Stories we tell

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Abstract
In this commentary, I respond to Ruez and Cockayne’s ‘Feeling Otherwise’ in a moment of intense ‘otherwise-ness’ as a global pandemic upends daily life in a variety of mundane and profound ways. Provoked by Ruez and Cockayne to take up the idea of the stories we tell, I reflect on ambivalence and writing into a world deeply undecided. Although it is not hard to detect accounts of this crisis at both the ‘paranoid’ and affirmative ends of an affective spectrum, there is also perhaps an unprecedented ambivalence seeping into our stories, one which holds potential for disrupting some of our taken-for-granted ideas about how the world works. As we attempt to use stories to make sense of this changing world and to write into being a world we want to live in, we must, as Ruez and Cockayne insist, remain attentive to difference and resist the pull of a universal, masterful story. I suggest getting comfortable—or staying uncomfortable—in the queasy, sweaty space of undecidability.

Keywords
affect, ambivalence, failure, stories, undecidability

I can never hear the phrase ‘stories we tell’ without thinking of Canadian filmmaker Sarah Polley’s 2012 documentary of the same name. Uncovering a family secret related to her paternity, Polley turns the lens on her past, questioning the stories she took for granted about herself and her family through Super-8 clips of her mother. What the viewer is hard-pressed to notice is that many of these authentic-looking home movies actually comprise new footage shot with actors. This clever twist thumbs its nose at the viewers’ naïve expectations of authenticity and truth in the stories we tell, especially those about our own families. It’s a reminder that when we look at our lives, at the world, we are always constructing—and constantly reconstructing—a story about what we observe. Polley says, ‘Telling stories is our way of coping, a way of creating shape out of a mess. It binds everyone together’ (Kellaway, 2013).

Ruez and Cockayne’s (2021) ‘Feeling Otherwise’ asks, among other things, for us to think carefully about the assumptions behind the stories we tell and the affective registers in which we record them. Their article lands at a moment of real otherwise-ness. What better time to reflect on ambivalence and stories than the unfolding of a global pandemic? What greater mess to reflect on than the one we find ourselves in? What more perfect reminder of the importance of paying attention...
to difference than the profound inequality glossed over by ‘we’re all in this together?’

If the stories we tell are an attempt to create shape out of a mess, then we certainly have our work cut out for us now.

The swing from ‘paranoid critique’ to affirmation with a few pit stops at ambivalence along the way is evident in the rapidly-proliferating discourse about what the pandemic tells us about the global social and economic systems we’ve created and what the post-pandemic world could, should, or will look like. From the ‘this is what we hath wrought’ corner come incisive critiques of capitalism, austerity, neoliberalism, racism, and sexism. The intersections of these systems have ripened the conditions for the deeply damaging and deeply unequal impact of a global health threat. Those leaning toward affirmation highlight the rise of care-mongering, for example, and the possibilities for re-organizing our collective care work and affirming our connectivity. These perspectives are not inattentive to difference, either, noting the entrenched patterns of uneven distribution of the labor that literally keeps humans alive from day-to-day (Henriques, 2020; Morse and Anderson, 2020).

On my daily scroll through social media, I bounce from one account to the next like I’m trapped in a very enthusiastic pinball game. Do I not agree that this is a ripe moment for the mercenaries of disaster capitalism, offered a once-in-a-century catastrophe from which to engineer an even more ruthless racket of global profiteering? Do I not also see the everyday acts of kindness among neighbors, the moms sewing masks and the families holding hands up to the glass of the nursing home window?

As I hurtle among think-pieces, hot-takes, long-reads, and Tik-Toks, I am only certain of this: all of our stories are written into a world that we don’t yet know. This was always true. It’s only especially obvious now.

We’ve been thrust into a period of radical undecidability, of intense not-knowing. We’re in a world where failure has gone from ‘not an option’ to our everyday condition. System failure is obvious as we observe institutions tremble around us, but it’s also felt bodily as a force pinning us to the couch, phones clutched in our aching hands. Although witnessed and mediated through the algorithms of social media, one thing that strikes me is the mainstreaming (and livestreaming) of affects of ambivalence, failure, uncertainty, and questioning. From the most mundane of ambivalences—is there a point to putting on pants today?—to the most world-changing—is there a point to locking millions of people in prison?—people are asking whether so much of what we’ve taken for granted as normal, commonsensical, and necessary is even remotely required (Alexander, 2020). If it’s not, then what’s next?

If the stories we tell are actually ways of attempting to bring into being a world we want to live in, what kinds of stories do we need? Ruez and Cockayne (2021) ask us to be mindful of the assumed links between feeling and action. For example, reparative work may tell stories that promote a set of positive or hopeful feelings, with an implicit assumption that generating this tenor of affect will encourage action (and that other kinds of affect will not). They say, ‘the movement from story to feeling to action may be neither so straightforward nor so singular, shaped as it is by difference’. The good news is that there may be a wider range of stories and affects that generate action; the bad news is that most of us know what it feels like to be caught in a Groundhog Day-like loop where we tell and retell stories in a dizzying dance that moves in circles more often than a straight line from story to action.

By this I mean the disheartening déjà vu of having to surface the same accounts of inequities for an audience with an endless capacity to be surprised by the kinds of problems that activists and scholars have been elucidating for decades, if not centuries. Racial inequities in health care and health outcomes. The rise of xenophobia during disease outbreaks. The turn to the carceral state to address social and health problems. The latent eugenicist politics that have never really been vanquished. For my part, I’ve been asked to write and speak about COVID impacts on domestic violence in the wake of mass killings and femicides in Canada; the devaluation of women’s and feminized labor; the ways that care work has always been an afterthought in cities; and the gendered and racialized double and triple shifts, to name a few (Cities Alliance, 2020; Kern, 2020;
Weldon, 2020). While I appreciate the opportunity, my inner voice is screaming, ‘None of this is new! Why haven’t you been paying attention?’ I’m both heartened and depressed that femicide, for example, is suddenly interesting in the context of COVID-19. In other words, I’m ambivalent in the face of ‘relationships between feeling, knowing, and acting that are complex, marked by difference, and essentially impossible to predict in advance’ (Ruez and Cockayne, 2021).

So, we need better stories, right? Bigger stories, more powerful stories? Well, as Ruez and Cockayne (2021) suggest, there are dangers of reaching for a better story. Drawing on Georgis (2013), they note that ‘any story, whether of resistance or pain, is inevitably haunted by what is excluded from that story’. Specifically, difference can be problematically smoothed out, especially if efforts to tell a better story end up reproducing tendencies toward mastery. Turning to Katz’s (1996) work on minor theory, Ruez and Cockayne (2021) find possibility in a ‘minor pluralism’ that precludes a dualistic choice between negation and affirmation and resides in what Povinelli (2011) calls a ‘queasy space’ of indeterminacy.

As we race to create shape out of the mess we’re in through the stories we tell, we have to become okay with being in the queasy space. Prone to motion sickness myself, this metaphor readily evokes a visceral unsettling, one that threatens to capsize any carefully-patched story that I hope will carry me to the other side of a rough crossing. Queasy space also calls to mind Sara Ahmed’s (2014) notion of sweaty concepts. These are concepts that do not descend from an abstract space somewhere above; rather, they ‘show the bodily work or effort of their making’. Conceptual work here is not distinct from the descriptive work (storytelling) that we do as we try to generate ‘a description of the world from the point of view of not being at home in it’ (Ahmed, 2014).

The pandemic has un-homed most of us in myriad ways. The fact that this un-homing is metaphorical for most but literal for many is but one reminder of the differences that can be smoothed over by singular stories. Keeping it queasy and sweaty means we’re not smoothing over the uneven patches created by difference or ambivalence. We’re not mistakenly assuming that one kind of story will carry us from feeling to action. We’re willing to sit with and then create ways to mobilize our queasy ambivalence to challenge the stories we’ve taken for granted about how the world works. We can refuse to choose between negation and affirmation and instead use a moment of rich undecidability to speak and write minor, messier stories describing a world whose inhospitableness is farther-reaching than we had dared to acknowledge. We might welcome affects of ambivalence as signs that we feel, in our bodies, the possibility of something different.

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