Ethico-onto-epistem-ological becoming

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**ABSTRACT**

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1981

Springbok tour of New Zealand – in my family sports and politics figure large, but not in any intended knot of entanglement\(^2\).

Invercargill, Southland, a strong rugby province where a barbed wire fence curls itself around Rugby Park – my brother, aged thirteen throws eggs at the protestors, political, in his anti-sport-politics protest.

1980s

Formative years – a blue voting middle class white roughcast house in suburbia. All the right zones for aspiration through education.

Self-made

self-reliant

self-determining

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self-contained.
I cycle to the Girls’ High School
on my blue ten-speed
come rain or shine
becoming with
girls-can-do-anything (a man can already do)
Latin chants
non scholae sed vitae discimus –
traces so deeply rooted
in my body –
not-for-school-but-for-life-we-are-learning
that I am sixteen again,
living out my anarchy
in absenteeism
and local pubs.

Post-1989
Rats and mice, underfloor
and in Skinner boxes.
Lay down the poison,
tap the lever,
stimulus-response,
brain-behaviour,
salivating dogs.
Psychology is in my psyche.
Reducing
Representing
Reality
Real
Reason/able.
I think, I sense, I perceive
the coming of a crisis.

1994
Social construction,
deconstruction
reconstruction.
A shifting of allegiance,
a loosening of ties,
a change of heart.
From Leith Walk to the Hocken building,
degrees of freedom to
degrees of uncertainty,
I cannot see straight –
distance is subjective
time is relative
culture counts and
meaning matters
in the space between
you and I
where we talk ourselves
into and out of
being.

Later

New horizons,
different shores.
Pain and privilege co-implicated
as I walk up the prime-minister strewn stair case of 10 Downing St.,
an esteemed guest
of the new liberalism –
penetrating the patriarchy,
the psyche,
this past-present of a future
in/determinable.
Broken bones and broken hearts
bruised and bloodied,
battered and beaten
I listen and listen,
ache and break,
in this first ever safe house
I make my vows
to de-pathologise,
my feminist oath
to fight right back,
to smash the system,
cracked and skewed,
bloodied and broken.
And now-before-and-after

This going back and coming forward,
coming back and going forward.
Re-turning.
Re-telling.
Re-configuring
these cuts and performances,
made, unmade and re-made.
I am left undone,
a redoing,
moment by moment.
A space-time-mattering of indeterminate beginnings and endings,
a queer quantum writing that makes time and makes me and makes known its own becoming, entirely and intimately in its pen and paper, finger and keyboard, mind and matter, now and then, there and here, intermingling, entangling, enlivening practices of be(com)ing.

Notes

1. Here I draw on Karen Barad’s (2007) use of this term, described by her as “an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being” (p. 185). This poem was generated as a practice of knowing-in-being, reflective of Barad’s claim that “we do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because we are of the world” (p. 185). My knowing cannot be written as though I am separate from the world of which I write about, as though I am looking out on it in order to determine or describe the nature of it, as distinct from me and my descriptions of it. My knowing comes from being in it, with it, and of it, from “a direct material engagement, a practice of intra-acting with the world as part of the world in its dynamic material reconfiguring” (Barad 2007, p. 379). This is not, however, and never has been, an innocent or neutral writing/knowing. Every moment presents itself with questions of responsibility and accountability for the world’s ongoing reconfiguring (Barad 2007) and the point,
according to Haraway (1994), is not just to read the webs of knowledge production, but to participate in the processes, “to make a difference—however modestly, however partially,” “in order to foster some forms of life and not others” (p. 62). Thus, my modest and partial retelling here is always already entangled with lively feminist and social justice desires for participating in the material-semiotic practices of making worlds anew.

I use the poem as an analytic device, as a structure which “cuts things together-apart” to produce a diffractive pattern (Barad 2007). Just as diffraction is a “mapping of interference” (Haraway 2004, p. 70), so, too, the poem offers a structure to map a myriad of interferences, of human and nonhuman encounters and nonlinear figurations of time and space. As a material arrangement, a poem is productive of giving meaning to certain concepts, or concepts can be seen as being materially embodied within the confines of the poem, for example, onto-ethico-epistemology.

A poem also intra-acts with the reader to produce an affective force. Poet David Whyte suggests that “poetry...is not about a subject, not about a quality, or an experience, it is the experience itself” (Whyte 2010). Such personal and evocative texts have come to be seen as potentially powerful, political, and meaningful in qualitative research, with the capacity to “move writers and readers, subjects and objects, tellers and listeners into this space of dialogue, debate and change” (Holman Jones 2005, p. 764). In a relational ontology, “affect refers to the force of intensive relationality—intensities that are felt but are not personal; visceral but not confined to an individuated body” (Whatmore 2006 p. 604). In this sense, the force of poetry, as I intend it here, to move, to affect, is a dynamic relational one, an intra-action between, at least, words and spaces and bodies of writers and readers.

2. Entanglement is used in this poem to signify the ontological inseparability of “agentially intra-acting components” (Barad 2003, p. 815, italics in original), where “to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence...individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (Barad 2007, p. ix). One could say my brother’s “egg throwing” was an enactment of, at least, a “sport-family-politics-age-time-space-egg” entanglement. Similarly, this poem is an entanglement of times and locations, matter and meaning, where the knowing that emerges is an articulation, and reconfiguring, of these intra-related forces making themselves known through the device of the poem.

3. I refer to the re-telling, and reconfiguring of other times and spaces, through the work of this poem as a “space-time-mattering.” What has come to matter (materially and meaningfully) here, in the words of the poem, is an ethico-onto-epistemological becoming. Matter and meaning, for Barad, are not separate elements. Drawing on quantum physics and critical social theories, she proposes a new philosophical framework that “entails a rethinking of fundamental concepts...including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, time and space” (Barad 2007, p. 26). Becoming, in a quantum sense, is not a continuous unfolding, a linear process occurring in or through time and space, rather “the ‘past’ and the ‘future’ are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the practices of space-time-mattering...” (p. 315).

4. The writing of this poem has been an attempt to “return” (Hughes & Lury 2013, p. 787, italics in original), rather than reflect on, some of my own intra-active entanglements with onto-epistemology in order, not to “replay a string of moments” (Barad 2007, pix) to demonstrate “a singular or unified progressive history” (Hughes & Lury 2013, p. 787),
but to enliven and reconfigure the past and future in this intra-active writing present. In this way, I suggest this poem is a “queer quantum writing,” drawing again on Barad’s philosophical framework enacting quantum physics in critical conversation with “critical social theories,” including queer theory (Barad 2007). Barad uses the term “quantum queerness” to refer to the un/doing of identity (2010, p. 247, italics in original), the troubling of the nature of causality, where “effect does not simply follow cause end-over-end in an unfolding of existence through time” (p. 248). Thus, this poem as a “queer quantum writing” is an attempt to map multiple affective-material-discursive moments co-constituting an ethico-onto-epistem-ological becoming, not as previous causes of a current state of being, but as an always ongoing, iterative dis/continuous becoming.

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Shanee Barraclough is Coordinator of the Master of Counselling programme in the School of Health Sciences, University of Canterbury, New Zealand. She has previously worked as a psychologist and counsellor in both New Zealand and the United Kingdom. She has recently completed doctoral research in the area of counsellor education exploring the entanglements of matter and meaning in the performative enactments of emerging counsellor identities, drawing, in particular, on the thinking of new materialisms and the agential realist framework of Karen Barad.

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