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Particular Resonances: A Review of Jonathan Wyatt's Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry

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Abstract

I want to start with talking a little about resonances.

To resonate means to meet. To vibrate *with* something in some way. Jonathan’s book is full of resonances. It is crafted of them. Resonances between disciplines; therapy, stand-up, writing. Resonances between characters in these worlds. Resonances between knowing, ethics, and the real. Resonances between affective states of *personing*– which isn’t quite the same as being human. And resonances between the author and the reader; Jonathan’s stories touch us with their humour, their caring for the process of inquiry, and their openness. He confesses things that I’m sure we can all relate to. Anyone who has stood on a stage will, for instance, – and spoiler alert – resonate when Jonathan dies.

Keywords

Creative-Relational Inquiry, Theory, Writing As Inquiry, Animism

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Particular Resonances: A Review of Jonathan Wyatt's *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry*

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I want to start with talking a little about resonances.

To resonate means to meet. To vibrate with something in some way. Jonathan's book is full of resonances. It is crafted of them. Resonances between disciplines; therapy, stand-up, writing. Resonances between characters in these worlds. Resonances between knowing, ethics, and the real. Resonances between affective states of personing – which isn't quite the same as being human. And resonances between the author and the reader; Jonathan's stories touch us with their humour, their caring for the process of inquiry, and their openness. He confesses things that I'm sure we can all relate to. Anyone who has stood on a stage will, for instance, – and spoiler alert – resonate when Jonathan dies. Keywords: Creative-Relational Inquiry, Theory, Writing As Inquiry, Animism

When I think of resonances, I think of the vibrational that moves *through*. Bodies *are* separate in this book, bodies of writing, aging bodies, bodies of land, rooms as bodies, but there is nothing quite in between them. Rather, they resonate together. To remove the between – the space that divides in our representations of the world – whilst retaining the material presence of difference, is quite a writing feat. And this feat is partly accomplished through stories, and Jonathan's careful consideration of theory. Jonathan's book is full of theory. It creeps under every description, lurking in stories of family, of loss, of shame, and of joy. But also, and especially, in the vitality of the ordinary.

The ordinary. Jonathan points us to Bettie St. Pierre's (1997) notion of the "physicality of theorising" when he describes Karl, a client of his, walking his ordinary streets:

Jonathan writes:

He tells me he lets the walk take control from the outset.

"When I'm on the pavement I turn whichever way draws me and I see where the walk leads. I go in the direction that feels right. It's a gesture to adventure".

"A gesture to adventure", he repeats. "See what I did there?".

"I do indeed".

"An enticement to excitement. A quest for zest. A run for fun".

Then he adds:

"No, that one doesn't work, does it? I don't run, for a start. Just amble. Peramble. Perambulate".

His playfulness wanders around the room, a curious and distracting child. I take us back to where he was. "You say it's all familiar, that you know every

pavement slab, every garden, every tasteless Christmas house-owner. So, how does that feel like zest and excitement. Tell me more about the adventure”.

He looks down at his hands, turning them over, this way and that. Like he’s looking for something. I feel my invitation has been too abrupt, too intrusive, too dull.

Karl seems stalled but he lifts up his head and continues, despite my clumsiness. “I never know what will catch me that time”, stabbing a finger onto the other palm for emphasis, “on that particular walk. I don’t know what window, what tree, whose front door. That’s where the adventure is, I suppose. But I agree, it’s not adventure, and the rest of it is dull. I know. I know. I was being ironic”.

He’s sad. Deflated. His voice diminished. (Wyatt, 2018, pp. 115-116)

But, is Karl being ironic? Was he being ironic from the outset? Did something happen in Jonathan’s interjection that moved Karl to claim irony? Could he not find what he was looking for, beneath his hands? Some theory to anchor his gesture to adventure? Instead he claims irony to escape the perceived silliness of adventure in the ordinary. Does Karl feel the need to be “grown up” against a pull for childlike wonder? I don’t know. These are my resonances.

Karl’s story leads me to a particular resonance that I felt in my reading of this book: That of the animistic.

Following the 19th century anthropological theorist, Edward Tylor (1871), Animism has historically been conceived as a naïve religious perspective. Often associated with “nature”; animism has been described as people believing in spirits hiding in rocks, trees, and water. It has been thought of as superstitious and as relying on an irrational belief in magic. But contemporary takes on animism instead describe long lived and sophisticated ways of being in the world. Ways of becoming with the world. In her paper “animism revisited” Nurit Bird-David describes what she calls the “relational epistemology” of the Nayaka people of southern India. She writes of them:

Their attention is educated to dwell on events. They are attentive to the changes of things in the world in relation to changes in themselves. As they move and act in the forest, they pick up information about the relative variances in the flux of the interrelatedness between themselves and other things against relative invariances. (Bird-David, 1999, p. 74)

Bird-David compares this relational understanding with dominant globalized ways of knowing, in which to understand the tree, we tend to fragment it, to analyse it, to understand *what* the tree is. Even if the tree remains standing as we investigate it, we none-the-less cut it out from ourselves and categorise it. We cut it down, so to speak. This approach has nothing to do with the production of action, or ethics, but with the supposed creation of abstract knowledge. Bird-David writes:

If “cutting trees into parts” epitomizes the modernist epistemology, “talking with trees,” I argue, epitomizes Nayaka animistic epistemology. “Talking” is short-hand for a two-way responsive relatedness with a tree— rather than “speaking” one-way to it, as if it could listen and understand. “Talking with” stands for attentiveness to variances and invariances in behavior and response of things in states of relatedness and for getting to know such things as they change through the vicissitudes over time of the engagement with them. To

“talk with a tree”—rather than “cut it down”—is to perceive what it does as one acts towards it, being aware concurrently of changes in oneself and the tree. It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibility. (Bird-David, 1999, p. 77)

For me, the Nayaka understanding talks of a way of living *as* relational-inquiry; Here the everyday can be full of wonder, and Karl might find philosophical support for his “gesture to adventure.”

If being educated to dwell on events, as Bird-David puts it, epitomizes the Nayaka way of becoming with the world, then being educated to “person” the world might well describe the ontology of the Ojibwe of North America. The anthropologist Alfred Irving Hallowell described the Ojibwa as living in a world full of people, only some of whom are human (1960). To people the world in this way is not to anthropomorphise, as the act of anthropomorphication can only be accomplished when you believe in a concrete human-nature divide. The Ojibwe do not think the objects about them have “human qualities,” they have (perhaps had) no concept of the western invention of the enlightenment human subject as distinct from the relational, the personable.

I feel a resonance with Hallowell’s description of the Ojibwe when Jonathan writes, in his second interval, of contemporary theory’s suspicion of the human centeredness of the personal (via Deleuze and Guattari, new materialisms, and affect theory). Jonathan makes a case—a tentative, exploratory case—for the personal as the “heart” of creative-relational inquiry. He calls on Kottman, in turn talking of Caverero, to explain that the self is “an existence that has not been reduced to an essence, a ‘who’ that has not been distilled into the ‘what’.” This “what,” I assume, is the unitary human subject. Creative-relational inquiry might be a call for a personable posthumanism. The person as haecceity, as thisness.

Stories are of course central to this personable ontological orientation. Tim Ingold, another anthropologist, has pointed to the Koyukon of Alaska as existing in an ontological world of immanence, where reality is always on the cusp of becoming (2011). In this world animals and objects are descriptions, riddles and stories, never held still with a noun. The spotted sand piper becomes “flutters around the water’s edge,” and the vanishing red fox becomes “far away yonder there appears a flash of fire.” Ingold argues that this mode of being imbues the Koyukon with a sense of relational care to existence. In resonance with Jonathan’s book, creativity in the affective relational *does* things. It offers affective encounters in life that prescribe the possible – the virtual.

Ingold (2011) also argues that stories lie on methodologically firmer ground than methods of classificatory analysis. Classification categorizes a thing on the basis of intrinsic characteristics, independent of the context in which it is constituted, the relations that have immediately gone before it, currently surround it or will follow it. Ingold (2011, p.160) writes:

In a story, by contrast, it is precisely by this context and these relations that every element is identified and positioned (Ingold 2007a, p. 90). Thus *stories always, and inevitably, draw together what classifications split apart.* (Ingold, 2011, p. 160; emphasis in original)

In drawing on these anthropological accounts of animism I am aware of the outsider framing I am setting up. I am particularly aware of my ignorance of existing indigenous methodologies and their ontological orientations. Scholars (for instance Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie, 2014, and recently Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt, 2019) have warned particularly

against new materialist inquiry enacting colonialism. An extractive approach that mines indigenous worldviews through anthropology may well sail close, even into, these colonial waters.

A better way of proceeding may be to ask what alternative ways of knowing exist from this place that we might think with (whilst also being wary of any link to indigenous nationalism)? Jonathan provides a direction here when, in Chapter 12, he calls upon the Cailleach to disrupt his work. The Cailleach, the Celtic giant Goddess of storms and winter, of deer herds and moorland, who formed the mountains as she strode the land, is with Jonathan and his writing. Jonathan calls her to his writing. He writes:

When the Cailleach blows across the Clyde Estuary to Arran, when she howls into my renderings of the stories of both Rafa and me and the Stand, she disrupts, folding and rolling the water into land, land into water, stage into audience, therapy into stand-up into writing, Rafa into Sarah into me into beers held in clenched fingers, the raging power of the storm goddess forging what Barad calls, trans/materialities.

Jonathan is careful to spell out the political “mutual indebtedness” in this co-creation. It is the Cailleach that does this work with him in his writing. Jonathan thinks with her, not with theory in this case, but with her stories, with her person, with her more than human powers which evoke a speculative inquiry, a magical realist inquiry. He puts this to work in his writing and it leads me to wonder about other stories from these shores, other ontologies, that might be thought with, that might be resonated with.

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