Autoethnography still chooses to locate itself within the subject-centered proclivities of humanist thought and phenomenological inquiry and to subscribe to a metaphysics of being that seems to continue to resist the powerful presence and theorizing practices of affect theory, materiality, and the posthuman. Therefore, those who continue to wish to identify as “autoethnographers” must be encouraged to ask themselves a fundamental question. Is what I am doing worthwhile as a form of inquiry or am I simply indulging in the production of accounts that nurture forms of subjectification that serve to sustain researcher identities and practice representations that are fragile, unsustainable, and possibly even dishonest? (p. 566)

In 2016, we coedited a special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly* dedicated to the theme “Posthuman Relations in Performance Studies.” In the introductory essay to that issue, we offered a summary of posthumanism:

The posthumanist proposition is that our lives are a complicated material set of relationships between human and non-human animals and materials. Consequently, we are irreducible to an “essential” and omnipresent humanity. The articulation of the world as a matrix of interaction, rather than a series of distinct spheres that comprise “nature” and “culture,” fractures the delicate fantasy that enables humanity’s comfortable isolation.

(p. 191)

This description—though insufficiently broad to meet our current understanding of the range of entities that can be imagined as part of the posthumanist project—serves as a summary of our orientation toward doing scholarship, as well as our broader ethic toward being with others in the world. For us, that is what autoethnography is fundamentally about: learning to be better with others in the world, human and nonhuman alike.

As scholars deeply invested in both performance and autoethnography, or what Spry (2017) calls performative autoethnography, we began to ask ourselves how one might do posthumanist autoethnography. Fortunately, we weren’t alone. This conversation is well underway in post-qualitative circles (e.g., Harris & Holman Jones, 2019; Koro-Ljungberg & Cannella, 2017; Simmons, 2016; Somerville, 2017; Spry, 2017). While these conversations are insightful in myriad ways, Gale and Wyatt’s (2019) emphatic call for a posthumanist turn in autoethnography was, for us, intensely grounding:

As both autoethnographers and posthumanists, we identified with the urgency in their writing. We felt called in (and perhaps called out) by their not-so-subtle ultimatum. We sympathized with the frustrations that manifest from the slow pace at which autoethnographers are getting “on board” with the posthumanities, as increasingly complex nature-cultural (Latour, 1993) crises arise globally.

Our editor’s introduction also tried to account for the learning-curve necessary to embark on ostensibly “new” metaphysical terrain (Roseik, Snyder, & Pratt, 2019). The posthumanities, both Western and Indigenous, can be difficult to conceptualize, particularly for those of us who were trained in U.S. academic institutions where the colonial foundational philosophies that all too often guide our thinking are humanist or humanism-derived. For many, to decenter the Western liberal human/humanist subject is still viewed as a form a sacrilege. It is our position that the posthumanities are a rejection of the undue privileging and centering of humans, rather than an effort at debasing or denying them. Instead,
the posthumanities offer us an expanded relational framework from which to better understand radical (and significant) otherness (Haraway, 2003) in human and more-than-human contexts. In what follows in this chapter, we continue to forge a path forward by critiquing the humanist ontologies that have, in our view, limited the potential of autoethnography as a radical other-centered practice. We do so by systematically untethering autoethnography from the tenets of humanism, in the process arguing that we can and must bring autoethnography into the broader, more inclusive, more other-oriented fold of natureculture by deeply considering relationships that include human and nonhuman animals, plants, microbes, objects, matter, technologies, places, and the other copresences that make manifest our shared world. We achieve this untethering by offering posthumanist alternatives to long agreed upon etymologies that comprise the term auto/ethno/graphy.

In the first edition of this handbook, Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) articulated the etymological dynamics at play in autoethnography. They wrote, “[a]utoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (p. 1). When encountering the term autoethnography broken down into its etymological components—a strategy we use to ground ourselves in the dynamic interplay involved when practicing autoethnographic inquiry—we are reminded that it is imperative not to prioritize one component of the term over another. Instead, as scholar-artists we must grapple with the synergistic relationships between these components in order to holistically understand the ontological force, ethical dimensions, current potential, and future possibilities of autoethnographic work. In this chapter we explore a series of questions designed to help us to move forward. We ask, for example, what possibilities are opened up if we reframe the self/auto as broadly relational? How might our preconceived views of culture be revised to understand our position in the matrices of natureculture? How might our writing styles and practices be reframed and expanded when working with a posthumanist lens? And what promise does the future of a posthumanist autoethnography hold for those who would make an effort to learn and experiment in this relatively new terrain? While examples of avowedly posthumanist autoethnography are rare at present, we hope that this chapter serves as an inducement for scholars and artists to begin working more earnestly in this vein.

RETHINKING SELF AS RELATIONAL

The posthumanist self, as described in this chapter, is rooted in a series of new materialist assumptions about the relational and material body and the ties between that body and self-constructs. This differs from previously articulated versions of poststructural self-constructs that focused primarily on the role of language as the medium of self-creation (Rapaport, 2003; de Freitas & Paton, 2009). While not discounting the obvious reality of effects and affects of language on social and cultural formations (de Freitas & Curinga, 2015), we proceed under the auspices of a new materialist philosophy that is distinctly nonrepresentational. This nonrepresentational philosophical position treats bodies and their actions not as “representations” of, or vehicles for, an abstracted self-concept (essence), but rather as emergent within the fundamental relational ground of being, through which the self-construct is forged and negotiated in relationship with other entities. In this sense, the nonrepresentational ontogenesis of entities is relational:

[H]umans are envisioned in constant relations of modification and reciprocity with their environs, action being understood not as a one-way street running from the actor to the acted upon, from the active to the passive or mind to matter, but as a relational phenomena incessantly looping back and regulating itself.

(Anderson & Harrison, 2010, p. 7)

Consequently, the composition of the human is externalized and rooted in relational inter/intra-actions between self and world, rather than internalized and essential (Rose, 1996). This argument is also found in Indigenous materialism. One example is Ravencroft’s (2018) description of “Country” as it is understood by the Yarralin:

Country cannot be confused with the connotations of that word in English: this is not merely land or ground or nature if by these things we mean something inanimate. To the extent it can be translated, it seems to be something like a living and life-giving nexus of energy-matter in which entities, including Ancestors, emerge; it is a sensate intelligence; it includes what in English might be thought of as geological and life forms, except that rock and mountain range are among the living.

(p. 361)
This formulation poses a paradox for autoethnographers concerning the nature of the writerly self/subject (auto). During the last decade of the twentieth, and the first decade of the twenty-first century, autoethnographers largely embraced a vision of an autobiographical/autoethnographic “I” (Ellis, 2004) that was derived from poststructuralist conceptions of identity fragmentation, formation, and reformation via language and meta-narrative collapse. In poststructuralist autoethnography, “the writing writes the writer as a complex (im)possible subject in a world where (self) knowledge can only ever be tentative, contingent, and situated” (Gannon, 2006, p. 474). This tentative, contingent, and situated authorial subject is nonetheless still presumed to be a plausibly reliable narrator, at least insofar as an authorial voice serves as a narration of personal experience. If one of the most basic claims of the autoethnographic project, writ large, is that it represents the “study and critique of culture through the lens of the self” (Holman Jones, 2018, p. 4), it would logically follow that the self must be at least, in part, a somewhat reliable representation of the composite life experience and interpretive schemata of the author within culture, which can then be utilized as a tool for analytical work. The “self,” that is, no matter how fragmented, is still often used as the primary argument for an “epistemology of provenance,” “the claim that knowledge arises from an experiential basis that is fundamentally group-specific and that others, who are outside the group and who lack its immediate experiences, cannot share that knowledge,” or, more pointedly, “only those who live a particular reality can know about it; and only they have the right to speak about it” (Kruks, 2001, p. 4). While autoethnographic efforts at extrapolating out from personal experience into sociocultural critique would seem to be a direct effort to confront the logical outcome of an epistemology of provenance—namely, that it leads to a series of ever-constricting social identity affiliations and eventual solipism—it still presumes the unicity of the subject position as our writerly contribution: the specific, unique radix of our mode of inquiry. Autoethnography, therefore, seems largely to rely (if implicitly) on a distinctively humanist philosophy that treats the “self” as a coherent and authentic, albeit potentially deeply fragmentary, entity. The self, in the simplest terms possible, is treated as a “thing”: understood as the conceptual equivalent of an object, and therefore stable enough to be observable, and (re)created largely by conscious, writerly effort.

New materialist and nonrepresentational concepts of the self-as-relation trouble the assumed thing-hood of the self. While proponents of the aforementioned perspective on the self would rightly claim that it does not preclude a version of relationality (Ellis, 2007), this relationality is not a fundamental relationality at an ontological level. It is the interaction of two (or more) preexisting entities, rather than the composition of those entities via relation. In contrast to this perspective, a nonrepresentational posthumanist account treats the “things” of the world—people, creatures, behavior, culture, etc.—as ongoing composite outcomes of relational processes occurring across time and space, while their being(s) emerge in tandem. The solidity of the world as we understand it is an aftereffect of relationship, the emergence of “bundles” of becoming. This concept has been dubbed “haecceity” by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). A haecceity—while not equivalent to a “person” or “creature,” necessarily—nonetheless names the composite moment of entanglement that consists “entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 261). Out of this ontology of infinitely small co-constitutive relations, pseudo-stabilized patterns of repetition emerge, and given sufficient time, these “events” start to become interpretable as individual entities. But these “events” are—at their core—still instances of flux occurring in a flat ontological space that gives rise to a nonhierarchical and non-teleological world of fundamentally relational entities, thereby stripping the “human” of any privileged place in the schema of being. Encountering an “other,” rather than being the meeting of two discretely separate entities, is understood by this rubric to be the codetermination of those entities by virtue of their interactions across myriad registers: the breadth of the sensorium, embodied proprioceptive awareness, conceptual appraisals (philosophical, cognitive, evaluative, and emotional), transactions of material force or symbolic meaning, etc. That this process works along lines of similarity and difference, across agencies both human and more-than-human, means that our very sense of self, and beyond this our very being, is iteratively codependent on those relational matrices in which we find ourselves caught up.

Finally, we arrive at the point where we can plainly name the seeming paradox: if the self is a coherent and autonomous “thing”—we are independently ourselves, that is—then it is fixed and is not fundamentally a relation. But new materialist and posthumanist theories of relational ontologies tell us that nothing is fixed, and therefore we evidently aren’t “ourselves”: we’re a composite relation of everything else, none of which is “itself.” So how does a posthumanist autoethnographer know where to turn, when this paradoxical “self” is supposed to be one of the lenses to which epistemological claims about the validity of
autoethnography as a method is tied? In short, we have three answers to this concern. First, we would suggest that the composite, relational quality of the self in posthumanist autoethnography is an opportunity to introduce a potentially liberatory quality to autoethnographic research: we aren’t fixed in our subject positions, which leaves them open to (hopefully) positive reinterpretation and performative reformulation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008; de Freitas & Paton, 2009). Second, insofar as autoethnographic research uses the “self” as an important commonplace of conceptual concern and praxis, expanding the “self” to include relations of human life, nonhuman life, machines, matter, and other forms of relational partnering may predispose us to an ecological view of the self that aligns with future-oriented efforts at multispecies flourishing (Lanka, 2018; Robinson, 2011). Third—and examined in much greater detail in the following—this version of the relational self opens up new possibilities at the level of creative work: reading, writing, and performing in new domains, with new vocabularies, at new scales of space and time, with a broader vision of what constitutes autoethnographic work than that which was previously constrained by the limitations of the humanist subject.

RETHINKING CULTURE AS NATURECULTURE

Just as posthumanist philosophies complicate the concept of the self/auto in autoethnography, so too do these philosophical interventions complicate the concept of culture/ethnos. While both ethnographers and autoethnographers alike attempt to “study a culture’s relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture” (Maso, 2001, p. 138), posthumanist autoethnography offers interventions that allow for a questioning of “culture” itself, as a conceptual category. Altering the concept of the self, therefore, cannot help but alter the concept of culture. But on a more fundamental level, the posthumanist project is one of interrogating (and deconstructing) philosophical dualisms: human/animal, mind/body, subject/object, and—most germane to this conversation—nature/culture. As Latour (1993) points out, the categorical constructs of “culture” and “nature” are philosophical inventions, rather than fundamental distinctions: “the very notion of Culture is an artifact created by bracketing Nature off. Cultures—different or universal—do not exist, any more than Nature does. There are only nature-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison” (p. 104). The oft-used term “natureculture” (Latour, 1993; Haraway, 2003; Cajete, 2016) is therefore not a compound term in an additive sense (“nature” + “culture”) but is rather meant to acknowledge that nature and culture are one and the same: a plenum wherein our “material lives are always culturally mediated, but they are not only cultural” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 27). Natureculture has come to supplant the more common, artificially delimited sphere of culture as the domain of posthumanist research, especially insofar as the term “culture” is commonly understood to stand in for “human culture.” Consequently, when considering the possibilities of a posthumanist autoethnography, the contention that autoethnographic research is a qualitative method for deriving insights about culture (and cultural experience) must be revised into the contention that doing autoethnographic research is a method for deriving insights about natureculture and naturecultural experience.

In light of a more expansive view of autoethnography’s purview, new opportunities and obligations arise for autoethnographers. A paradigm rooted in natureculture complicates familiar senses of individual identity and cultural participation and can render thinking about perspectives on personal experience challenging. For example, how are we to wrap our minds around our fundamental biology and its contributions to our affective states (Wilson, 2015; Shaviro, 1995)? When we write and embody our experience in natureculture(s), how might we be forced into accounting for the myriad interactions between forces of human and nonhuman agency that both enable and impede our collective flourishing (Dickinson, 2017; Lyons, 2017; Pearson, 2015)? How do processes of boundary drawing and dissolution operate in the sphere of natureculture, “where flesh is not mine, but of the planet’s of which I am a part” (Mazis, 2002, p. 27)? These questions and more haunt a potentially emergent posthumanist autoethnography.

The most fundamental shift enabled by the paradigm of natureculture, however, is the emphasis within autoethnographic discourses on the role of entities traditionally considered to be merely contributing to, or “outside” of, human culture. The experience of being “human” in “culture” is more properly understood under a posthumanist paradigm as the experience of existing as the intersection of animal, vegetal, fungal, bacterial, viral, mineral, technical, climatic, cultural, spiritual, and geospatial inputs and outputs. To attempt to write autoethnographically about what it is to embody a relational selfhood is to document and interrogate not only one’s seeming place within human culture but also
to interrogate these other relational, naturecultural dimensions that comprise one’s being and experience. In this way, posthumanist autoethnographies share the established autoethnographic characteristic of documenting “epiphanies” (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989). These epiphanies, however, might very well take place in the most mundane of circumstances, moments of heightened and uncanny realization of the multispecies, material fundamentals of our very existence (Silverman, 2007). Whether the realization of our coexistence with bacterial inhabitants of our bodies (Phillips, 2018; Zolnikov, 2018), an awareness that our lives are comprised of close companionship with a wide variety of nonhuman others (Johnson, 2017; Markwell, 2019; Sheriff, 2017; Pattinson, 2017; Borthwick, 2006; Furman, 2006), or any number of other realizations that are typically masked by entrenched structures of instrumentalist, patriarchal, and humanist thought, any instance wherein the autonomy and self-determination of the human is questioned can be fertile ground for autoethnographic inquiry.

The process of broadening autoethnographic concern to encompass multispecies communities also heightens the ethical demands of representation and affiliation for would-be posthumanist autoethnographers. The relational ethics of autoethnography (Ellis, 2007) place demands upon researchers to account for the ways in which their research might aid or hinder the flourishing of the multispecies communities of which they write and are members. Much of the extant autoethnographic work that borders on posthumanism engages directly with questions of ethical relations to nonhuman others, particularly as related to patterns of instrumentalization and consumption, ranging from vegetarianism and veganism (Andreattà, 2015; Tulloch, 2016) to cases for—and against—hunting, in both Western and Indigenous communities (Presser & Taylor, 2011; Villanueva, 2019; Fix, Burnam, & Gutteriez, 2019). While it could perhaps go without saying that we do not perceive there to be a “correct” ethical perspective for approaching the task of writing posthumanist autoethnographies, we feel it necessary to acknowledge that the process of writing often leads to works that empathize (Braidotti, 2013, p. 26), sympathize, and find (un)common ground between more-than-human authors and relational partners. The task of writing, performing, and performatively writing autoethnographies depends upon intimacy and is an effort to “embody an intimate understanding of self’s engagement with another within a specific sociocultural context. In autoethnographic performance self is other” (Spry, 2001, p. 716), a scenario that begets both opportunity for trans-entity understanding and joyful affiliation, as well as the lived experience of nonhuman suffering, disempowerment, and estrangement.

Complexity is the watchword for posthumanist perspectives on natureculture. The processes of attending to situated personal experience in matrixes of human and nonhuman naturecultures render the easy calculation of causality impossible, leading to webs of affect and systems of multiple causation within even seemingly straightforward interactions. These deeply embedded formulations of more-than-human agency consequently engender significant demands for responsibility, accountability, humility, and reciprocity between human and nonhuman agents, akin to the established ethical demands of autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017; Tulis, 2013; Visse & Niemeijer, 2016). Posthumanist autoethnography also raises ethical questions for which we do not yet have satisfactory answers. For example, it is unclear at present how questions of consent factor into multispecies lived arrangements and the representation thereof. In the form of a question: Must we—and how can we—establish some degree of consenting authorization to represent entities and objects (Rowe, 2017) that cannot speak and may not even be conscious? Is there a violence, as Derrida (2002) would contend, in drafting these entities into language at all, with its largely essentializing, totalizing, and instrumentalizing outcomes for nonhuman life? What does it mean to make oneself a “vulnerable observer” (Behar, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) in a research relationship that is often astounding asymmetrical in terms of power, via human domination over nonhuman life, but can sometimes culminate in radical inversions, up to and including the point of human death (Schutten, 2008)? These questions, among others, present future avenues for posthumanist autoethnographic research.

RETHINKING WRITING AS MULTIGENRE

The final element of the auto/ethno/graphic construction concerns the task of writing, alongside its formal and ethical considerations. While much has been written about the “doing” of autoethnographic writing (Pensoneau-Conway, Adams, & Bolen, 2017), we want to foreground two conversations in this section. The first is an acknowledgment of autoethnography’s long affiliation with autobiographical writing and a concomitant shift in associated literatures that arise from a posthumanist autoethnography. The second is an effort to examine the worldly repercussions of the written word on diverse multispecies communities, particularly in light of the tension between evocative
and scientistic language that arises due to these newly associated literatures.

The crucial posthumanist difference of attending to natureculture, nonhuman agency, and the expanded and relational concept of humanity makes it likely that scholars operating in this mode will seek affinities with modes of writing that are alternatives or admixtures to current autoethnographic forms. These literatures will draw from established bodies of personal narrative, scientific inquiry, Indigenous traditions, and other bodies of work that complement the posthumanist prospect of writing a relational self, embedded in mutually constitutive naturecultural relations. In what follows, we offer some potential examples of these diverse literary forms.

NATURE WRITING

The most familiar body of literary tradition with which the posthumanist autoethnographer might find an affinity is so-called “nature writing,” a contested and fraught term in its own right. While a healthy debate about the integral features and coherence of nature writing exists (Lyon, 1996; Murphy, 1994), much of the work that is referred to as nature writing is “a first-person, nonfiction account of an exploration, both physical (outward) and mental (inward), of a predominantly nonhuman environment, as the protagonist follows the spatial movement of pastoralism from civilization to nature” (Scheese, 2002, p. 4). This sort of writing is arguably a productive middle ground between autobiography and science writing, broadening the meaning of “life” (bios) in “life writing” (biography) through the exploration of the multimodal impacts that the nonhuman world has on the human. As Allister (2001) notes of these sorts of imbedded, more-than-human texts, “the author’s life is written on the land and all its inhabitants, human, animal, plant, and rock, and by turning terrain into text, geography into consciousness, these writers create a new and significant kind of life-writing” (p. 3). Just as with contemporary autoethnography, which seeks to embed the reader—via authorial perspective—in situated contexts of interpersonal and cultural exchange, so too do many nature writers attempt a similar type of literary transport into deep relationships with the more-than-human world.

There is some sparse precedent for autoethnographers writing in a mode that makes use of nature writing as a literary touchstone (Denzin, 2000; Manley, 2019). These examples are written by authors attempting to represent complex relationships between humans, nonhumans, and their environments, particularly in an era of escalating ecological crises, albeit often with less of an interest in undoing the centrality of humans. The future of posthumanist autoethnography, moving beyond an uncritical veneration of lyrical or pastoral representation of nature that can sometimes characterize the nature writing genre, aligns the enterprise with the “new nature writing” (Cowley, 2008; Smith, 2017). This is a mode of critical writing wherein writers “don’t simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodize and commune: they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect,” in response to the sense that “we are devouring the world, that there is simply no longer any natural landscape or ecosystem that is unchanged by humans” (Cowley, 2008, p. 9). The task of decentering—or minimizing—the self-knowing, willful, and humanist subject will lead researchers and practitioners, in the coming years, at least to the conclusion that “culture isn’t the opposite of nature. It’s the interface between us and the non-human world, our species semi-permeable membrane” (Mabey, 2007, p. 23), and likely beyond, into more radical, ethical, and interwoven perspectives.

ETHOLOGY

Ethology—the study of animal/nonhuman behavior—may seem an unlikely place to look for clues about posthumanist potentials for autoethnography. The history of ethological writing, however, is a hotbed of literary experimentation that points toward possible futures for autoethnographic research, particularly insofar as the future of autoethnography may demand deep insights into the lives and minds of our nonhuman social companions. We want to briefly highlight the foundational work of early ethological writing for the sake of demonstrating literary forms that grapple with the notion that nonhuman entities experience the world in radically distinct ways, rooted in their physiology. While contemporary “philosophical” ethology has taken this practice and expanded upon it (a topic covered later in this section), it is crucial to acknowledge that from the very outset of ethological study, there has been a place for the literary impulse.

Jakob von Uexküll, a Baltic German biologist, was preoccupied with understanding and documenting the biosemiotic “lifeworlds” (umwelten) of various animals. In his published works, he attempted to think, write, and transmit the world as it appeared to a given organism, based upon their sensory apparatuses and their attendant stimuli. In his most famous example—writing the experiential perspective of the blood-sucking tick—he imagined (deeply informed by biological research) a world that seemed
hopelessly limited in comparison to the lifeworld of humans: stripped of visual stimulus, devoid of color, a soundless void that could stretch on for nearly two decades. This tick-world is comprised of but three possible experiences: the smell of butyric acid (produced by mammal skin), the sensation of “collision” with an animal (as it drops from an overhanging plant), and temperature (as it seeks a place to find a blood meal) (von Uexküll, 2010). While this account may seem technical, it is important to remember that this writing was a revolution in treating animals as entities interpreting their portion of a shared world and thereby constituting their own subjective reality. As Sagan (2010) points out, there is a paradox in von Uexküll’s work, a kind of shamanic projection into what it is like “to be a blind, deaf tick waiting in darkness for an all-important whiff of butyric acid...” He tells us what it means to be a scallop, or what flowers look like to bees in a spring meadow” paired with the more quotidian style of a working naturalist, in that “he is simply saying that other animals perceive, that they too have worlds, and [that he is] trying to figure out what those worlds are like” (p. 20).

We refer to Von Uexküll’s work not necessarily because it provides specific formal guidance for a contemporary more-than-human autoethnographic writing style, but rather because it is an early experiment in the fusion of scientific, literary, and experiential writing. This is one of the features that will define a posthumanist autoethnography, whether the subjectsclass=“p"”>

If the goal of a posthumanist autoethnography is to unsettle the traditional humanist subject, and to suggest that autoethnography has a future outside of the literary and philosophical project of humanity, it may be that turning toward the naturecultures and lived experiences of animals (and living beings more generally) provides a productive rupture with traditional ethnographic discourses and theories of participant-observation (wherein the researcher is presumed to be a stable, recognizable, fully-human entity).

**INDIGENOUS WRITING**

Indigenous writing is critical to posthumanist autoethnography. In addition to writing styles and content, this section focuses on the ethics of inclusion in the posthumanist perspective. Required reading for anyone considering posthumanist autoethnography is Roseik, Snyder, and Pratt’s “The New Materialisms and Indigenous Theories of Non-Human Agency: Making the Case for Respectful Anti-Colonial Engagement” (2019) in which they explore Barad’s concept *agential realism* in relation to where it is found in Indigenous studies and traditions of thought (p. 2). Throughout their analysis, they demonstrate why it is absolutely essential that posthumanist autoethnographers do not rely solely on Western perspectives when theorizing about matrices of natureculture and offer the work of a number of Indigenous theorists for posthumanists.
to consider (e.g., Stacy Alaimo, Vine Deloria, Robert Bungee, Eva Marie Garroute, Michael Marker, and E. Richard Atleo) in service of an “inclusive politics of citation” (p. 4).

Ravenscroft aptly points out that writings on new materialism have willfully ignored Indigenous perspectives. Ravenscroft argues,

In Australian Indigenous materialisms—at least to my stranger’s eyes—“human” and “inhuman” are so extensively, elaborately, and constitutively entangled that the very terms human and inhuman, culture and nature, body and ground as conceived within a Western-oriented epistemology start to tremble, if not fall.

(p. 355)

She evidences this ignorance by pointing out that nowhere in Bennett’s Vibrant Matter (2009) is there a single mention “of the great First Nations intellectuals for whom all matter is indeed vital” (p. 356). Barad’s Posthumanist Performativity, Ravenscroft reveals, does not include “so much as a footnote to other thinking about human outside Barad’s own intellectual traditions and habitual ways of living” (p. 356).

Ravenscroft’s position is crucial to the study of posthumanist autoethnography in that it reveals how Western views of new materialism risk reinventing the Western humanist subject in its own image if Indigenous perspectives are willfully ignored. As Ravenscroft puts it,

The oral and written textualities composed by Australian Aboriginal people, who read and write relationship in ways that are among the most complex in the world and who theorize the “human” as deeply consubstantiated in relation to the “inhuman,” risk remaining outside the considerations of key new materialist theories as if Aboriginal people had never spoken.

(p. 356)

Ravenscroft’s goal in her essay is not to eliminate the Western subject’s work in the posthumanities in service of a cultural origin claim. Instead, it is to contend that it is both negligent and philosophically dishonest to willfully ignore written and spoken Indigenous perspectives that have theorized with these materialities as equipment for living, for millennia.

A significant part of human survival, as Silko (1997) points out, is in storytelling practices that function to demonstrate how “harmony and cooperation” with “animate and less animate” entities are vital to natural-cultural being. Whereas all posthumanist autoethnographers should not attempt to adopt Indigenous writing practices in their naturecultural forms, we certainly can learn from and about the writing processes that Indigenous people have been engaged in for millennia. These perspectives are central to the relational ethics of the posthumanist project.

**SCIENTIFIC WRITING**

The final dimension of posthumanist autoethnographic writing upon which we feel compelled to briefly touch is the question of the inclusion of “scientific” content and language in posthumanist autoethnographies. It is fair, we think, to suggest that the demands of posthumanist autoethnography—for situated specificity, thorough knowledge of the lives and existences of myriad nonhuman entities and agencies, and an appreciation for the complex inter-/intra-actions that give rise to our world—may lead authors into the realms of the so-called hard sciences: the life, physical, earth, social, and perhaps formal sciences. Much of the natural and technological world that radically shapes our entangled, collective lives lies beyond our ability to see or experience it firsthand. Whether it is a question of physical scale—minute viral infection or massive global weather patterns—or temporal scale—the approximately 330 picoseconds for a computer CPU to complete a processing cycle or the unfathomable deep time displayed by the starry sky each night—the world is full of wonders that escape us due to our physical and perceptual limitations. But these realities are impactful nonetheless, and it is only through the insights enabled by scientific perspectives that we can come to understand and appreciate these daily marvels. Posthumanist autoethnographies should not shy away from scientific content; it has been written that “we care only for what we love. We love only what we know” (Bouma-Prediger, 2001, p. 21), and scientific inquiry is one mode of increasing that knowledge. In the transdisciplinary future of posthumanist research, the sciences and the humanities will meet in the fertile ground of our lived experience.

The *language* of science, however, may have a more ambiguous place in autoethnography than the devotion to inquiry and discovery offered by science. In autoethnography, as in life, words matter, and the words of science often serve to advance a vision of the nonhuman world that is rooted in the logic of use-value. The mechanistic, instrumentalizing language of science—a lexicon of “species,” “populations,”
“environments,” “life histories,” and “objectivity,” to name a few key concepts—reduces the lives of individuals to statistical data-points, transforms beloved places into potential commodities, and endangers our sense of being deeply interwoven with the more-than-human world on a foundational, sociolinguistic, and conceptual level. An eloquent advocate of the profound need for a carefully chosen language, Wendell Berry (2000) writes

To defend what we love we need a particularizing language, for what we love we particularly know. The abstract, “objective,” impersonal, dispassionate language of science can, in fact, help us to know certain things, and to know some things with certainty. It can help us know, for instance, the value of species and of species diversity. But it cannot replace, and it cannot become, the language of familiarity, reverence, and affection by which things of value ultimately are protected.

(p. 41)

Autoethnographic writing thrives on precisely this particularizing language; it is perhaps the defining feature of the form, the means whereby authors seek to “show, rather than tell” about their lives, the cultures of which they are a part, and the interactions that give rise to and inform their experience. Indeed, the language used to represent our lives may be seen to arise within our lives, made possible via the contexts and conditions that we call home. To the extent that posthumanist autoethnography seeks to reject the instrumentalizing and mechanizing tendencies of contemporary anthropocentric humanist and capitalist essentialism, it must be filled with proper nouns, with rich descriptions of individual lives (as opposed to life histories) and places (as opposed to “ecosystems” or “environments”), as well as with stories of affinity and complexity across multispecies worlds that are fundamentally irreducible. Indeed, the very basic components of language—pronouns, for example—may be a mode of conceptual and linguistic intervention (Kimmerer, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The potential for posthumanist autoethnographies, for all of their transdisciplinary complexity and philosophical sophistication, remains aligned with one of the long-established primary goals of autoethnographic research: examining “the act of self-narrative and the tension between creativity and restraint associated with that act in various political contexts” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 1). As detailed in this chapter, posthumanist perspectives work to alter the understanding of the ontology of that self, the consequences and formal characteristics of that narration, and perhaps most importantly, the question of who or what “counts” in naturecultural political contexts that suddenly appear to contain far more actors and agents than was previously assumed. The posthumanist project, an effort at “repopulating the social sciences with nonhuman beings, and thus of shifting the focus away from the internal analysis of social conventions and institutions and toward the interactions of humans with (and between) animals, plants, physical processes, artifacts, images, and other forms of beings” (Descala, 2014, p. 268) means that the tools and techniques of the autoethnographer—participant observation, field notation, journaling, interviewing, scholarly research, creative writing, and all the rest—remain crucial to the task of writing thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973, p. 10; Goodall, 2001) of those interactions and the naturecultural life experiences that arise from them.

The promise of posthumanist autoethnographies is not simply that they might serve as a more complex or “accurate” version of existing autoethnographic writings. They are qualitatively different insofar as they look outside of established humanistic frames to become active modes of multispecies inquiry and intervention. The transdisciplinary aspiration toward posthumanist thick description serves an ethical purpose as well, as it reframes nonhuman lives and processes as narrative subjects (Plumwood, 2002). This task of reframing and recognizing “earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects is crucial for all ethical, collaborative and mutualistic projects” (Plumwood, 2002, p. 176), and it is a task for which autoethnography is uncommonly well suited. Writing from within lives of multispecies complexity, beyond the limitations of Western humanist thought, we may yet find new aesthetic and ethical modes to help us navigate the troubling times and conditions of uncertainty that seem to be approaching with increasing velocity. If nothing else, the posthumanist autoethnographic turn will remind us that we are—a “we” that extends far beyond the human—joined via our worldly fate and beholden to one another for the planet’s very survival.

NOTES

1. When we discuss ontology in a posthumanist framework, we are referring to the complicated nature of being as
relationally performative with nonhuman matter and matters of all kinds. That is, material existence is a set of active, repetitious matrices of copresence amongst all of natureculture. This idea is in contrast to humanist orientations toward ontology, wherein humans are presumed to maintain a privileged essence over nonhuman things and ostensibly exist in their own anthropocentric hierarchical realm.

2. This claim is in reference to the ways that Indigenous communities have been exploited by Western researchers for centuries. To engage in Indigenous methods means that one must be willing to develop a relational partnership with the communities whose cultural practices are being researched and to learn to conduct fieldwork differently than much Western training teaches. We recommend reading Margaret Kovach’s “Doing Indigenous Methodologies” as well as Robin Wall Kimmerer’s Braiding Sweetgrass (Kimmerer, 2013) as entry points into Indigenous methodologies.

REFERENCES


Goodall, H. L. (2001). Writing the new ethnography. Altamira.