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We are All Ships Coming Home to Ourselves

An Autoethnographic Poem in Two Parts

Jana's Ship Comes Home

“We tell about our lives in story form. Stories also form us. They are important for the formation of our identity and they help us to know who we are. We learn from stories and stories help us to interpret life. Through stories we enter the meaning making of others” (Bruce, 2008, p. 323)

Empirically speaking, we are made of star stuff. Why aren't we talking more about that?

One year ago, after I had come out to only one person, and hardly, even, to myself, I read this book that a friend had loaned me. When I had so many other things I should have been doing. When I should have been reading for class. When I had at least three final papers due. When I should have been sleeping. My friend had handed *The Argonauts* to me at least a month prior, but after reading the first few paragraphs I realized I was not yet ready, so I set it down. The book had been staring at me from my nightstand for weeks and I figured I should probably return it soon; *she must need this for her final papers*, I thought. So, I picked it up and started reading and I could not put it down. I read clear through the night. I devoured it in a way I had not done with a book in years. And I sobbed. The whole way through. I took small breaks to catch my breath, to wipe my tears, and to take pictures of meaningful passages because I could not write in a borrowed book. I have a whole album of those photos still on my phone. I texted my best friend and told him: “it’s hitting so close and so hard and I can’t stop crying, but I can’t stop reading” and he promised me that these were “good things, though;” that they meant I was

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working through *it*. I told him I just had to trust him on that and I did. “We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something”ⁱ

On New Year’s Day, about a month later, I stayed in bed reading articles to try to help me come to terms with my queerness, narratives that I desperately hoped I would see myself (a late 20-something who had never realized she was or even could be queer) in, stories that would convince me to be “out.” On that day, I read a piece by Katherine Bernardⁱⁱ) called “Not Knowing,” in which they write through their experience of reading Nelson’s *The Argonauts*. At one point, Bernard recalls a friend who came out via a detailed email to friends:

She writes, ‘For a splinter to be removed, the skin must soften around it. And I guess it took me till I was thirty to actually soften and sit with myself long enough to understand what was bringing me that pain.’ I am so happy she is not in pain, or the same kind of pain. But I think what I’ve learned is there’s a plank lodged in us and it’s being alive.

It took me until almost thirty to understand what was bringing me my pain and Nelson’s *Argonauts* helped me see it and also to release it. But it was not *just* Nelson. It was also who she refers to as the “many gendered-mothers of my heart.”ⁱⁱⁱ Nicolazzo, Spade, Ahmed, Zajicek Sargent, Patton-Davis, Cisneros, Bidwell-Smith^{iv}—authors, theorists, scholars, friends, kin.

Nelson’s citational practice, a nearly effortless weaving of theorists, poets, artists, scholars, into her own narrative, rests on a deep and strong lineage of maternal figures who help her (and subsequently her readers) understand the pain of queer, of memoir, or motherhood, of being. I’d argue too that *The Argonauts* is what Clare Hemming’s^v would refer to as a progress narrative almost especially because of the way she synthesizes the theoretical and the personal. Brene Brown^{vi} says that for people with a trauma history, vulnerability has never been safe, but

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“by claiming one’s voice it liberates our consciousness, helps us to define ourselves, and to begin to see where others and ourselves need to make changes”^{vii}

Perhaps, even, the whole novel is a love letter; to her many-gendered mothers, to Harry, her partner, to Iggy, her son, to herself:

But whatever I am, or have since become, I know now that slipperiness isn’t all of it....The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margins, return to the same themes in one’s work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again—not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life.^{viii}

These revisitations; are they grief, are they undoing, are they loss?

“I think sometimes people misunderstand my interest in loss. What interests me, the place that I’m curious about, is how do we respond to loss? And even within that, I’m particularly interested in people who use incredible will and deliberateness and imagination to kind of re-conceive or reconstruct a coherent sense of self in the face of this loss^{ix}”

Bernard ends her review/reading of the novel: “the book is a valve: where you gush, you’re queer. We all have it: the shifting, bright not knowing.”^x But in that moment, I *did* know. And now, “I understand what it is to hold the position, to be held by it.”^{xi} I hold my queerness, but I am also held by it. Sometimes in heavy and persistent ways, sometimes very little, always in my work. “Turning straight means turning away from a queer object choice, which registers as grief before the grief can be covered over. She desperately and rather badly performs heterosexuality

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as a defense against becoming queer and as a way of not being undone by the loss of this becoming. To do straightness is not to be undone by giving up queer love.”^{xii}

In the end, really, we are all ships coming home to ourselves. Growing and re-building ourselves over and over again:

Sometimes one has to know something many times over. Sometimes one forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets, and then remembers. And then forgets again.

As with knowledge, so too, with presence.^{xiii}

The many-gendered mothers of my heart helped me see that, continue to help me see that, and now I am on my way to re-building and coming home to myself again. Again and again and again.

The moment of origin. The moment we come into ourselves, or know our self, or become self. What if the moment of origin is actually an undoing? Not in that we have undone our self or been shattered before we come anew. But that we have been undone and only within or in spite of that undoing do we emerge, with new, renewed, radical potential for possibilities, for futures. To be queer is to be broken, fractured, undone; “queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troublant.”^{xiv}. When the world undoes us, we show up anyway; “those who have been undone by suffering can be the agents of ethical transformation.”^{xv}

But the world is not meant for us—the center is not the margins^{xvi} and “for those who have existed too long on the margins, life has never been safe or comfortable.”^{xvii} How do we reconcile our marginalization; our undoing by the majority? Do we keep to the margins and build or rebuild ourselves there? Do we conform and move back towards the center?

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Against assimilation, one could insist that the dominant culture assimilate to queer culture, not the other way around. Straight culture has already learned much from queers, and it shouldn't stop now. In particular, it needs to learn a new standard of dignity, and it won't do this as long as gay people think that their "acceptance" needs to be won on the terms of straight culture's politics of shame.^{xviii}

Walking the world after our undoing, after we have become our queer self, could be our death march, but we go in anyway. We are resilient because we have to be. We risk our safety just by being, just by loving. But I am enamored of the way we hold space for each other and show up for one another. How we act on our love. How we care for each other; mind, body, soul, spirit; "fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other."^{xix} Queer kin: thank you for being, for breathing, for loving, for fighting, for your honesty, for your bravery. Please know that I love you with my whole, cracked open heart.

On being undone...and becoming anyway.

on being undone

the self as an undoing

to be liberated, to be renewed.

undoing oneself

being undone as a becoming

the push and pull of it.

the breathe in, push out of it

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to have without holding
to hold the position, to be held by it
beholding and being beheld
to have and not to hold
to revisit. to re-conceive. to reconstruct.
on being undone
and becoming anyway

Barbara's Ship Sets Sail

The autoethnographic, autoerotic, autobiographical queer love is not only a ship coming home for queer-identified folks, it is also an undoing of the hetero/sexist moorings that have kept my own ship from sailing. “The slightest sign of recognition from another at least confirms one’s presence in *his* world. (emphasis in original)”^{xx} The presence of queerness in my own life is a direct recognition of the queerness of others – a presence that does not mill around external to my sense of me-ness and instead lingers internal to an un-doing of self-identified hetero/sexism. For me, “I am located in a version of truth whose engines are so far hidden from view that they are silent” only to become voiced as they reverberate with the new-found sounds of others.^{xxi} My own hetero/sexist identity cannot stand in the pretense of its own vacuum. It, too, must be undone, in order to set sail.

It was night, at least it felt like night at the end of a day. I was a stranger in this country. Was I fifteen or had I just turned sixteen? What happened before? What happened after? I can’t even

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locate the assault in my memory of the day. It stands alone as if it happened in a world all its own. I don't remember the end and I don't remember the beginning.

It was a public place. I was surrounded mostly by people I did not know. Sitting at a booth. Sipping a coke. Or was it tea? I can't remember.

I must have been wearing a skirt. It would have been impossible otherwise. Or was I wearing shorts?^{xxii} I just can't quite wrap my memory around the mechanics of it.

Sounds all around. People laughing. Talking. Music not so faintly covering all manner of noise. Reverberations. Were those my knees, my vagina, or the silent poundings within my soul? There were four of us at our table. Speaking English. Before I knew what was happening his fingers were inside me. Inside me. Where I'd never dared to take myself. No eye contact. No consent. What was happening above the table seemed "normal." What was happening below the table was bewildering for me. Why? What could I do? The undoing of my own bodily agency. A man. Older than me, but not by much. I think. How had his fingers invaded me so? How had I not protected myself? How come I did not know what to do?

Above the table – laughing and talking, I suppose. I can't remember. What I do remember is being trapped in an awful liminal space between an awareness of something happening to me and an inability to reclaim my own autonomy and power. My body was not my own. Had it ever been? If I could not summon it to act at such moments, did any action I had ever taken really matter?

My body was responding. Never had I been touched *there*, wherever *there* was. I was learning things about my vagina at someone else's behest and under someone else's control. I didn't like it. I felt myself go flush. I felt tingly. What was happening and how could I get it to stop? Eventually I came, though this word was not in my vocabulary of the time. I felt manipulated into a

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bodily response of the most intimate kind and into the vulnerability of embodied sexualized feeling without my permission. The mind, the soul, the spirit had not agreed. My body mimicked pleasure, but pleasure was not to be had. My foreign-exchange, older sister, sitting on the other side of the table, noticed something. “A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way to inhabit the world that gives ‘support’ to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place. The table becomes queer when it provides such support.”^{xxiii} Thank God. She pierced through my liminal unknowing, the stopped time of my bodily innocence, and said, “Are you okay, Barbie?” That is the last thing I remember. The whole experience was encased between somehow finding myself at a table next to a guy whose fingers took ownership of the crevices I had not yet claimed for myself AND that question: Are you okay?

For decades, this memory lurked behind aspects of my “self” that were ascribed to my personality. For decades, I didn’t really acknowledge having been very affected by the experience. I downplayed it. I didn’t consider it enough of a violation to report. I was/am pretty sure in my own sense of the story that he, that guy, that stranger who sat beside me for a time-stopping set of minutes, didn’t think he was hurting me. I kept assessing MY experience as if its validity was a function of what I presumed to be HIS innocent perspective and hands. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. How *did I come* to privilege some idea about his experience over my own? Could I know myself and claim my own experience without taking HIM into account? “Are you okay, Barbie?” I ask myself. “[T]he distance between one’s experience and one’s perceptions of it become enlarged by a vast interpretive network; if our direct experience contradicts its interpretation by this ubiquitous cultural network, the experience must be denied,”^{xxiv}

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It took a long time for me to decide my body could be known by me, without the aid of an other. This form of intimate knowledge of one's own body is love for me. His claiming of my body as his own, is the deep message of patriarchy and heterosexism in my own life and experience. Where is the love in that? There can be no admission of love in the absence of my own bodily autonomy.

Haraway^{xxv} has alerted us to the challenge of liberating our own view of our bodies from the technologies and gaze of the other, in this case the medical doctor.

“Armed with a gynecological speculum, a mirror, a flashlight, and—most of all—each other in a consciousness-raising group, women ritually opened their bodies to their own literal view....More than a little amnesiac about how colonial travel narratives work, we peered inside our vaginas toward the distant cervix and said something like, ‘Land ho!’ We have discovered ourselves and claim the new territory for women. In the context of the whole orthodox history of Western philosophy and technology—visually self-possessed sexual and generative organs made potent tropes for the reclaimed feminist self. We thought we had our eyes on the prize.”

Kathy Davis draws on Haraway's insights to describe a project that takes “the female body as a starting point for understanding the condition of being a woman in a social order hierarchically organized by gender and other intersecting categories of inequality” with aspects of anatomy, physiology, experience, and culture that more or less devalues femininity.^{xxvi}

Lesbian-feminism helped free me from the oppressive self-involved predatory patriarchy through which my very body was being claimed. “For a woman to be lesbian in a male-supremacist,

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capitalistic, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture such as that of North America, is an act of resistance.”^{xxvii}

“The woman who embraces lesbianism as an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny must also identify with the worldwide struggle of all women to end male-supremacist tyranny at all levels. As far as I am concerned, any woman who calls herself a feminist must commit herself to the liberation of *all* women from *coerced* heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue. The lesbian-feminist struggles for the liberation of all people from patriarchal domination through heterosexism and for the transformation of all socio-political structures, systems, and relationships that have been degraded and corrupted under centuries of male domination.”^{xxviii}

Lesbian love invites all women to take their bodily experiences seriously as a valuable source of knowledge. “Experiences are also treated as a necessary resource for interrogating cultural understandings that deny, distort, or misrepresent women’s bodies and the circumstances and conditions of their embodied lives.”^{xxix} It is argued that as women gain control over their bodies, they gain control over their lives.

It is queer love that set me on the path of recognizing patriarchal and hetero/sexist intrusions into my sense of self and into my capacity for self-love. Whispered into my frozen experience is a NO so silent that it’s embodied motionless belied the quivering surprise of an intruder. Silent NO more, so that I might KNOW more of love. I have a vague memory of a Gloria Steinem speech where she argued that egalitarian heterosexual love and romance was nearly impossible under

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patriarchy. Certainly, I had to be loosed from heterosexism-as-patriarchy in order to love. And now, that love, is queer.

NO

No.

Penetration.

No.

Flush.

No.

Motion.

No.

Thought.

My body.

His hands.

His knowing.

My experience.

Left.

In the Silence of Hetersexist Patriarchy.

Set me free.

Unmoor my self-knowing from his hands.

Set sail.

Say yes to love

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Queered by my own experience.

Are you okay, Barbie?

Autoethnographic Queerings of Ethnographies of Love

How are these autonomous autoethnographic writings of love relevant for ethnography? With contested ideas about what constitutes autoethnography, Tami Spry suggested it is a “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self and other in social context.”^{xxx} For Stacy Jones, autoethnography reveals the inevitable entanglement of the personal and the political holding out the possibility of changing both.^{xxxi} “Individual women’s subjective accounts of their experiences and how they affect their everyday practices need to be linked to a critical interrogation of the cultural discourses, institutional arrangements, and geopolitical contexts in which these accounts are invariably embedded and which give meaning to them.”^{xxxii}

But, we would like to queer that orientation. Firstly, “Ethnography is not an innocent practice.”^{xxxiii} Ethnographic knowledge claims/production are always contextual and perspectival.^{xxxiv} Our experiences are “epistemologically indispensable” but “never epistemologically self-sufficient”^{xxxv} as a form of knowledge. We think that ethnographic studies of love, must always, at least in part, be fluidly and fluently autoethnographic. Our understanding of love must always begin with our understanding of love in, through, for, and with ourselves, our bodies. The context of love always involves the contexts of selves and bodies. Bringing that full circle, Denzin^{xxxvi} joins Pelias’s description of autoethnography^{xxxvii} as a “methodology of the heart” wherein we might hope “to learn how to love, to forgive, to heal, and to move forward.”^{xxxviii}

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Secondly, we have also intended to queer our mainstream notions of writing love through our relationships with other scholars. In our citational practices we have taken up an intimate relationship with our co-author scholars such that our experiences are voiced into concert with and through the metaphors, ideas, and experiences of those who have written before us. The use of these quotes, intertwined with our own stories, brings a dynamic sense of autonomy and authorship which is neither fully separated by the social milieu nor entirely dictated by it. These citational practices queer our traditional ways of separating our self-intimacy from our ethnographies. Love invites new relationships of intimacy in the practice of our liberatory research.

“Consciousness of oppression is not only a reaction to (fight against) oppression. It is also the whole conceptual reevaluation of the social world, its whole reorganization with new concepts, from the point of view of oppression.”^{xxxix} It’s queer.

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ⁱ Butler, *Violence, mourning, politics*, 13.

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- ii Bernard, *Not Knowing*.
- iii Nelson, *The argonauts*, 105.
- iv These scholars, theorists, poets, memoirists, teachers, best friends, colleagues are the lineage from which I come and have come to be: Z Nicolazzo, Ph.D., Dean Spade Sara Ahmed, Ph.D., John Zajicek, Elizabeth Sargent, Lori Patton-Davis, Ph.D., Sandra Cisneros, Claire Bidwell-Smith. This list of “many gendered-mothers” is inspired by Dana Ward’s poem “A Kentucky of Mothers”
- v Hemmings, *Why stories matter*.
- vi Brown, *The Power Of Vulnerability*.
- vii Bruce, *Narrative Inquiry*.
- viii Nelson, *The argonauts*, 113
- ix Krauss, *Character Approved*.
- x Bernard, *Not Knowing*.
- xi Nelson, *The argonauts*, 21.
- xii Ahmed, *The Promise Of Happiness*, 104.
- xiii Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 18-9.
- xiv Sedgwick, *Tendencies*. xii.
- xv Ahmed, *The Promise Of Happiness*, 216.
- xvi Spivak is also instructive on centers and margins.
- xvii Ng, *A Woman out of Control*, 201.
- xviii Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*, 74.
- xix Ahmed, *Selfcare As Warfare*.
- xx Laing, *The Self and Others*, 82.
- xxi Clough, *Narratives and Fictions*, 88.
- xxii Victim-blaming sexual violence myths include a trope “What she was wearing” which many of us are taught to think through, even with respect to our own assault experiences. See Phipps, A. 2014. *The Politics of the Body*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- xxiii Ahmed, *Orientations*, 570.
- xxiv Firestone, *The Culture of Romance*, 125.
- xxv Haraway, *The virtual Speculum*, 67.
- xxvi Davis, *Reclaiming Women’s Bodies*, 126.
- xxvii Clarke, *Lesbianism*, 128.
- xxviii Clarke, *Lesbianism*, 129.
- xxix Davis, *Reclaiming Women’s Bodies*, 127.
- xxx Spry, *Performing Autoethnography*, 710.
- xxxi Jones, *Autoethnography*.
- xxxii Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders*, 131.
- xxxiii Denzin, *Analytic Autoethnography*, 422.
- xxxiv Dennis writing as Korth, *Choice, Necessity, or Narcissism*.
- xxxv Alcoff, *Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory*, 45.
- xxxvi Denzin, *Analytic Autoethnography*, 423.
- xxxvii Pelias, *A Methodology of the Heart*.
- xxxviii Denzin, *Analytic Autoethnography*, 423.
- xxxix Wittig, *One is not Born a Woman*, 52.