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The essay in the Anthropocene: towards entangled nonfiction

Abstract:

The essay as a genre in the tradition of Montaigne stages the inadequacies of attempts to grasp at objects and what connects us to them and them to us and us to each other, and then slings away the safety wheels by wondering: who we are anyway? But what happens to the essay in the age of ‘hyperobjects’ (Morton 2013) like global warming? This essay examines how the anti-methodical techniques of the essay (personal, lyric) might be placed to respond to life in the Anthropocene, when the ‘I’ of the essayist finds itself in increasingly uncharted waters, when ‘nature’ itself, let alone ‘human nature’, begin to look like quaint conceptual knick-knacks, and when humans can no longer claim special ontological status over nonhumans. Philosophers, anthropologists, environmental humanists and other scholars are increasingly experimenting with modes of writing enmeshing scientific data and critical theory with affectively charged, embodied and intimate accounts. At the same time, essayists are rethinking the boundaries of the personal, and trying new ways to write from a standpoint rejecting human/nonhuman binaries. This essay seeks to draw connections across the disciplines, to invite further alliances between creative writers and fellow academics, as together we essay the Anthropocene with entangled nonfiction.

Biographical note:

David Carlin’s nonfiction books include *The Abyssinian Contortionist* (2015), *Our Father Who Wasn’t There* (2010), and edited collections *The Near and the Far* (2016) and *Performing Digital* (2015). His radiophonic feature/essay with Kyla Brettle, *Making Up: 11 Scenes from a Bangkok Hotel* (2015), won four Gold and Silver awards at the 2016 New York Festivals Awards; he also led the *Circus Oz Living Archive* ARC-funded project, co-curating the exhibition *Vault: the Nonstop Performing History of Circus Oz* (2014 Melbourne Festival). David is Vice-President of the international NonfictionNOW Conference, and Associate Professor, co-founder of the non/fictionLab and co-director of WrICE at RMIT University.

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Art is thought from the future ... If we want thought different from the present, then thought must veer towards art. To be a thing at all – a rock, a lizard, a human – is to be in a twist. How thought longs to twist and turn like the serpent poetry. (Morton 2016: 1)

This essay moves within the context of two parallel developments, which I am interested to bring together. The first, within the field of practice of creative writing, is the revitalization of the essay as a literary form in the past three decades, most noticeably in the United States but also in other sites. This new vitality has in part been driven by, and constitutes a critical response to, the explosive growth of the phenomenon known, somewhat awkwardly and fuzzily, as ‘creative nonfiction’. We have seen, since the 1990s, a new attention to the long and heterogeneous history of the essay through the anthologizing work of Philip Lopate and John D’Agata, the explosion of literary journals and imprints dedicated to the essay, and experiments in the personal and lyric essay, and in autocritical, hybrid, multi-modal and performance essay forms by diverse writers including Lia Purpura, Ander Monson, Geoff Dyer, Eula Biss, Claudia Rankine, Chris Kraus, Wayne Koestenbaum, Maggie Nelson, to name just a few. Linking these diverse essayistic practitioners is an attention to the poetics of the essay form, a commitment to artfulness in accounting for complicated material realities.

The other development, this time within the humanities and social sciences, is the growing momentum of ‘posthumanist’ theories and methods that make visible and disrupt the hitherto privileging in Western thought of human over nonhuman. ‘A posthumanist account’, writes the theorist Karen Barad, ‘calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of “human” and “nonhuman,” examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized’ (2003: 808).

Such accounts emerge in the urgency of the eco-political situation we find ourselves in, in response to which the old ‘progressive’, leftist projects have been unable to offer effective alternative directions to counter the globally dominant neoliberal worldview. This eco-political situation is the (too slowly) dawning awareness that we humans are entangled, along with everything else on the planet, in an era of geological time for which our species bears unique responsibility. This era, which has been dubbed the Anthropocene, is ‘a new epoch in Earth’s geological history, one characterised by the advent of the human species as a geological force’ (Scranton 2015: 121). Some argue that the new era should instead be called the ‘Capitalocene’ or ‘Plantationocene’, attributing the responsibility to particular economic systems of activity rather than to humans per se (Morton 2016: 14-24). However, what is not in doubt is the gathering storm of an uncanny ‘hyperobject’ (Morton 2013), namely: global warming, with its associated symptoms of human carelessness.

This essay considers how the essay as a genre might help in finding ways to account, ethically and affectively, for the situation of the Anthropocene. First it proposes an anti-definitive definition of the essay – anti-definitive as befits the definition. Then it briefly outlines some of the currents of the posthumanist twist that have lately animated the humanities and social sciences. Afterwards it attempts to trace and encourage an

intermingling of these two trajectories of the essay and the posthuman, in particular focused on the reading of posthumanist texts from the social sciences *as essays* bringing in the personal and the lyric. Here and there, applying the creative resources of the essayist together with the ethical orientation of the posthumanist, a domain of critical/creative practice opens up that we might call *entangled nonfiction*.

The essay

On the one side, the essay – a literary and extra-literary genre bent, since Montaigne, since Sei Shonagon (D’Agata 2009), on accounting, from the embodied and temporally located standpoint of a human, for a given mesh of things, internal and external, as they appear at a certain time and place to that person. The essayist accepts the mantle of being an amateur in knowledge practices, in the sense of not *professing to know*, as a professional or indeed a professor is commonly seen to do; addressing topic areas without claiming to be appropriately trained and accredited. The essayist approaches the thing that the essayist entangles with – for Montaigne it might be cannibals, sleep, perfumes or ‘a custom of the Isle of Cea’ (Montaigne 1993), for Maggie Nelson it might be the colour blue and heartache (Nelson 2009) or queer love and parenting (Nelson 2015) – through a canny method of stumbling, circling and getting lost. Where the professional (sociologist, footballer, dentist, curator and so on) is disciplined, works within and helps to perpetuate and reinforce the boundaries of disciplines, the essayist as amateur knowledge-collector makes attempts (*j’essai*), steps out onto stage without having his or her lines rehearsed.

The essay meanders like a river, says Paul Graham (2012: 171). And yet, like the water in a river, it is going somewhere. The track an essay makes is contingent on things it encounters along the way, just like the river might encounter mountains, dams, the sudden force of gravity, irrigation pipes. An essay discovers things it wasn’t looking for. It finds a logical destination it could never have predicted, as a river in Australia might find itself emptying into a vast salt lake and from there evaporating into drops of moisture blown away in the air.

According to Theodor Adorno’s diagnosis (1984: 152), the essay is ‘classed among the oddities.’ In his classic theoretical appraisal, ‘The Essay as Form’, Adorno mounts the case for the essay as a political antidote to positivism’s rigid separations between object and subject, art and science, form and content. Even now positivism, although long theoretically discredited, still remains a powerful influence on contemporary culture, as attests the experience of any schoolchild instructed in the boring doxa of ‘how to write an essay’ wherein we learn (and have to unlearn) that ‘presentation should be conventional, not demanded by the matter itself’ (Ibid.: 153). By contrast, the essay listens to what the matter demands. It foregoes the arrogance that *the matter* is something inert, fixed and passive, to be pinned down like a beautiful blue butterfly beneath glass.

Furthermore, as Adorno would have it, the essay offers, in its humility, a path between the twin peaks (phallogocentric crags?) of empiricism and rationalism, which have cast such deep shadows across Western thinking and culture. The essay constitutes a nonviolent assault on the systematic ‘method’ – as Adorno calls it, in the singular – that

holds such stern and serious sway in both empiricism and rationalism. This method, that of ‘scientific procedure’ (Ibid.: 157), is always ready to hand as a supposedly dispassionate tool under the control of the equally supposedly dispassionate (and implicitly white, male) subject. But the essay plays a different game, following its own, carnivalesque rules. The essay performs a different kind of thinking, one that takes note, above all, of movement: shifts, slides, ricochets and loops:

The essay does not obey the rules of the game of organized science and theory that, following Spinoza's principle, the order of things is identical with that of ideas. Since the airtight order of concepts is not identical with existence, the essay does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine – deeply rooted since Plato – that *the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy*; against that *ancient injustice toward the transitory* ... (Ibid.: 158, emphasis added)

More and related properties of the essay, as collected by Adorno: it admits the evidence of phantasies just as much as other experiences, histories and truths; it is out and proud with being fragmented and random, scoffing at epistemological totalities and certainties; it staggers into promiscuous complexities and worries at the cockiness of ‘the “understandable,” the notion of truth as a network of causes and effects’ (Ibid.: 162). In sum, and in keeping with its secretly revolutionary tendencies: ‘the essay shakes off the illusion of a simple, basically logical world that so perfectly suits the defense of the status quo’ (Ibid.: 163).

The essay, then, we might say: a citizen art of the attuned, un-disciplined amateur (cheerfully perverse and multi-coloured).

The posthuman

On the other side – well: vultures, albatrosses, glaciers, plastic bags, hormones, industrial feedlots and so on. And, not coincidentally, lists of heterogeneous things like that one. In other words, nonhuman objects brought to our attention as urgent ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 2010: 478) through diverse and interdisciplinary trajectories of research. Such thinking, coming after the impasses of postmodernism and post-structuralism, has appeared under various guises, including the posthuman (Braidotti 2013), the nonhuman turn (Grusin 2015), actor network theory (Latour 2005), environmental humanities (van Dooren 2014), new materialism (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), speculative realism (Harman 2010) and object-oriented ontology (Bryant 2011, Bogost 2012).

The posthuman brings to the fore certain questions. What is it about the way we humans conceive of ourselves as having a special and separate status within the world of things that reinforces the lack of care within our actions as to their effects on others, human and nonhuman? Could it be that the reification and, indeed, *naturalisation*, of concepts such as *nature*, the *environment* and *wilderness* might be merely the flipside of practices of exploitation and extraction? How can we recognise the problem in thinking that the appropriate response to destroying the planet, Easter Island style, is to ‘save’ the planet, as if it were a damsel in distress and we the hero; that this still preserves the hubristic, gendered vision of human exceptionalism that has brought about the problem in the

first place? How do we find other ways to reflect on where we are in the middle of things, human and nonhuman – sleeping children, trees, bacteria, rats, possums, inkjet printers, wifi signals, raindrops, things in every direction – and to cultivate such necessary arts as noticing (Tsing 2015), listening and attuning (Stewart 2011)?

One way to look at the posthuman turn is as the next phase in teasing out the faultlines within Western post-Enlightenment thought, after Marx revealed the workings of class and capital, Freud the shadows of the rational mind, feminist theorists the patriarchal biases of our cultures and societies, postcolonialists the deadly consequences for coloured bodies flowing from cultural fantasies of whiteness, and queer theorists the like bias towards heterosexual love and practices, and cisgendered and able bodies. Each of these other shifts involved an attempt to name and destabilise the position privileged within a given binary: rich over poor, conscious over unconscious, male over female, white over person of colour, cis/straight over LGBTQI. The posthuman turn identifies and addresses an even larger elephant in the room: the normative privileging of the human over the nonhuman in our thinking, and the consequences of ascribing qualities such as agency, memory and affect only to the human.

In situating the human within the bigger context of the more-than-human, we are called upon to change the ways we think and act; and moreover the stories that we tell and how we tell them. Because, to return us to the urgency of our situation, we need to recognise that '[o]nly-human stories will not serve anyone in a period shaped by escalating and mutually reinforcing processes of biosocial destruction – from mass extinction to climate change, from globalization to terrorism' (van Dooren et al. 2016: 3). Learning to take into account – to bring into our accounts, whatever form they take – the being, becoming and ongoing concerns of other species requires the cultivation of particular skills, as flagged above. As well as noticing, listening and attuning, we can add 'attentiveness' (van Dooren et al. 2016) and 'passionate immersion' (Tsing 2011: 2).

For creative writers of all genres, these skills will sound familiar. Indeed, for creative writers, such skills should be already finely honed, since empathy, observation and attention to detail have long been considered essential to a writer's craft. However, what the posthuman sensibility demands is to apply these skills with new sensory and affective range – to reconsider the limits of subjectivity, for instance, so that other species such as trees might be recognised as having 'ecologies of selves' (Kohn 2013: 134), or, going further, to consider what has been called 'the liveliness of the abiotic', since:

Many [abiotic] entities, from geologic formations and rivers to glaciers, might themselves be thought to have distinctive ways of life, histories, and patterns of becoming and entanglement, that is, ways of affecting and being affected ... (van Dooren, Kirksey and Munster 2016: 4)

In other words, it is not all about us.

(Non)contradiction and response-ability: the creative and the critical

In the posthuman context, it is widely argued that *critique* is no longer enough (if it ever

was): it is reductive and based on what the philosopher Timothy Morton calls The Law of Noncontradiction (Morton 2016). Morton argues provocatively that alongside making sense of things, we need to make (serious) nonsense of things. He traces the vector that has led to the industrial-scale mess of the world we are making (viz global warming, mass extinction, ecosystem collapses, etc.) back beyond the Industrial Revolution itself to the agrarian revolution in Mesopotamia 10,000 years ago. He coins the term *agrilogistics* to define a way of thinking and doing things based on the Law of Noncontradiction: the attempted eradication of differences, and artificial corralling of things into simplistic, non-contradictory categories. A is A and only A, B is B and only B. Agrilogistic logic works like this, for instance: all plants in a designated field must be wheat plants, identical and interchangeable. Anything else becomes a weed or a pest. All workers tilling said field are also to be considered interchangeable and identical, as units of labour. The wheat plants themselves exist only so as to produce the seedhusks for milling. The field is a blank slate that ‘can always be wiped clean’ (Morton 2016: 50) and given new ‘inputs’ (eg. barley, oats). The field, and everything else, exists only *for* the human who thinks of himself as moving towards ever-greater control over it, and them.

To operate outside the doomed cul de sac of agrilogistics, and its attendant practices of scientific critique, says Morton, ‘we are going to have think things as *weird*’ (Ibid.: 65). To make his case, Morton bends and twists established modes of academic writing, bringing in the informality and the declaration of personal, relational entanglement that have been the hallmarks of the essay genre since Montaigne. Morton writes with an urgent, hectic sense of excess, dragging his philosophising and scholarship towards the ludic unruliness of the essay. Here’s a taste of his style:

The media and the experts often use guilt as a way to force us to be ecological. How’s that been working out so far? It’s like making us guilty about sugar to force us not to eat it. Guilt is enjoyment upside-down. Don’t think of a pink elephant! Guilt is a for-its-own-sake that tries not to be so. (Ibid.: 132)

It is interesting to note that early essayists, in the 17th and 18th centuries, defined the genre of the essay in ways uncannily resonant with Morton’s proposition concerning ‘agrilogistics’. Celebrated English essayist and co-founder of *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison, turned to ecological metaphors in contrasting the form of the essay with more conventional ‘methodical discourse’:

Among my Daily-Papers which I bestow on the Public, there are some which are written with Regularity and Method, and other that run into *the Wildness of those Compositions which go by the Names of Essays* ... When I read an Author of Genius who writes without Method, I fancy myself *in a Wood* that abounds with a great many noble Objects, rising among one another in the greatest Confusion and Disorder. When I read a methodical Discourse, I am *in a regular Plantation* ... (2012: 12-13, emphasis added)

However, if the essay was, metaphorically, the place of wildness as distinct from the plantations made possible by slavery, it was nevertheless restricted in other ways. Another leading English essayist of the time, William Hazlitt, observed that the purview of the essay was defined solely by the ambit of the human, leaving the scientists,

philosophers and theologians to deal with matters beyond the human:

[The essay] does not treat of minerals or fossils, of the virtue of plants, or the influence of planets; it does not meddle with forms of belief, or systems of philosophy, nor launch into the world of spiritual existences; but it makes familiar with the world of men and women, records their actions, assigns their motives, exhibits their whims ... plays the whole game of human life before us, and by making us enlightened Spectators of its many-coloured scenes, enables us (if possible) to become tolerably reasonable agents in the one in which we have to perform a part. (2012: 16-17)

In sum, the essay tended towards wildness and against method, but restricted itself primarily or, for Hazlitt, exclusively, to the affairs and perspectives of humans. But the essay's techniques are well suited to a new context in which the human and nonhuman are considered as always already intermeshed.

Feminist scholar Donna Haraway is another who, I would say, is moving the social sciences towards creative writing and the essay in particular. Haraway invokes a need for methods of 'speculative fabulation', science fiction and speculative feminism alongside – or indeed, entangled with – 'science fact' (2016: 322). Like Morton, Haraway argues for new ways of thinking and of making accounts of a complex, entangled world (that is ours but not only ours). She calls for a mode she calls 'multispecies storytelling' that is 'about recuperation in complex histories that are as full of dying as of living, as full of endings, even genocides, as beginnings ... real stories that are also speculative fabulations and speculative realisms' (Ibid.: 450). Haraway's recent book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) attempts to enact this ethic of multispecies storytelling through playfully essayistic accounts of, for example, Pigeonblog, a collaboration between racing pigeons, artists, engineers and pigeon fanciers working on problems of air pollution in California (655); and the bitter entwining of Haraway's beloved, ageing dog's urinary tract problems with the fate of pregnant mares kept in cruel industrial feedlots to produce synthetic oestrogen.

For Haraway, the prime capacity we need to cultivate now, as writers and as citizens, is that of 'response-ability', an ability to be responsive in a profound sense to the concerns of species, things and individual 'critters' different to ourselves. Environmental humanist scholar Thom van Dooren shows a way to do this in his essay 'Pain of Extinction: The Death of a Vulture' (2010). Here he deliberately departs from the style of more conventional scientific reporting, which treats nonhuman species as non-individuated masses acted upon, for good or ill, by humans. Instead he slows down to depict the lived reality of how individual Indian vultures suffer and die painful deaths after consuming the poisonous flesh of cows dosed up by humans with the anti-inflammatory drug, diclofenac. Van Dooren tells the story of a vulture thus:

It will take two days for him to die. The food that he has just eaten has poisoned him. His kidneys will fail, causing a build up of uric acid crystals in his internal organs. These crystals will cut into and kill off the tissues that surround them, causing painful lesions, swelling and inflammation. He will likely get weaker as time goes by. Suffering from lethargy and depression, his neck will begin to droop in the manner characteristic of the sick and weak members of his kind. Eventually, dead or near to death, he will fall from his perch to the ground below. (2010: 271)

Likewise, Deborah Bird Rose, a scholarly colleague of van Dooren, adopted an experimental, affectively charged approach that strays radically from academic norms of human-centred ‘objectivity’ in writing her book *Wild Dog Dreaming* (2011), about her encounters with the dingoes of Australia. She describes her methodological rationale, which draws upon the concept of the ethical ‘face-to-face’ theorised by Levinas:

I wanted to keep to the forefront of my thinking, and of the reader’s experience, that the trigger for this work was an encounter [with the nonhuman] that demanded response. It was not about theory, or representations, or ontologies; it was about finding one’s self face-to-face with all these dead bodies ... (2013: 10)

Once again, we might observe hereabouts that creative writing of all kinds – including novels, poetry and creative nonfiction – is primed with techniques to enact Haraway’s ‘response-ability’ and Morton’s call for thinking things as weird. But what the essay as a genre offers that is distinctive in posthuman times of ‘staying with the trouble’ is the way it explicitly stages the interplay of fact and speculation, the confession of uncertainties and wonder looping through attempts at knowing. The essayist, tethered to the strangeness of the real, is accustomed to following the lines of dialogue among diverse things that arise as if either from within and/or outside the mind/body of the essayist. Now, in Anthropocene times, as the strangeness of the real is observed as rapidly accelerating, and scientific understanding of nonhuman materialities increasingly upend ‘modern’ ideological assumptions (see Latour 1993), essayists are called, more urgently than ever, to bear witness and attempt new accounts.

Entangled nonfiction: personal and lyric

I propose, simply enough, that the essay – that object I sought to define earlier as an anti-generic genre defined by its admission of the discontinuities and messiness of attempts by anyone to fully account for a situation, an experience, a topic at hand – presents itself as a particularly apt and handy tool for articulating the entanglement of humans and nonhumans, and for encouraging mutations within the viruses of language, desire and sensory perception that flow through and among us.

In teaching the essay as a literary genre to undergraduates, one has to disambiguate what is commonly described as the ‘personal essay’ from its authoritarian (and better known) opposite, the ‘formal essay’ (see Lopate 1995). The formal essay is a procedure for the packaging and expression of knowledge claims that schoolchildren learn, with strict rules of presentation and ‘evidence’. In its hardcore orthodox form, the formal essay decrees complete suppression of the essayist’s ‘I’ voice.

The personal essay, by contrast, celebrates and privileges the ‘I’ voice. ‘What do I know?’ asks Montaigne with gleeful abandon. I might know nothing; nevertheless what *do I* know? Maggie Nelson expresses the motivation of the personal essayist thus: ‘I am interested in offering up my experience and performing my particular manner of thinking for whatever they are worth’ (2015: 97). The personal essay is often accused of being confessional, solipsistic and/or narcissistic – and no doubt these are dangers faced by those entering the territory. However Nelson’s choice of the word *performing* is an important signal here. If the (personal) essay is seen as a performative rather than

a representational genre, then the position of the essayist's narrative voice becomes radically reimagined: the 'I' becomes another object entangled and in motion. The narrator's 'I' in this movement is no longer, then, a projection of the Cartesian subject who confidently affirms his (sic) existence through a non-contradictory assertion that *he thinks* (with a solid surety around both who *he* is and what *thinking* is). An essayist such as Nelson resists the trope of representation, wherein 'I' the essayist is implicitly figured as having a fixed or at the very least a continuous, contained and bounded identity, from which secure position he ('I') re-presents through language and other media whatever phenomena (each likewise figured as continuous, contained and bounded) he is attending to. Nelson, as in *The Argonauts* (2015), doubles up on herself, reading herself back to herself, revising and questioning her own claims. She sews other people's words (critics, philosophers) in amongst her own, signaling this gently with italics. She queers the essay at the same time as she steps away from flag-waving:

I don't want to represent anything. At the same time, every word that I write could be read as some kind of defense, or assertion of value, of whatever it is that I am, whatever viewpoint it is that I ostensibly have to offer, whatever I've lived. (Ibid.: 97)

Nelson's work pushes the personal essay towards openness to the posthuman; towards entangled nonfiction. Its approach invites interweaving with those critics and scholars in the humanities and social sciences attempting to find new modes of writing that *allow us to think things as weird*. They are approaching the territory of the essay, I would argue, as a space of possibility that is neither, on the one side, scientific critique nor, on the other, personal expression grounded in notions of individual psychology. In the Anthropocene, we find we can no longer ignore the entanglement of things at vastly divergent scales of time and space, from the lodging of particles of carbon dioxide in the stratosphere to mass movements of human refugees, to the subterranean action of fungi in ruined forests. Timothy Morton contends that this context of global warming as a hyperobject calls for techniques of writing that dislodge the intimate from the personal:

The thinking style (and thus the writing style) that this turn of events necessitates is one in which the normal certainties are inverted, or even dissolved. No longer are my intimate impressions 'personal' in the sense that they are 'merely mine' or 'subjective only': they are footprints of hyperobjects, distorted as they always must be by the entity in which they make their mark – that is, me. I become (and so do you) a litmus test of the time of hyperobjects. I am scooped out from the inside. (2013: 5)

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's writing pushes away from normative traditions of scholarly debate and critique towards annals of the affective and the fragmented in 'ordinary scenes of living'; in other words, towards what she calls *atmospheric attunement* (Stewart 2011). She asks:

What happens if we approach worlds not as the dead or reeling effects of distant systems but as lived affects with tempos, sensory knowledges, orientations, transmutations, habits, rogue force fields ... ? What might we do with the proliferation of little worlds of all kinds that form up around conditions, practices, manias, pacings, scenes of absorption, styles of living, forms of attachment (or detachment), identities, and imaginaries, or some publicly circulating strategy for self-transformation? (2011:

446)

In works including her unusual and beautiful book *Ordinary Affects* (2007), Stewart uses strategies we would recognise once again as familiar from creative writing, such as: *writing theory through stories, descriptive detours* – attempts to describe *things hanging in the air* (2011: 446-7). Stewart's work approaches from the direction of the social sciences what in creative writing has become known as the lyric essay, an offshoot of the personal essay tending towards experimental form and prose poetry, among whose more well-known practitioners and advocates include Lia Purpura and John D'Agata. An early manifesto for the lyric essay published in *Seneca Review* states: 'We turn to the artist to reconcoct meaning from the bombardments of experience, to shock, thrill, still the racket, and tether our attention' (Tall and D'Agata 1997). Stewart's approach is, in a sense, to push this further – not to seek for 'meaning', as in a discursive essence extracted from a situation, but rather to practice a form of writing (or other artful making) that attunes to, and attempts to describe, the shifting sensory currents and material flows that become a situation, and in doing so, *attending to what matters* (Stewart 2011: 450).

From the direction of creative writing comes powerful recent work like U.S. writer Nicole Walker's *Micrograms* (2016), a collection of micro-lyric essays on objects as diverse as 'Microsoccer', 'Microapocalypse' and 'Microtopography'. The technique of 'micro' allows Walker to zoom through vertiginous questions of scale, attending to all sorts of things along the way. A teenage moment in memory, a tree decomposing in a forest or an everyday scene at the supermarket will rustle against movements at nano and planetary scales, and all within the swirling hyperobject of ecological crisis (or as Walker calls it, 'you-know-who Voldemort' (2016: 31)). Walker brings a poet's tactics of rhythm and repetition to her lyric essays; everywhere she follows movements in the air, in bodies, in atmospheres: within and under and through, barreling along a road in a truck or falling into the internet, she reports from the frontline of everyday life in all its complex, looping weirdness. Everyday life: 'a plummet into a future that might have already disappeared' (Ibid.: 37). The wind blows through the essays in this collection, the rain comes down or – increasingly in Walker's ecologically stressed American West – fails to come. Nonhuman actors in these micro-scenes include the carbon inside a fallen tree, the warring micro-organisms in the human gut, the 'paths of planets: Venus, Mars, then Mercury' (Ibid.: 7), each one interacting with the other and the next, in a constant dance of composition. Like this, from the essay *Microbags*:

The [plastic] bags live in the garage. Unlike the refrigerator, the garage is not airtight. Sometimes, I leave the garage door open. Sometimes, there is a wind. Sometimes the wind comes in and steals the plastic bags as if the wind had some groceries to make precious. The wind takes the bags, plasters them across Ponderosa, wraps them around pinecone, flags them against a decaying stick. The stick isn't going anywhere now. The Ponderosas preserved. The pinecones, seeding inside of the bag, with the benefit of a dusty rain, grow their own tree inside the bag. Inside the bag is a perfect microcosm. A hundred million tiny planets floating across the state, blowing their forevers across the highway, through the forests, across the ocean, establishing themselves as normal as continental cash. (Ibid.: 63)

The playful attunement to the nonhuman in Walker's writing is influenced by other recent essay collections such as Alison Hawthorne Deming's *Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit* (2014) and Amy Leach's *Things That Are: Encounters with Plants, Stars and Animals* (2013). Such work can also be seen as a mode of contemporary nature writing in the long tradition of Thoreau, Macfarlane, Mabey, Lopez and Ehrlich, a tradition that is now reinventing itself when the distinctions between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, have been unsteadied.

Essays do not rely on overarching narratives but often stories at all scales are threaded through them; stories of encounters with and between objects (including humans) remembered and remembering, imagined and imagining, observed and observing, sensed and sensing. Let's return to environmental humanist Thom van Dooren and the birds that haunt him. His book *Flight Ways* (2014) is a sequence of essays each tasked with examining a bird species threatened, like the vultures, with extinction. Van Dooren seeks, like Stewart and like Walker in their own different ways, an attentiveness suffused with a modesty that acknowledges unknowable nonhuman perspectives, an ethically entangled witnessing. To understand and to be affected by the extinction of the albatross, van Dooren tells us, one need not only assess the data scientists have collected, but to 'stand in the presence' (2014: 612) of albatrosses at their nesting places in the vastness of the Pacific Ocean. In this way one can encounter *albatrosses* (no longer 'the albatross' as an abstraction) both as individual, breathing beings *and* as connected to a long lineage of beings flowing back through time, and forward – or not – into the future.

As we wonder what to do and how to respond amidst the planet's sixth great extinction event, the first such event caused by the actions of a single species, we need to attend to and make account of things at vastly different scales – in the case of the albatrosses, to the evolution of a species and the vast lifespan of toxic plastics in the ocean, at the same time as to the individual bird suffering and dying. Let's consider the essay, then, as an immersive, ethical, worldmaking activity. To essay is *to make worlds* in the sense that, as Donna Haraway puts it, worlds 'are not containers, they're patternings, risky co-makings, speculative fabulations' (2016: 544).

Onward

Until now, in this posthuman time of the Anthropocene, the essay has arguably been marginalised through not adhering to the dominant, prescribed values of coherence, completeness, non-contradiction – the 'scientific ethos of objectivity' (Duplessis 2012: 149). Only now is it becoming clear that the messy, multi-directional methods of the essay might be urgently needed to account for what is happening all around us.

My impulse here is to set the stage for further connections between contemporary currents of innovation in the essay genre in creative writing and experiments in writing by humanists and social scientists arising from the urgency of posthuman ethics. This is an invitation for us to learn from each other and to open dialogues with and around our writing, entwining our artistic and knowledge practices. It is an invitation to collaborate that recognises, as cultural anthropologist Anna Tsing puts it, that '[t]he evolution of our "selves" is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up

with others before we even begin any new collaboration' (2015: 29). Humans and nonhumans are entangled: we co-contaminate and together we dwell amidst the precarity and ruin of hyperobjects. Tsing again:

If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity, then it's time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices ... To listen and tell a rush of stories is a *method* ... Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter. (Ibid.: 34-37)

The essay, I am suggesting, offers itself as a way to collect and organise such *rushes of troubled stories*, a way to account for the mysterious, indeterminate encounters that move the essayist to write.

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