulatory excitement of creative differentiation in the collaborative engagements of always new relational moments—what Manning refers to as “research-creation.”<sup>20</sup> “Staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present . . . as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters and meanings.”<sup>21</sup> The affectiveness of the ordinary is related to the capacity of bodies in action; in this we have to be constantly aware of the rhetorical fundamentality of Spinoza’s oft-quoted question, “What can a body do?” In the necessity of contingency, we can never *know*, but we can always be animate in the indeterminacy of our ongoing, processual *knowings*. “Worlding” involves a wondering that is nurtured through the creative deviations brought to life by these speculations and fabulations. When Manning says, “there is never a body as such: what we know are edgings and contourings, forces and intensities: a body is its movement,”<sup>22</sup> we can be assured of the value of the not-yetness of our inquiries and excited by the potentiality and capaciousness of the words we offer, the “actual

occasions”<sup>23</sup> we bring into emergence and the concepts we create. Bodies in motion live in momentary worldings of “now you see me, now you don’t”;<sup>24</sup> they are ghostly, sylph-like, briefly apparent, caught in a glimpse and then lost in the wink of an eye. Virginia Woolf talked of her encounters with “moments of being” and how the indeterminacies of these encouraged her to write: “No one could have understood from what I said the queer feeling I had in the hot grass, that poetry was coming true . . . It matches what I have sometimes felt when I write. The pen gets on the scent.”<sup>25</sup>

By concluding these claims for the flows and eddies of futurity over the substantive fixities of futures, two things can be offered for emergent autoethnographic practices. The first involves returning to Massumi, to his suggestion that we should take joy in our digressions, invite “the risk of sprouting deviant” and also getting “so caught up in the flow of . . . writing that it ceases at moments to be recognisable . . . as your own.”<sup>26</sup> The second involves encouraging human and nonhuman kin-making, sympoietic approaches to new and exciting forms of concept making as event, and the encouragement of speculative forays into the unexpectedness and excitement of the always not yet known. ■

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KEN GALE works at the Institute of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Plymouth in the United Kingdom and has published widely and presented at a number of international conferences on the philosophy of education, research methodologies, and collaborative approaches to education practices. His most recent book, *Madness as Methodology: Bringing Concepts to Life in Contemporary Theorising and Inquiry*, was published by Routledge in 2018. Email: K.J.Gale@plymouth.ac.uk

#### NOTES

1. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
2. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) 18.
3. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2.
4. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 5.
5. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.
6. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.
7. I take Haraway’s use of “oddkin” to refer to a more free and wild version of kin that can be understood to extend beyond the kinds of genealogical kinship relations to be found in, for example, religion, family, or a species-oriented form of biology. In this I will suggest that Haraway’s term can be understood in relation to what Manning refers to as “always more than one.” E. Manning, “Always More than One: The Collectivity of a Life,” *Body and Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 117–127.
8. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.
9. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
10. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London: Continuum, 2004), 44.
11. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, “Conclusion: Storying our Future,” in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, eds. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams, and Carolyn Ellis (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 675.
12. Ken Gale, “Theorising as Practice: Engaging the Posthuman as Method of Inquiry and Pedagogic Practice within Contemporary Higher Education,” in Carol Taylor and Christina Hughes, eds. *Posthuman Research Practices in Education* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

13. Elizabeth St. Pierre, "Post Qualitative Inquiry in an Ontology of Immanence," *Qualitative Inquiry* 25, no. 1 (2019): 3.
14. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *What Is Philosophy?* (London: Athlone, 1994): 5.
15. Erin Manning, *Always More than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
16. Brian Massumi, "The Supernormal Animal," in Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015) 14.
17. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: The Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 23.
18. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) 23.
19. Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 4.
20. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 11.
21. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.
22. Erin Manning, "Wondering the World Directly, or How Movement Outruns the Subject," *Body and Society*, 20, no. 3 & 4 (2014): 163.
23. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*. Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of Edinburgh during the Session 1927–1928 (New York: Macmillan; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929).
24. Ken Gale, *Madness as Methodology: Bringing Concepts to Life in Contemporary Theorising and Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 2018).
25. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 2nd ed., ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 93.
26. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 18.