The Matter of Performative Autoethnography
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Living within the context of a global pandemic makes writing about anything else seem dismissive of the personal, social, and systemic pain and chaos we are living with in some form or another. I know it marks this essay, carbon dates it perhaps in the geographies of the body politic. Engaging and articulating the embodied nature of performance, autoethnography, and materialism may reveal something about our relationship with the otherness of things, expanding perhaps, our notions of what constitutes lived experience. Narrating lived knowledge gained from opposing continued violence toward people of color and viral responses from our treatment of the environment have the potential to call up a utopian performative of word and body where we might consider “matter as a text, as a site of narrativity, as storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 451). In the shifting entanglement of language, affect, agency, and things non/human, performance insists that we speak from and with our body’s interactions with hegemonizing performativities to offer subversive and transformative narratives.

The doing of performance requires considering and making choices about how and why and when and where the body moves and with whom, taking into account the sociocultural constituencies of place, space, and historicity (Conquergood, 1985, 1991, 2002; Denzin & Giardina, 2019; Hamera, 2006; Madison, 2019). Such is the case in the construction of performative autoethnography which engages the personally political as well as the ethical and moral dimensions inherent in autoethnographic texts (Alexander, 2012; Denzin, 2003; Diversi & Moreira, 2009; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2001, 2005; Callier & Hill, 2019; Holman Jones, 2005; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Pelias, 2004, 2007; Pineau, 2000, 2002; Pollock, 1998, 2007; Spry, 2011, 2016). Performing autoethnography, states Bryant Keith Alexander (2012), gives voice to experience as a means of realizing, personalizing, foregrounding, and sharing histories and happenings that matter . . . in seeing ourselves in relations to the politics of culture and scholarship with the ability to use our shared experiences through performance as templates of sociality and tools of critique. (p. 541)

Studies in posthumanism and new materialism offer methodological expansion for articulating lived experiences, as well as expanding our notions of what constitutes lived experience when we view matter “as a site of narrativity” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 451). Posthuman perspectives conceptualize texts, stage, others, props, self, as well as cultural discourses, narratives, and norms that exist within and beyond the page and stage as matter with agencies constructed in their shifting entanglements (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009). In a posthuman performativity, body, voice, and text are not separate entities but elements equally agentic with things human and nonhuman. What kinds of stories might we tell--and what kinds of ethical responsibilities to the Other might we gain--when recognizing the complex connection and ethical responsibility with the other-than-human?

With these ideas in mind, consider the following performative autoethnography, “Writing About Nothing,” written/perform for the 2019 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry’s (ICQI) Special Interest Group in autoethnography. In this text, I try to speak from within the material entanglement of bodies, discourse, blood, place, and more.

WRITING ABOUT NOTHING

I like to start from the back. I like to start in and amongst bodies. I like to start from a place that can
feel both comforting and terrifying, as if we all are the “person in and between words” as Pelias (2014) says of performance, considering, he continues, “which way to turn, which way to attach, questioning, maneuvering, imagining, wondering if one might cling to another without damage, without danger” (p. 29–30). I like to start from a place that feels at once secure and vulnerable, a practiced vulnerability (Stry, 2011) of moving out of one’s comfort zone, creating awareness of being a part of an agentic assemblage, a strategic surrendering into a space of risk where one weighs the personal political costs of “entanglement, ravishment, love,” as Pollock (1998) describes of performative writing, the personal political cost when critically reflecting upon and then embodying the critical creative process of material bodies together (p. 98). Donna Haraway might call this “staying with the trouble.” “I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities,” writes Haraway (2016b), “of partial recuperation and getting on together. Call that staying with the trouble. And so I look for real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms” (p. 10). Troubling the agreed-upon deal of bodies together engages a practiced vulnerability, making each of us Pelias’ “person between words” creating possibilities of real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms, the “dangerous, fantastic possibilities” of performance (Pollock, 2007, p. 243), all essentials of autoethnography.

So starting from the back, disrupting social expectations, wondering if one might cling to another without damage makes it more about bodies, the material dis/comfort, the material effect of our bodies together, making salient the power structures of the bodies present, perhaps developing an awareness of being part of a material assemblage. “The self that acknowledges its thingness,” writes Bennett (2015), “is paradoxically a body with newly activated sensory capacities—including the power to detect material agency” (p. 104). So how might qualitative research and writing be affected when we foreground the performative materiality of the body as vibrant matter, its “thingness,” as matter possessing agency independent of human representation?

Posthumanism and studies in materialism reject the sovereignty of humans as the only beings/things capable of narrativity and agentic interaction. Matter is “a site of narrativity, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 451). Studies in materialism tap into the genome of performance studies with foci on the personally political narrated body. “Performance,” writes Elyse Pineau, “enables an imaginative leap into other kinds of bodies and in doing so opens up embodied possibilities for resistance, reform, and renewal” (p. 45). So, if (1) matter itself has narrative agency which includes animal, human, and thing bodies, and (2) bodies are the place from which performative autoethnography is written, then how does matter matter in performative autoethnography?

In the first line of her national bestseller M Train, Patti Smith (2016) writes, “It’s not so easy writing about nothing” (p. 3). Her statement offered for me a kind of epistemological counterbalance. Matter and nothing. What is deemed nothing, and who gets to decide? What kind of matter is deemed “nothing” to patriarchal power structures, to neocons, to predators of power?

It’s not so easy writing about something that power structures want us to see as nothing, as matterless, as something without matter, as something that doesn’t matter, as something excluded from meaning-making strategies. When materiality is taken out of theorizing and meaning-making, when the materiality of certain bodies is excluded as important to power structures, then those bodies become “nothing,” giving those in power the authority to decide what matter matters, the power to decide who and what is something, and who and what is nothing. “Racism? That’s nothing really, just some angry Black people that . . . nothing, nothing, nothing . . . Homophobia? Heterosexism? That’s nothing, just some angry bitches that . . . nothing, nothing, nothing . . . Ableism? Nothing. Climate change? Nothing.” It’s not so easy writing about nothing. It’s not so easy starting from the back.

So perhaps one engages a practiced vulnerability as and with agentic matter realizing that in this entanglement, in this “enactment of knowledge-power-discourse practices” (Barad, 2007, p. 57) exclusions matter. What might writing look like in a practiced vulnerability with agentic matter, trying to stay with the trouble creating real stories that could also be speculative fabulations and speculative realisms?

A few years ago, I attended the National Communication Association conference, which usually has 6,000–7,000 attendees. A friend of mine was in the back of a crowded elevator when a colleague and his friend shoved their way in. She recounted how he told his friend that because of the aging population of women in academia they are all going to be subjected to god-awful stories of menopause now for years. Menopause, as I’m sure these wise and compassionate colleagues would agree, concerns the matter of blood. In considering then, matter as a text, as a site of narrativity, as storied matter, what story might the matter of blood tell?

It’s blood simple. It’s all blood simple. Those crazy god-awful menopausal women and their bloody
stories. Or not. Apparently some blood matters, and some blood doesn’t. There’s blood and then there’s not blood. It’s blood simple, a phrase created by Dashiell Hammett in his novel Red Harvest (1989). The hard-boiled hyper masculine police officer Op says:

This damn burg’s getting to me. If I don’t get away soon, I’ll be going blood-simple like the natives. There’s been what? A dozen and a half murders since I’ve been here. . . . I’ve arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I’ve ever got the fever. It’s this damn burg. It’s got me going blood simple.

(p. 154)

I am an aging woman. The materiality of my biologically female body is aging. And try as I may I am having a hard time finding a cultural narrative that makes me feel “good” about that. And by good I mean competent, healthy, creative, productive; but social performativities try to morph my sense of being into the desire to be young, thin, nubile . . . and you can see where this is tragically going, horribly going, hegemonically going. Dominant social narratives of aging get injected into our heads like Botox, like anesthesia trying and trying to numb me into a consumer complacence, trying to dumb me down into the horrible woman, the hysterical woman, the “nasty” woman, scooping up bottles of age defyers and skin-stiffeners grabbing as many as my privileged pocketbook can hold until bursting at the seams of sociopolitical sanity.

This damn burg’s getting to me. If I don’t get away soon, I’ll be going blood-simple like the natives, and I mean the “new” natives, the neo natives the hypermasculine neophyte neocons who have claimed this burg as if it were their first nation’s own. You can grab some pussy here and no one cares, well, except the pussy. But such matter doesn’t matter. Hope he doesn’t get any of that nasty woman menstrual blood on his hands. Out, out damned spot.

Because this isn’t the first time I’ve got the fever, not the first time this burg’s gotten to me. It’s been a long slow burn of menopausal hot flashes, oh, not flashes, “power surges,” they’re not hot flashes they’re power surges, a palatable and peppy phrase middle-aged women created because they knew they’d be subject to neo-native elevator talk trying to reduce us to a middle-aged cliché. Having a laugh at the publicly pop-cultured reduction of the hilariously hormonal woman, the middle-aged woman, the god-awful woman. She’s having a “power surge.” Makes me wanna go all blood simple on his ass.

No more blood on her hands. Out, out damned spot, no more spotting, no more pregnant pausing. A bloodless coup, a blood feud with herself. A blood fugue with words.

It may not be so easy writing about nothing, but with our bodies here in a practiced vulnerability (Spry, 2011) questioning, imagining, “wondering if one might cling to another without damage, without danger” (Pelias, 2014, pp. 29–30) embracing these moments of starting from the back, it could be a simple matter of blood.

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At the 2016 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Norman Denzin claimed that inquiry is at a new performative turn—namely, that the researching, theorizing, material body is in free fall referring to the destabilized material and discursive body in conceptualizations of human sovereignty, matter and meaning, and agentic realities. He urged researchers to look toward performance theory and methods to guide us into posthuman scholarship. “This style of research and creation—tracking the processes of radical interconnection, between both material humanity and the rest of Being,” write Brisini and Simmons (2016), “is a task for which the Gordian knot of performance epistemology is well-suited . . . a way of working within the newly heightened constraints of worldly belonging after humanist sovereignty falters” (p. 193). And it is, after all, this worldly belonging that we long for, desire, require at this point in our earthly habitation in the matter of free-falling bodies.

Imagining the postmenopausal body in free fall, imagining “that which is excluded in the enactment of knowledge-power-discourse practices” (Barad, 2007, p. 57) from a material standpoint has assisted me in considering what matter matters, how the effects of blood, gender, an elevator, colleagues, vulnerabilities matter as they affect one another as an assemblage where each element has agency, each considered storiied matter. The vibrant materials of this experience form a performative assemblage where “performance must be understood as not simply an issue of how discourse comes to matter, but also of how matter comes to matter” (p. 207), each element creating and remaking the other, creating and remaking what is and what can be.

Performative autoethnography is written from the entanglements of love, blood, bones, bodies. Entanglements that are at once damaging and healing. It is written from the cracks and crevasses between and from the varied assemblages of self, other, and context. Doing autoethnography is what makes
autoethnography. As is performance, autoethnography is made from the intra-action of things which include affect, bodies, dominant cultural discourses, as in this case the materiality of menstrual blood and the cultural themes and associated discourses.

Further, from a posthumanist perspective, considering each of these elements as matter entangled in practice, critical self-reflection is only one component in autoethnography. In our continuing development in autoethnographic praxes, the process of critical reflection deserves review and realignment; “Turning the mirror back on oneself is not the issue,” writes Barad (2007), “reflexivity cannot serve as a corrective here. Rather, the point is that these entangled practices are productive, and who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter” (p. 58). What else happens within the processes of critical reflection? Writing about nothing, about what dominant powers view as nothing, about what is excluded in these entangled practices, is the fundamental task of performative autoethnography.

Writing for and as performance opens awareness to the materiality of our bodies, of nonhuman bodies, things, discourses, moving us into the embodied complexity of articulating these assemblages; we become “a body with newly activated sensory capacities— including the power to detect material agency” (Bennett, 2015, p. 104). Whether an autoethnographer intends to perform in front of an audience or not becomes immaterial in relation to the embodied awareness created through performative autoethnographic methods.

We understand the world and our relationship to the world through our body’s engagement with agentic assemblages (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009; Brisini & Simmons, 2016; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2016). Performance is a methodological connective tissue in our exploration of assemblages. A posthuman performative autoethnography is the articulation and construction of that understanding as in Butler’s assertion, “It is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less ‘human,’ the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable” (p. 8). Performance assists in the creation of the text by requiring specific critical focus on the body’s experience with and as agentic matter in an assemblage where all non/human bodies are heuristically constitutive.

With these ideas in mind, I offer four components fundamental to the creation and the doing of posthuman performative autoethnography: (1) performative autoethnography articulates an embodied material assemblage, (2) autoethnography is a performative doing, (3) performative autoethnography actuates a textualizing body, (4) performative autoethnography is written for performance.

**ONE: PERFORMATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ARTICULATES AN EMBODIED MATERIAL ASSEMBLAGE**

In *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, Kahlo writes, “We direct ourselves toward ourselves through millions of beings—stones—bird creatures—star beings—microbe beings—sources of ourselves” (Fuentes, 2005, p. 24) expressing the intra-activity of multispecies and nonhuman agency in the creation of art. Directing ourselves toward ourselves is the impulse of autoethnography, but a posthuman perspective of performative autoethnography asks that we see matter (things human and nonhuman, discourses, thought, theorizing, affect) as possessing agency as a part of a performative assemblage, “to call into question the nature of agency and its presumed localization within individuals (whether human or nonhuman)” (Barad, 2007, p. 15).

Performance initiates awareness to the materiality of our bodies, of nonhuman bodies, things, discourses, and their co-creative intra-activity. “Assemblages,” writes Bennett (2009), “are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (p. 23) of blood, bodies, hegemonic constructs. Moving us further into autoethnographic processes, Wyatt and Gale (2013) offer up “assemblage/ethnography” addressing “the spaces in between selves and others . . . the spaces we are part of and create” (p. 305). An assemblage/ethnography or a posthuman performative autoethnography strives to articulate the ineffable entanglements of agentic matter to track a kind of copresence where something else about who we are as worldly actants and “the spaces in between” become known.

**Embodiment**

The body knows, “The body surges,” writes Stewart (2007), “Out of necessity, or for the love of movement . . . The body knows itself as states of vitality, immersion, isolation, exhaustion, and renewal” (p. 113). What the body knows and how and why it surges constitutes the composition of performative autoethnography originating from the will to embody and articulate “states of vitality, immersion, isolation, exhaustion, and renewal” (2007, p. 113). Embodying
the collisions and communions of what the body knows invites us to be “oddkin” with self and stone, birds and beings, blood and age. As Haraway (2016b) petitions, “Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; this is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations. . . . We become-with each other or not at all” (p. 1). Through the process of embodiment posthumanist performative autoethnography can offer an articulation of this agentic assemblage of material vitality and immersion. This is what encouraged me to look at the desire for Botox, menstrual blood, Patti Smith, “blood simple” and more as an agentic assemblage affecting the upheaval of post menopause.

Embodied knowledge is gained by paying somatic attention to how and what our body feels as an element with other materialities and “requires learning to be truly present” (Haraway, 2016b, p. 1) as storied matter, as stories are, Pineau (2000) explains, “rubbed up against on another sometimes lovingly, sometimes with an irritating chafe that rubbed me wrong, rubbed me raw, required the ointment of a critical eye” (p. 33). Embodiment is the research home, the methodological toolbox, the “ointment” of the performative autoethnographer. Posthumanist agency expands the pedagogical and epistemological possibilities of embodied knowing based in “rubbing up against” the assemblage of autoethnographic experience.

**Matterphor**

Blood, bones, imagination, and discourse all scheme to construct performative autoethnography. “Poetic imagination is muscular, handed, and kinesthetic,” writes Jane Hirshfield (2015) speaking into a posthumanist construct of writing. “The tongue, the ear, the eye, the alertness of skin,” she continues, “entwine the world for which and by which they come to being, and of which each is part. . . . A poem plucks the interconnection of the experiencing self and all being” (p. 14). As does Kahlo, Hirshfield identifies the interconnections of vibrant material being within the writing and performing body. Viewed through a lens of thing-power (Bennett, 2009) and a posthuman performativity, Kahlo and Hirshfield refer to more than a sensual experience with nature and move us beyond the use of and surely the embodiment of language as metaphor only.

I work to conceptualize the performative autoethnographic process as an agentic assemblage of “storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed.” I try to “pluck the interconnections” of how storied matter rubs up against me, how it rubbed me wrong. Here body and word together—the foundational components of any autoethnography—along with stones, bird creatures and star beings, form matterphor.

Similar in disciplinary scope to Dwight Conquergood (1991) and Mary Strine’s (1998) mapping of the culture-performance matrix, the intersectionalities of performative autoethnography, posthumanism, and new materialisms offer deep epistemological possibilities, not the least of which is exemplified in the term “matterphor,” which offers materiality and metaphor as inseparable; “language is material, materiality is storied,” explains Jeffery Cohen in Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman (2015, p. 226). As in Barad’s intraactivity, here discourse and matter are understood to be equally collaborative in meaning-making. Performance scholarship is based on the interplay of body, words, and the forces of their construction, the making of matterphor, “of trying to understand the interplay of the material and discursive the natural and the cultural, in scientific and other social practices” (Barad, 2007, p. 42).

Performative autoethnography can explicate the interrelations of non/human being to tell stories of matterphor (Spry, 2019). Written from the transient borders between the semantic and somatic, performative autoethnography may offer a language, a way to articulate posthuman interconnectedness, a methodological response to environmental humanist’s “search for conceptual models apt to theorize the connections between matter and agency on the one side, and intertwining of bodies, natures, meanings on the other side” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 450). A posthuman performative autoethnography can articulate these sociopolitical matter-agency implications; it can “cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perpetually open to it” (Bennett, 2009, p. 14).

Considering the earlier piece, “Writing About Nothing,” notice how blood in this case is explicated as agentic material actively constituted with other vibrant material within an assemblage. Here blood, and its lack, is a matterphor of discourses concerning female aging, the physical processes there in, patriarchal hegemonies, my history with and use of language, and more. The physiological exclusion of blood in post menopause offers understanding of aging women as excluded in sociopolitical value. “The image of affective bodies forming assemblages,” writes Bennett (2009), “will enable . . . a theory of action and responsibility that crosses the human-nonhuman divide” (p. 24), thus assisting in imagining and articulating “real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms” (Haraway, 2016b, 10). If “matter can
shimmer with undermined potential and the weight of received meaning” (Stewart, 2007, p. 23), if we view a matter of blood as shimmering with its own agency, its own storied matter, then imagine the possibilities for meaning-making revealed in this “received meaning” through performative autoethnography.

**TWO: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IS A PERFORMATIVE DOING**

**Performativity**

Madison and Hamera (2005) assert “performativity becomes all at once a cultural convention, value, and signifier that is inscribed on the body—performed through the body—to mark identities” (p. xviii) reminding us that performativity constitutes a doing, an ongoing process of meaning “inscribed upon the body” through an assemblage of social actions. Within performative autoethnography, engaging performativity is a dual process; it (1) identifies dominant socially constructed and hegemonically normalized performances, and (2) interrupts these performances with autoethnographies that critique homogenizing categories and then present “unexpected collaborations and combinations” (Haraway, 2016b, p. 4) of living with one another. Madison’s (2006a) concept of dialogical performative is particularly resonant as she turns to Homi Bhabha and Jill Dolan in their linking of performativity to the term *punctum*. Madison conceptualizes dialogical performative as “a break in the flow of expectation that resists the repetitive and hegemonic power to reinscribe identity and value. The performative is a subversive performativity that opens up the possibility for alternative performances and alternative citations” (p. 322) echoing Haraway’s (2016b) entreaty of “speculative fabulations and speculative realisms” (p. 10).

The performative-I positionality (Spry, 2006, 2011; Pollock, 2007) of the researcher in performative autoethnography seeks to operationalize alternative performances. Based in a negotiation between self/other/culture/language, the researcher constructs a story of her critical engagement with others giving an account of herself, a critical accounting of “I” with others in sociocultural contexts (Butler, 2005). The performative-I disposition is founded in the ethical check and balance of agency (the empowerment of telling one’s story) and representation (the sociocultural responsibility of telling one’s story).

In *Autoethnography and the Other* (Spry, 2016), I discuss the need for a performative-I more accountable to the Other. I offer a *willful* embodiment of “we” where embodiment is an ethically willful and vulnerable act requiring sociopolitical commitment of a performative autoethnographer as an *unsettled-I* engaging Trihn’s concept of the Inappropriate/d Other. Here the Other is not appropriateable because she possesses a critical agency whose identity construction is not dependent on a self-other relationship inevitably placing those with power (human) as SELF; as Minh-ha (2012) argues, “We can read the term ‘inappropriate/d other’ in both ways, as someone whom you cannot appropriate, and as someone who is inappropriate. Not quite other, not quite the same” (p. 1).

Posthuman perspectives expand the scope of the inappropriated other in performative autoethnography. Who is matter and who is not? Who matters and who does not? The Black Lives Matter has offered wisdom and clarity to understanding how and when and to whom which bodies matter. As in “Writing About Nothing,” Barad (2007) reminds, “exclusions matter both to the bodies that come to matter and those excluded form mattering” (p. 57). The nonhuman and the inanimate (Kimmerer, 2013) are surely viewed as inappropriate to human sovereignty; but conceptualizing these as inappropriatable and perceiving matter as agentic can “lead us to new ways of living in the world,” to other wisdoms that surround us (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 57–58). Such a performativity constitutes a willful embodiment of non/human “we” engaged in agentic being and meaning-making, “shimmering,” immaterial of human presence or absence.

**Doing**

The embodiment of the performative-I is not an individual experience. Posthumanist perspectives activate the embodiment of multi/thing/species with texts, stage, others, props, self, and cultural discourses that exist within and beyond the stage. Viewing performative autoethnography from a stance of distributive agency of things more fully activates the meaning-making of doing and its connection to performativity. As Bennett (2009) notes, “there is not so much a doer . . . as a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage” (p. 28). The relational embodiment of the other, central to critical autoethnography, becomes realized in more than just the living human body. Matter is “an intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency” (Barad, 2007, p. 151), which is the substance of performance, a doing, a thing undone, a thing becoming. Performative autoethnography is the substance of articulating such personal/political/non/human/narrativity.
Barad’s (2007) perspectives of intra-active becoming and agentic realism speak into performance studies’ foundations of meaning made within the doing of things. “Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity” (p. 151). Pollock (2007) conceptualizes performance as “doing the thing done so vigorously as to undo it and simultaneously to call down the gaping grace of what else might be done” (p. 243). Here, materiality is discursive, and discourse is material-making and remaking meaning in an interactive becoming.

Conceptualizing performative autoethnography through a posthuman performative doing expands our abilities to understand an agentic assemblage as a multidimensional heuristic. In “Writing About Nothing” I wanted to explore how performative autoethnography might be methodologically expanded if I were “to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally” (Bennett, 2009, p. 10). What if I sought to experience the relationships between menstrual blood, aging, cultural narratives, misogynistic colleagues, and the 2019 ICQI Autoethnography Special Interest Group horizontally, as a “congealing of agency” (Barad, 2007, p. 151), as an agentic assemblage? How would that affect the writing process and practice?

But performance is also about transformation through doing the imaginary, imagining what could be while taking into account the complexities of what is. Part of the dialogical performative, posits Madison (2006a), is to recognize that “the very notion of possibility rests with those who can imagine other ways that the smallest thing and the largest thing are or can be; we need the imaginary to envision the world and ourselves differently” (p. 322). A posthuman performative autoethnography can realize “other ways that the smallest thing and the largest thing are or can be” when human sovereignty is abandoned by imagining ourselves through birds, stones, star creatures.

**Posthuman Voice**

Both performance and any kind of textual creation are entangled in voice. Rather than something the performer “takes on” or “acts out,” rather than a thing of authenticity with a pure interpretation that the performer must arrive at, voice is a conglomeration of body, language, author, historicities, culture, intertextually inside and outside of the text. It is an intra-action (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009) of all non/human things involved in the creation of experience. As autoethnography is never about the self alone, the writerly voice is also part of a continuing agentic construction affected by place, space, and all other vital matter.

An expanded conceptualization of voice can assist in expanding meaning-making possibilities in performative autoethnography. Offering a particularly fecund conceptualization for such meaning-making possibilities, Lisa A. Mazzei and Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2019) conceptualize a *posthuman voice* where “voice is a material-discursive practice that is inseparable from all elements (human and non-human) in an assemblage” (p. 67). Similar to the body in a posthuman performativity (Brisini & Simmons, 2016; Spry, 2019) being but one material element within an agentic assemblage, Mazzei and Jackson “no longer think of voice as a discrete representation of experience spoken from an individual subject, but as an-other body or agent in the agentic assemblage that acts and confounds with them” (p. 70). An agentic assemblage of voice echoes autoethnographic methods that embrace collaborative or ensemble conceptualization and construction of experience; Stacy Holman Jones (2005) explains autoethnography as an “ensemble piece. . . . It asks for a performance, one in which we might discover that our autoethnographic texts are not alone” (p. 764).

A posthuman voice as a posthuman performative autoethnography seeks to “make matter matter, [to] enable an analysis that decenters the intentional human subject, and distributes agency among all of the things in an assemblage that is continually making and remaking itself” (Mazzei & Jackson, 2019, p. 76). As in “Writing About Nothing” notice how the place—at a professional conference—and space of the elevator matters in the analysis of the speaker’s voice, his feeling of privilege to make denigrating comments anywhere at any time. A verbal pussy grab. Makes me wanna go all blood simple.

**THREE: PERFORMATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY ACTUATES THE TEXTUALIZING BODY**

In her work with indigenous Potawatomi language and knowledges, Kimmerer writes, “The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be human” (2013, p. 57). Her work moves us deeper into the texture of a posthuman performative autoethnography by decentering human sovereignty and basic linguistic constructs themselves. “English grammar,” contends Kimmerer, “boxes us in by the choice of reducing nonhuman being to an it, or it must be gendered, inappropriately, as a he or a she” (p. 56). Language, which language, the hegemony of a dominant language, and the moral and ethical concerns of how
language is constructed by or with non/humans are part of Kimmerer’s concept of “the grammar of animacy” (p. 55). I find Kimmerer’s view that all animate things and beings are agentially constructive of language similar to Bennett’s vibrant matter where it is in the doing and the doing together that we make and remake ourselves with other elements. “Maybe a grammar of animacy,” argues Kimmerer, “could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one” (p. 58). Leading us into new ways of living in the world is a moral basis of performative autoethnography.

**Textualizing Body**

Such posthuman analyses resonate with and further develop the concept of the textualizing body (Spry, 2011), where the methodological processes of analysis, composition, and performance are deemed interdependent; no epistemological hierarchy exists between page, stage, word, or body in the construction of performative autoethnography. I have argued that the body/self, the autoethnographic text, and the performance of the text contribute equally to the meaning-making process. Performance methods assist in the creation of the text by activating the autoethnographer’s critical awareness of her material and socially constructed body in the writing process. What is written from the body changes the body and vice versa; what is performed turns back upon itself, changing word and body.

As discussed earlier, matterphor posits materiality and metaphor as inseparable; “language is material, materiality is storied” (Cohen, 2015, p. 226). Body as text. Text as body. In performative autoethnography, body/performatives, paper/word, and stage/performance are in flux, in process, in progress as they continually (re)generate one another in a Deleuzian cycle of becoming; none existing as fixed or static, none positioned as authority.

So, although we view the concept and practice of writing as intra-active materialities, as humans we express ourselves through the spoken and written word; thus, words on the body and the page must be specifically addressed in terms of how we create text. Posthumanist and materialist praxes assist in advancing how we perceive of and operationalize the textualizing body by conceptualizing all parts of the writing process as an assemblage; as such, we are able to imagine more expansive meaning-making possibilities for healthful engagement with all materialities when we view body/language/material as “a corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012, p. 451). This is the purpose of the posthuman textualizing body, to offer a way of conceptualizing “matter as a text, as a site of narrativity” (p. 451) in the vibrantly material writing process of performative autoethnography. “Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives,” writes Kimmerer (2013), about the grammar of animacy and multispecies agency, “the things we might see through other eyes. . . . We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves; there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us” (p. 58).

With these ideas in mind, consider the performative autoethnography “Stars and Stones in Aotearoa” written for a panel at the 2019 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry focusing on the Critical Autoethnography (CAE) conference held each year in Australia or Aotearoa (New Zealand). This piece explores the learning of humility I experienced with Fetau Iosefo’s whanau (family) while attending the conference as the keynote presenter. My education from this family and the conference goers was daunting and deeply transformative, and to honor this family and all beings, I work daily to practice these lessons in humility. From “Stars and Stones in Aotearoa”:

The next day we are asked to gather for an opening ceremony for the conference. Haami Samson Hawkins, an elder who teaches and studies Maori and indigenous pedagogy explains what we will be doing. He mentions that we are particularly fortunate to be here in the first weeks of July since the star Mata Deke is sailing above us. He relates that Mata Deke is the star that collects those who have left us, that they are beings of light sailing in the sky. And my knees go weak. And I take note.

And still with voice I cannot find, I am flung back into the stars remembering the voices of two shaman who told us that our son Keller lost in childbirth ascended into a star being; it was a dream that these two shaman who did not know each other experienced separately and on separate occasions. To the detail they recounted how Keller appeared to them telling them that he was in his seventh stage of ascension and chose our family as his final stage of ascension into a light being. I look up and I am humbled at the sight of our star child . . . yet another gift form this whanau. And I take key note.

Writing this piece from a posthuman performative autoethnographic perspective opened me to the presence of humility that I had never experienced. The family, stars, my own expectations, shamanist
teachings, and so much more was involved in the matterphor of that agentic material assemblage. I realized, as Kimmerer (2013) says, “We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us” (p. 58) “... star beings—microbe beings—sources of ourselves” (Kahlo in Fuentes, 2005 p. 24).

Performance, which at its heart is the embodiment of experience through movement and language, has taught me a skepticism of language’s ability to represent me or others outside of the dominant master narratives that it is meant to serve. I could not have written “Stars and Stones” without the healthy skepticism of language necessary in a practiced vulnerability, skepticism of language’s ability to represent the complexity of grief and how it can be turned into hope through intra-action with stars, skepticism of the systems of power held in place through language (Spry, 2011). Dominant narratives are built on human sovereignty, hegemony, and linguistic hierarchies. A post-human performative autoethnography has the ability to dismantle these by engaging matter as vibrant and agentic, by allowing parents to see their star child, by continually learning a collective humility. Imagine the possibilities.

Any use of language means we are presented with language’s propensity toward imperialism, colonialism, and human sovereignty. “English doesn’t give us many tools for incorporating respect for animacy,” writes Kimmerer (2013); language should “remind us, in every instance, of our kinship with all of the animate world” (p. 56). It is in seeking to make what Haraway refers to as “oddkin” that I begin to understand my own kinship to star beings, to the waka (the traditional boat of the Maori and Pacific Islanders), and to other non/human beings.

FOUR: PERFORMATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IS WRITTEN FOR LIVE ENGAGEMENT . . . PERFORMANCE

Finally, and perhaps most foundationally, performative autoethnography is written from the assumption of live engagement with others whether this be a theatrical audience, an audience at a conference, a personal gathering of others, or a reader on the other side of the body/paperstage looking in at the embodied words you have created. Knowing we are going to be engaging others face-to-face, body-to-body “calls us shamelessly forward” in a practiced vulnerability deeply effecting what we are going to say and how we are going to say it. This profound and basic communication principle is why so many performance studies disciplines are housed in communication studies departments. Doing performative autoethnography means we are bodying forth “across those hard-edged maps” (Madison, 2006a, p. 244) to communicate with others/things non/human.

Performative autoethnography is written to move off the page doing the labor of meaning-making with and in the presence of others, further exhibiting autoethnography as never about the self alone but rather, as “a relation of being and knowing” (Pollock, 1998, pp. 87–88). This experiential multiplicity is one of the main reasons theories of materialism and posthumanism that embrace an interactive distributive agency of things non/human strongly resonate with performance studies and performative autoethnography. The multiple sociocultural meanings and material locations of blood in “Writing About Nothing” seeks to exemplify the agentic character of non/human things.

In performative autoethnography performance is not an added scholarly bonus. It does not operate as an interesting feature or entertaining option that one might choose after “finishing” the autoethnography. It is part and parcel of the writing process assisting us in a constant awareness of our bodies in motion with others, always turning back upon the words just wrote to reconsider again and again what and how we might communicate knowledge whether or not one speaks these words to a live audience or one on the page.

In writing the keynote for the 2019 CAE conference I had to carefully consider who would be attending, our personal, professional, and political relationship with one another, the space and place of a university, etc. This seemingly basic audience analysis becomes aptly more complex when considering engaging these elements as agentic matter, when viewing the performing body as matterphor in creating performative autoethnography. Notice what and how we write is changed when imagining being present with an audience of our work. What do I really want to say about the complexity of experience when I am face-to-face or body-to-blood or bird-to-bone with another? The prophetic words of performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood (1998) serve here as epistemological genome: “The key question for twentieth-century communication theory—a question at once philosophical, moral, and political—is how wide and deep our empathy for others can reach, how ready we are to see ‘the human as precisely what is different’” (p. 230). We must make ourselves ready; our worldly belonging depends on it.
CONCLUSION

Performance constitutes relations between self/author and all materialities. Among the things discussed here such as embodiment, agentic matter, performativity, matterphor, posthuman voice and more, posthumanism and materialism studies primarily address the unseating of human hierarchy, the equalizing of the self with all other matters. It is in a sense an “unselling” that posthumanism offers to autoethnographic studies as “we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there” (Scarry, 1998, p. 77).

With these ideas in mind, along with the matterphoric assemblage of a posthuman voice engaging a grammar of animacy, I will end with the closing remarks of “Stars and Stones in Aotearoa”:

Two nights later, I recount this experience before beginning my keynote performance. I did so inspired by all other presenters at the conference who had begun their autoethnography within the ritual of gratitude to the people and land of Aotearoa. Such is the space created at CAE. It is a continued communally generated learning of humility that opened my throat that night. I’ve walked out onto many stages over many decades. But that night as I walked out I felt us all scooped up into the arms of us, of we, and the room levitated. And as my throat began to open, the levitated “us” seemed to speak these words:

It feels like Keller, in a star boat with all of our lost loved ones, is here with this assemblage of people, and that these loved ones came in with Mata Deke as his wayfaring light beings helping all of us surviving loss to wayfind, to find our way. They whisper that the light comes ‘round, always comes back around, waiting for us, holding on to us especially in those dark spaces where finding our way seems improbable, and then impossible. But Keller has taught me that this feeling of hopelessness is part of the travel. And now having been embraced by the waka, by the whanau we begin to see that the body and the boat are one whether in light or darkness. Thank you, Mata Deke.

NOTES

1. Posthumanism and new materialist studies emphasize the deconstruction of human sovereignty over nonhuman species and things. All species animate or otherwise are considered to possess narrative agency. For further study, see Barad (2007), Bennett (2009), Brisini and Simmons (2016; this Handbook), and Haraway (2016a, 2016b).

2. Through the explication of the term performative assemblage Barad (2007) seeks to critique and move away from privileging language as the predominant means of epistemological and ontological representation and meaning-making. See J. L. Austin’s (1975) and Judith Butler’s (1993) work on performativity, as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s (2009) work on assemblages to understand the basis of Barad’s critique.

3. To engage the work of other autoethnographers engaging the body as a site of critical theorizing, see also Alexander (2012, 2013), Davies (2019), Holman Jones (2005, 2016), Holman Jones and Harris (2018), Wyatt and Gale (2013).

4. Deleuze and Guattari (2009) argue that identity is part of a complex social assemblage emphasizing fluidity, exchangeability, and multiple functionalities. Such theorizing assists in conceptualizing a posthuman performative autoethnography where the body, the labor of writing, the process of performance, and the material elements of page and stage are all intra-connected, agentic, and contribute to the production of an autoethnographic text. See also Mazzei and Jackson’s (2019) concept of voice in/as agentic assembly in relation to a Deleuzian cycle of becoming as well as works by Ken Gale (2018) and Jonathan Wyatt (2018).

REFERENCES


