diffracting autotheory

What I want to offer here increasingly seems to me like a statement about the ordinariness of the interactions and encounters that constitute our subjectivity. The line goes something like this, "Who we are (becoming) cannot be thought apart from what we encounter." Affect theory has been helpful for me in thinking about the doubleness of interactivity–the way that we are reshaped by and reshape what we encounter. The encounter, relationality, has become the primary focus for imagining how we might reconceive subjectivity in a world haunted by ecological, economic, and political catastrophe.

These encounters always begin in the middle.

I want to stitch together some connective tissue among posthumanism, affect theory, and autotheory to make a case for understanding these discourses as co-conspirators in reimagining and reexperiencing subjectivity and embodiment. Here, Donna Haraway asks us to consider the various nonhuman "actants" that surround us and attend to the "networking and unequal collectives" we perhaps already coconstitute or, at least, co-inhabit. The political or ethical valence of Haraway's work resides in taking responsibility for those human and nonhuman actants that habituated and humanist modes of thought obfuscate or dismiss. Erin Manning, on the other hand, draws our attention immediately to the political, seeing the interstitial as a space for "new diagrams of life-living to be drawn." Both Haraway and Manning's writing constitute what seem to me precisely these new diagrams. The form(s) their arguments take elude a certain positivist capture, and instead continuously gesture towards something emerging from within their work.

But I want to begin somewhere else. Let's start in the middle.

"To read diffractively implies a certain *suddenness*," suggests Iris van der Tuin, borrowing the term of Haraway and Karen Barad (van der Tuin 112). We've probably all felt this sudden surge–a transversal connection made when reading because it resonates with or amplifies something we already know. Alternatively, the impact of what we read is intensified or sharpened by what we bring to the text. This is not the strong paranoid reading Eve Sedgwick warns us about; the kind of reading that confirms our suspicions about the meaning that lies beneath the textual surface. Instead, this suddenness multiplies and activates alternative potentials of signification among, rather than merely in, what we read and what we encounter.

Haraway offers diffraction as an antipode and antidote for our obsession with replication, reflection, and reproduction. She emphasizes "where the effects of difference appear," asking us to look at what emerges from diffraction patterns. "Diffraction is a mapping of interference" (Haraway 70). Diffraction attunes us to where signal and noise pass over into one another– maybe what we thought was noise is just as vital as what we thought was signal. Where do we see the minor resounding in the major or majoritarian? Science fiction, or SF, becomes a potent site for performing this kind of work because it foregrounds "the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others" (Haraway 70). In Haraway's work, SF has a multitude of meanings, including speculative fabulation, an experimental gesturing towards alternatives places and temporalities.

"*Ordinary Affects* is an experiment, not a judgement," Kathleen Stewart tells us on the first page of her book (Stewart 1). I think of Haraway. *Ordinary Affects* as a speculative fabulation. Suddenly, on the back of the book, we find Haraway describing *Ordinary Affects*: "Full of resonating stories, encounters quirky in their unapologetic ordinariness, and murmuring

objects, this book takes me into the thick world of the everyday in the U.S.A." I sense something generative about affect theory and diffraction.

For Karen Barad, materiality is a series of diffractions. Indebted to Haraway's work, her agential realist ontology, what she calls a posthumanist performativity, refuses the inherent separateness of subject and object and instead posits that boundaries are iteratively de- and reconstructed within and by interactions. This anti-representationalist framework suggests that "Meaning is not an ideality; meaning is material" (Barad 175). The production of difference is just that–a process. And it's reciprocal rather than unidirectional, simultaneously though differentially reconfiguring both subject and object. In this way, Barad changes our primary unit of measure from the individual to the relational, emphasizing how subject and object become through the process of diffraction.

van der Tuin reconfigures Barad's shift from the individual to the relational into an explicit reading practice. Diffraction doesn't merely "stay clear from classificatory reading," rather, it produces new configurations of signification by "affirm[ing] links between seemingly opposite schools of thought." Diffractive reading is generative not by way of dialectical negation, but rather through the production of differences. It amplifies specific facets of the texts, foregrounding something that might seem peripheral, noisy, or minor in in an effort to engender "new concepts or traditions, new philosophies." Classificatory or hermeneutically suspicious reading becomes inadequate for dealing with the multitudinous cacophony of textual diffraction.

Yet, I think the diffractive reading van der Tuin articulates might resonate beyond the textual or methodological to help us see how texts and readers affect and are affected by one another while resisting the readymade distinction between self and other, subject and object, reader and text. Reading, the encounter among reader and text, is itself a diffraction. Who and

what I am (becoming) is iteratively reconfigured in the reading, by the encounter with the text. But the text is also reconfigured by the encounter. In literary studies, we know that texts are not stable objects, but a negotiation among bodies–me and the book, but also the material-discursive bodies that (over)determine how we read. Neither of us are singular or stable entities. In this way, diffractive reading isn't necessarily something we actively do, but rather describes the process through which the reader is affected by the text in the act of reading. I want to move away from reading that enacts diffraction to attend to the diffractions that are enacted within reading–an ordinary encounter that might do extraordinary things.

The back of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* describes it as "a genre-bending memoir, a work of 'autotheory' offering fresh, fierce, and timely thinking about desire, identity, and the limitations and possibilities of love and language." Nelson claims that she "stole" the term from Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, which interweaves Preciado's experiments with testosterone into a robust description of recent mutations in contemporary capitalism whereby affect becomes one of the main products and raw materials for its reproduction. Nelson explains, "I'm always looking for terms that are not 'memoir' to describe autobiographical writing that exceeds the boundaries of the 'personal,' and since this book has more theory in it than other books of mine, it seemed an apt description" (Nelson, "Riding the Blinds"). She then quotes the opening lines of Preciado's book. The resistance to "memoir" shared by both Nelson and Preciado suggests the need for an alternative mode of describing or accounting for subjectivity, especially as we attempt to cultivate a process-oriented life writing. Collectively, these provocations foreground the way that "self-theory," that which "exceeds the boundaries of the 'personal,'" intoxicates or affects its reader.

Nelson describes her writing as performing intimacy but offers a refinement by way of Judith Butler: "I mean writing that dramatizes the way in which we are *for another or by virtue of another*, not in a single instance, but from the start and always" (Nelson, *The Argonauts* 60). This notion of relationality resonates throughout *The Argonauts* in Nelson's interweaving of other's voices into her narrative. Butler's name is listed in the margin of the book, her words italicized, simultaneously differentiated yet incorporated. Donald Winnicott, Eileen Myles, Eve Sedgwick, and the collaborative work of Claire Parnet and Giles Deleuze make similar appearances. Elsewhere, in what seems like a nod of Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, whole pages are ceded to Nelson's partner who writes extensively about his mother's death. In this way, *The Argonauts*' form dramatizes our co-constitution–the way that "we" emerge within our encounters with others. This isn't necessarily a process of cultivation or incorporation, but perhaps a performance of the kind of responsibility that accounts for, recalling Haraway, the "interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others." Nelson's autotheory inter-stitches critical theory into the text's body to dramatize a process-oriented ontology as a series of diffractions among human and nonhuman (textual) forces.

Here is where I should offer a definition of autotheory, but I don't know what autotheory is (And there are lots of other reasons not to offer a definition here, not least of all because I'm more interested in what it does that what it is.). Sometimes it feels like reading a memoir that sat through a graduate level critical theory class and is so enamored with the impossibility articulating a subject that it continuously undermines its own generic drive. But it's not as pretentious as that: it's Maggie Nelson talking about freedom at the School of the Art Institute at Chicago. It's Nelson offering a quote from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* about debt and obligation, "We owe each other everything," but forgetting to, or

neglecting to, or just not closing whatever she's citing. So it's not just when you're siting in the audience and you realize that you don't quite know where Moten and Harney end and Nelson begins, but also when this helps you recognize that you never actually knew where anyone began or ended. Autotheory performs the difficulty of boundary work by undercutting itself at every turn.

Here's a different example: Writing about the multitude of toxicities, chemical, interpersonal, and familial, Susanne Paolo asks, "What does my body consist of?" Her *Body Toxic* charts an intertwined multi-generational narrative about her family's life in the U.S., her mother and father are children of Barbadian and Italian immigrants, respectively, and the effects of DDT on those who lived in and around her New Jersey hometown. Described as an "environmental memoir," *Body Toxic* posits the body as radically ecological, down to the gene, rather than autonomous or self-contained. "I'm the product of my mother and father's DNA and of their DDE: these lay down with the in their nuptial chamber. A mouthful of breastmilk and DDE formed by my first human meal." (Antonetta 138). Here, *Body Toxic* emphasizes exposure and vulnerability in sharp contrast to the autonomous body of liberal humanism, suggesting that we are poisoned from the start. In addition to these genetic diffractions, Paola inter-stitches various passages from her childhood diary into the body of the text–diffractions patterns reminding us that the past continues to resonate into and beyond the present towards the future. An eleven-year-old Antonetta writes, "I think I shall write memoirs about life in America, and my philosophy and opinions about it. Then I will wrap it in mud or clay, and someday I shall bury it for people far in the future to find" (Antonetta 6). Perhaps more important than the imbrication of time and materiality into the process of life writing is the suggestion that this

writing will be somehow useful or affective in the future. It's a fragment that suggests that we, too, introduce diffraction patterns into others.

Eileen Myles's *Afterglow (a dog memoir)* considers the implications of these reciprocal patterns enacted between and among her and her dog, Rosie. The memoir unfolds as a series of reflection of and between Myles and Rosie's life together, both preceding and in the wake of Rosie's death. Yet, to say that Rosie haunts the book, or Myles, wouldn't be entirely correct. Rosie speaks constantly throughout the text, diffracting not just the narrative through her own experience, but deflecting the text's trajectory throughout. *Afterglow* is not (just) a memorial, but a reckoning with what human/nonhuman relationships wrought. In a puppet show following her own death, Rosie explains, "That's what this book means. We are talking to our 'masters.' Very gently and subtly. Dogs are true leaders and strong teachers as the life of Eileen Myles *after* my own life will show" (Myles 33). Far from offering a simple anthropomorphized ethics in which we treat dogs as equal to humans, *Afterglow* asks very simply and 'subtly' to take dogs, animals, nonhumans, seriously as part of our lives. It's an anti-oedipal gesture that might reframe human/nonhuman kinship in a nonhierarchical manner. Rosie's voice is important not because *Afterglow* gives voice to the voiceless–we all know how problematic this move can be. Instead, it asks us to attune to the voices that we tend *not* to hear, be they barks, cuddles, and the postures of those with which we already cohabit the world.

In each of these texts, what we find is not some unitary or autonomous subject, but the process by which the subject becomes or the conditions of possibility for subjectivity. No stability, only transit, over and over again. More importantly for our purposes, these texts potentially introduce diffraction patterns into the lives of readers simply by dramatizing counter-intuitive modes of subject formation. This is not to say that these are after school specials, but

rather that by framing subjectivity as diffractive, these texts implicitly ask the reader to attune to the diffractions they also undergo.

They make palpable "this 'I' that is not 'me' alone and never was, that is always already multiply dispersed and diffracted throughout spacetime(mattering), including in this paper, in its ongoing being-becoming is *of* the diffraction pattern" (Barad 182). This reconfiguration of the subject has far reaching consequences, not least of which is the cultivation of more viable ethical relationships with and to those humans and nonhumans we continuously encounter.

When I was initially envisioning this conference paper, I thought that these texts required a certain mode of reading that we might call diffractive. Increasingly, I've come to think of autotheory as itself performing and enacting a series of diffractions both within their narratives and within the relational encounter we call reading. These metatheoretical texts offer a methodology to explore the breakdowns of bodies and genres, blurring distinctions between self and other, narrative and theory, reader and text. Yet, I don't want to privilege autotheory as doing particularly extraordinary work–mundane encounters are differentially significant, and I don't want to lose sight of that. However, I do think autotheory attunes us to the way we are cut through with and by one another–the humans and nonhumans that coconstitute our subjectivity. Echoing Nelson echoing Butler, "we are *for another or by virtue of another*."

Autotheory is not a solution or prescriptive for reimagining subjectivity so much as a means of mapping and enacting new territories for exploring the possibilities and boundaries of subject formation, knowing full well its contingency. "*The aim is not to answer questions, it's to get out, to get out of it*" (Nelson (*The Argonauts*) 82, Deleuze and Parnet 1). "…my *aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced* (creativeness)" (Nelson (*The Argonauts*) 102, Deleuze and Parnet vii). In quoting these

passages from Deleuze and Parnet's *Dialogues*, Nelson gestures not just towards the generative thinking enabled by diffracting others through her writing, but also the kind of thinking engendered in dialogue. The subject of autotheory is at work in multiple dialogues, coconstituted by the diffractive effects and affects of memoir, theory, animal studies, disability studies, environmental studies—a proliferating list. In this way, autotheory is both co-conspirator and co-conspiratorial. Autotheory becomes a site where experimentation and creativeness might well into "new diagrams of life-living" (Manning, *The Minor Gesture*). It's a site to explore possible worlds, or perhaps even a site to diffract new worlds waiting in potential in the ones we already inhabit.

> There is no question. There is only the effort to "*get out, to get out of it*".

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