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Writing Across the Faultlines of Depression: Towards a Methodology of Writing the Silences of Self

Abstract:

Autobiographical writing involves the performance of identity through the writing process. In practice, traditional forms of autobiography and memoir, even autobiographical essay, necessitate a form of writing that performs a humanist rendition of the self. A narrative identity is, predominantly, the foreground of the autobiographical story.

The silent trauma of mental illness, specifically depression, involves considerable time spent, in a sense, apart from oneself, in periods of autobiographical silence.

Building on the new materialist practice of 'onto-cartography' (Bryant 2014), this paper theorises a methodology for writing the experience of depression through a materialist focus on the more-than-human experiences of everyday life. Through writing experiences as a collation or assemblage of practices, writers may gain a more holistic and reparative approach to understanding non-linear and traumatic experiences of 'silence', or departure from the self.

This paper uses fictocritical writing, of the author's own experiences and engagements with theories of experimental autobiographical writing, to gesture toward a methodology for writing the 'silences of self'; those moments where the conscious narrative identity is inconceivable under the weight of illness, where it is interrupted. The paper offers significant progress in the autobiographical form, through the experimentation and development of a form that allows for uncertain and fragile authors to write the trauma of the everyday.

Biographical Note:

Elizabeth Pattinson is a doctoral candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her thesis uses non-representational theory and the notion of ‘assemblage’ to theorise flattened ontologies across which the relations and coexistence of humans, non-human animals, and machines might be mapped through the performance of moments of encounter. Her work problematises the binaries of human/non-human and human/animal, through tracing the transmission of affect across these tensions, in the use of pervasive media and the practice of everyday life.

Keywords: Methodology of writing, Mental illness, Silences, Fictocriticism , Flat ontologies

Quietening

Each creature has its own practice of withdrawing from the world. Hibernating, sleeping, resting. We speak of ourselves, humans, in terms of the animals when we speak of fatigue. The animals know the importance of sleep, of silence. The bears hibernate; the lizard warms its blood in the sun, still, calm. The dog, my dog, sleeps, belly-up, unworried by the main road outside.

When we speak of exhaustion that bleeds beyond our bones, strangely, we assign our bodies the language of machines. We speak of emotional exhaustion, the mind slowing, with words that give our fleshy, vulnerable bodies a machine-like significance. We shut down; we switch off. The body that breaks under the weight of modernity is a powered-down machine. As we get further away from the animals, with our lights, our phones, and our screens, we change our words too.

A clinically depressed friend can't respond to text messages. She apologises, when she resurfaces. 'I get like that,' she says. She closes her eyes to the world. She sleeps more. I let my mobile phone drain, leave it off, I relish the dearth of lights, beeps, sounds, intrusions. The space between self and media, self and world, self and ubiquitous connection, is fused and re-fused, melded over and over with a beep, a flash.

Depression, whether periodic or chronic, is a quietening. The self is marked by a fatigue that bleeds beyond the brain, a sense of slowness; my own depression is marked in periods of severity by sleep, a physical realisation of the stasis of my mind. Eight hours, ten hours, sixteen. The body tires under the weight of the mind. Sleep stills the consciousness. I do not dream.

Anaesthetics, Interruption and Ontology

Cressida Heyes' *Anaesthetics of Existence* (2014), speaks of her experience mishearing the phrase 'an aesthetics of existence' to be 'anaesthetics of existence', the medically induced sleep, chasing a tangent of the anesthetized subject of modernity. Heyes theorises the anaesthetising of consciousness as a potential response to the sensory overload of modern life. Heyes writes about the prescriptive and controlling nature of time, a system of measurement that, for the depressed person, can overwhelm in itself. This anaesthetised self, struggling between moments of will and

inertia, lives out a 'slackening of intentionality and …changing perception of time' (2014, 275).

As a postgraduate student coming to the degree with a legacy of mental illness, in both my blood (not a family member *without*) and an inheritance well known within the academy, I am versed quickly in the trails of guilt in the everyday – the unproductivity, the procrastination. Heyes writes of the controlling patterns of modern time-management, multitasking, failures of self-management through the lens of our guilt at time wasted, at thoughts uncollected: 'Time passes without our noticing – whether because we are sitting in a haze, numb, or because, more literally, we are unconscious (blacked out, sedated, asleep)' (2014, 275).

In a way, depression might also be written as a deafening, a deafening of the mind to the pull of public life. The threads from the world outside that draw a body up and out of simple being, out of animal-states, out of sleep.

There is a warping of sound, a fusing of the noise, a slowing, and, at anxious moments, a quickening. Everything all at once becomes too much and, over time, patterns emerge. The reassuring touch of a lover gains a sting. The air tastes of salt.

My words, normally quick across the page, clot under the skin. The space between the body, the mind, and the page, thickens and scars. The quietness envelops. I turn off my screens. The room I sleep in has a glass wall that looks onto a busy road, so even without the screen-glow, I never find complete darkness. The inner-city melts into the closest thing to silence.

Depression might, for the purposes of this paper, be conceived as an interruption. A crack in the passage of consciousness: something that breeds hopelessness. Inertia.

When I speak of depression in this paper I follow the lead of Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 2012) in positing that experiences of depression, episodic or chronic, might be more productively considered as products of the coursing, flashing, blinking and ever-moving systems of capitalism. Depression might be considered, then, as an interruption of the everyday, a fissure in the performance of capitalist life.

As Hyde (2011) posits, depression might be thought of as an 'ontological' interruption that 'lies at the heart of our spatial-temporal existence' (Hyde 2011, 265).

This notion, of an interruption, provides an opportunity for rethinking the relationships between bodies and ritual, bodies and object, bodies and animals, bodies and time. In trying to regain footing in the fugue, one might benefit from a reconsidered ontology.

A potential route, for reconsidering the methodology of writing the depressed subject, is the turn to posthuman ontologies of new materialism, in particular Manuel DeLanda's (2006) interpretation of Gilles Deleuze's 'assemblage'. Assemblage is a term born of the Deleuzo-Guattarian move away from sociological conceptions of organic totalities, a move instead to classify 'wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority'* (DeLanda 2006, 10).

DeLanda's focus here, on exteriority, makes relevant the assemblage as a theoretical lens for developing a methodology of writing that looks beyond the agency of the human. An assemblage, in DeLanda's terms, may lend a materialist significance to the practices, surfaces, and agents that compose the experience and practice of everyday life.

The value of an assemblage as a mode of considering the experience of everyday life between machine, animals, and human bodies, lies in the flexibility that an assemblage affords the relationships between components. Considerations of ecological systems, social situations, and the practices of everyday human life may be limited by the doctrine of organic totalities, which defines, as requisite, logically necessary relationships between components; DeLanda's assemblage, however, includes systems, practices, experiences, events that merely relate components as 'contingently obligatory' (DeLanda 2006, 11).

1. Ordinary Things

I have long been fascinated by the everyday. As a child, I fussed over books that showed scenes of rabbits, mice, beavers, strangely organised into tiny anthropomorphic communities. In trees, behind secret, minute doors under the grass. I related with the world best through the patterns of the everyday that I shared with others, and conversely, as I lost—indeed, as I lose—my grip on cognitive stability, I lost touch with the patterns of the everyday. I lost an ability to look back at myself, to look at myself, and the spaces around me. I lost rhythm.

Writing as a form of somatic management for depression is problematic in the beginning. Where can one begin writing the infinite lethargy, the slowing and thickening of the body, the mind? In trying to write the little pieces that concatenate to be a person's life, through the downward stages of the mind, the everyday represents much more than it is. It represents a last vestige of function, of control. It melts into the whole; the small tasks of the everyday transform.

Ben Highmore (2010) is fascinated by the ambiguous role that routine plays in our everyday lives: whether invented or inherited, routine problematizes the tensions between bodies and technology, exhausting, what Highmore terms, 'the finite limits of human bodies' (322). Our bodies wear down, our minds wear thin. The reality of our flesh comes back to us.

Cvetkovich (2012) draws parallels between the feeling of depression and the notion of the *ordinary*: 'part of the insidious effects of a culture that says people should be sovereign agents but keeps weighing them down with too much (or too little) to do' (158).

Reconceptualising depression as ordinary, as an ordinary product of capitalism and the prescriptions of everyday life, is a form of resistance. If we shy away from the language of pathology and psychology, and write away from the rigorous borders of medical models, the word means something else. The quietened self of capitalism can be written with different words; it can be ordinary, ubiquitous.

The ordinary space of depression, then, is the space of everyday life that tends to be the battleground for the depressed patient. The linen on the bed. The rhythms that either defeat or define a person: the getting up, showering, getting out. Interactions. With the dog, with the cat, with others, with the sun outside, with a lover. The bounds of this space can be the walls of a work cubicle, the walls of the house, the walls, tiled and blue, of a swimming pool, underwater. There might be no walls. The simplest of moves might be reparative. One might perform health, happiness, food, drink, sex; one might perform nothing at all. One might speak; one might not.

The thing shared between experiences of depression, is the quietening; the deafening of one's ears to the threads that pull. These are different for all of us, the threads that pull and link us to the balancing force of ingrained social behaviours, the things that we lose with depression – the responses, the initiative, the small-talk. Mornings. The

quietening might be a hobby, dropped. I stop running. My friend Sarah stops reading. My brother stops talking. Something stops; something is silenced by the depression.

I only have refrains, echoes. Sitcoms, discs scratching with repetition. The refrain of housemates, lover, family, conversations, sometimes even thoughts, exchanged. But nothing in between. The movements and motions of everyday are what constitute my world, and in lieu of a presence, to fill the silence, these motions might perform the self.

2. Cultural Poesis

Ethnographer Kathleen Stewart (2005) conceives a form of writing that approaches 'ordinary affects'; that is, the trajectories, currents, and potentialities of the affects that circulate the everyday, the ordinary happenings, the comings and goings, the habitual, and the instinctive. Stewart's writing owes a great debt to the consideration of the world as an assemblage, seen in her assertion that her ethnography is 'committed to speculations, experiments, recognitions, engagements and curiosity' (Stewart 2005, 1015). Stewart's writing, rather than debunking or dismantling what we accept as the patterns and surfaces of our world, acts as a life force unto itself, dipping in and out of the everyday, watching, observing, absorbing, and describing.

Heather Love's (2010) 'descriptive turn' in sociology, echoes this practice of intricate, close, fastidious description. Perhaps this is where the growing ethnographic attention, to the moments and practices of being, gains provenance, the small decisions, the tasks of existence that slip unacknowledged in holistic conceptions of selfhood. Love notes the significance of description in ethnographic work: 'attention to action, to everyday experience and consciousness, and to things' (2010, 276).

In fictocritical writing, this fusion of the everyday, the seemingly unrelated, the significance of moments and their potential trajectories, is used to great effect by Stephen Muecke (2002; 2008) to explore the subjectivity of the writer and the affective resonance of moments, things and places. The 'descriptive turn', Love highlights, is characterised by a world that is written 'fat and living', rather than 'thin and dead' (Love 2010, 388). This is a world filled in the text, fleshed in the text, by words, by description, by anecdote, by knowable faces and gestures and tales, by surfaces and skins.

Perhaps what I seek is an appropriation of Kathleen Stewart's 'poesis', one that does not seek the patterns of the community, the trajectories of the social, but one that seeks a connection between self and world – the world of the everyday, the world of the self performing rituals. A connection between place, objects, subject. This is the connection so often decayed by the experience of depression, the practice of withdrawal and the quietening of the self. Stewart's objective for ethnography is the same objective I hold in trying to write 'depression' – a writing for the half-known, half-lost, self, a writing that enlivens the waning self and its surrounds. As Stewart writes: 'the writing here is one that tries to mimic felt impacts and half-known effects as if the writing were itself a form of life' (2005, 1016).

A Methodology for Silent Selves: New Materialism

To write, in these spaces-between-self, to write during an episode of depression, sufferers, subjects, all of us, all of them, will tell you, is approaching the impossible. Perhaps writing afterward, meditating, inquiring into what happened, is the best course of action. But how does one delve back into the experience of pain after the pain has subsided? Especially, like this, when the pain precluded the consciousness of experience itself?

Non-Representational Theory and Writing the Subject as System

I propose a fusion: the writing as a form of life, as Stewart writes, the writing as reparation, a bridge built between self and world, an essay tracking the small gestures, the pharmacology, the new learned words of medical discourse, a writing that lives, that reaches for limp limbs, that pulls open stiff and dusty curtains. A writing that takes on an appreciation of the ontological significance of our surroundings, through a pursuit of resonance in the everyday. This writing, as a mapping of our assemblage—the collections of an affective current through the focus on the *things* around us—can be linked to developing new materialist theories of onto-cartography.

The writing might be thickened, in this sense, with the philosophical practice of mapping objects, bodies, machines, and affects, as pre-personal intensity (Massumi 2002). This approach, at last, might allow the self to recede somewhat, to act in synchronicity with its surrounds, rather than give them shape. This blend of subject

and world, in a practice-based consideration of ontology, takes theoretical precedence from Nigel Thrift's (2008) 'non-representational theory' – a form of writing that performs relations as pre-personal and anti-biographical. Thrift calls this:

> … a *material schematism* in which the world is made up of all kinds of things brought into relation with one another by many and various spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter, and the violent training that such encounter forces (8).

A turn to the material, in writing the experience of depression, holds promise because it is a turn away from the immaterial. The silence. The weight of a narrative identity hushed, fractured.

In considering the experience of depression as an assemblage, one must remember that this paper theorises the writing of the experience of depression by the subject. The fragmented nature of the subject problematizes the process, because narrative may be inaccurate, or sometimes impossible. Instead, a performance of Thrift's 'things' and 'relations' (8) might be a more appropriate approach. The turn to the material collates things, objects, moments, affects, and surfaces in a move beyond performing identity. Identity might instead constitute, in itself, an assemblage. This definition is supported by Deleuze's (1991) original writing on the emergence of subjectivity as a system, for these purposes, a system constituent of an assemblage. He writes:

> The subject is the entity which, under the influence of the principle of utility, pursues a goal or an intention; it organizes means in view of an end and, under the influence of the principles of association, establishes relations among ideas. (98)

Thus, considering the collection of material relations and immaterial affect as a collection which might be mapped, is a starting point for a form of writing that maps

without homogenizing experience, that traces currents and practices without demanding a unity in the subject.

This form of writing, a writing that maps affect across events, across moments, is linked to Levi Bryant's (2013) 'onto-cartography', described as the:

> … practice of mapping the spatio-temporal paths, the gravitational fields, that arise from interactions among things. Central to this project is the recognition that things and signs produce gravity that influences the movement and becoming of other entities (14).

Onto-cartography is not merely a listing of things and signs. Instead of inventory, it is an attunement, an attentive map, of sorts. A writing that entwines the resonance of the everyday objects that exert an affective pull on the self. A writing that leaves humanism and forges a 'self' in the space between objects, environments, things, and the organisations and rituals that call into being things, homes, animals, bodies.

The writing might be thickened, in this sense, with the philosophical practice of mapping objects, bodies, machines, and affects as pre-personal force. This approach, at last, might allow the self to recede, to act in synchronicity with its surrounds, rather than give them shape.

The everyday rituals of being constitute a 'worlding' of a kind; a worlding in which the body and the mind are no longer necessary for a picture to be painted, a scene to be written. Instead, the self might be reflected in the steam of a downward shower flow, before a body steps in; in the space for a hand between a jar of tea leaves and a waiting cup. The organisation of things in routine might be the management one needs, might be the process of becoming that heals and pushes beyond the fugue.

The writing then acts not as a form of life itself but an organisation of life, a mapping, not a demystification, as Stewart is quick to remind us, but the cartographic gesture Bryant leads us towards.

Louis CK's Tears and the Recursive Selves of Depression

I come across a video, in my absentminded state, of Louis CK and what he calls the 'forever empty'. It is a video on Youtube; an interview with an American talk show host about why Louis doesn't want his children having mobile phones. The comedian, Louis CK, is famously a 'great parent' and, among my generation, a great guy. This is the first video I have seen of him speaking, and his acerbic take on existential anxiety, stemming from his own depression, is alarming.

He talks about driving, an activity marked by ambivalence, a departure and an arrival, but in the middle, solitude, if you're in the car alone. And for him, in spite of his Springsteen soundtrack and his semi-legal dalliances with his mobile phone, it is, in a way, a silence.

As a comedian, Louis CK is one of a paradoxical breed of performers who are ubiquitously depressed and more honest about the morbidity of life than anyone else. He lightens our feelings about this, by pushing the morbidity of reality upon us, and making us laugh about it. This simultaneous awareness and humour is perhaps the most honest way of confronting the things we are partially protected from (by the affects of collective and shared social anxieties, transmitted and buzzed through the endlessly overstimulating world of digital devices). That is, the reality of what lies beneath the pulsating affects of nervousness, busy-ness, tension – an actual loneliness, an existential anxiety, that is distinct from the trajectories of nerves that characterise contemporary existence. As Louis CK says:

> Sometimes, when things clear away, you're not watching anything, you're in your car … [Louis mimes driving]. 'Oh … no … here it comes … the sadness.' (Team Coco 2013, 4:02)

He speaks about his own experience and, whether exaggerated or true, the anecdote is incredibly resonant. Sitting in his car, driving, a Bruce Springsteen song comes on the radio, pulling him back to his high school depression, and he says he feels it coming on, 'it' being 'the sadness'.

> He pauses. ‘Life is tremendously sad …’
>
> The audience laughs, nervously.
>
> ‘Cause it’s so hard.’
>
> He speaks of that moment, of reaching for the phone, or the computer, or whatever is there to touch the outside world, to pull in connections with other people in a way that is not even about connecting with others, but about pulling them into our consciousness, sharing ourselves with them. The interactions we grab at in order to cloud this great ‘forever-empty’. This time, Louis says, this time he puts down the phone and stands in the way of that great overbearing melancholia.
>
> ‘I let it hit me like a truck.’
>
> Louis describes being ‘hit’ in this way, a way we go so far out of our own way to prevent happening in our day-to-day life. He is hit by the strength of despair. He falls from the suspension between machine and habit; he falls into realising the shallow layers of ‘feeling’ that lace his everyday.
>
> ‘You never feel completely sad or completely happy … you just feel kinda satisfied with your product, and then you die.’ (Team Coco 2013, 4:40)

We recognise ourselves in him, in our urge to quell the silence, in the moments when you look around a train carriage at everybody, on a screen, in the real, tangible threats orchestrated by our cultural practices of distraction, in our anaesthesia.

Highmore (2011) condemns our cultural dependence on apperception – the continual application of the known to the new, the readiness of habit to embrace the new with familiarity, thereby rendering it known. He identifies a guilty pleasure of mine in states of mental fugue: the comfort we feel in re-watching, in a practice of ossification that stagnates the capacity to know, and the capacity to feel. Highmore states:

> We can sit, dreamily, in front of multilayered TV series taking it all in without having to concentrate. We know the format; we know the moral ambiguities of the police detective, the torn sympathies we have for vics

> and perps (victims and perpetrators), the departmental politics, the montage sequences of jagged camerawork and rock soundtrack. We know this culture and this culture knows us (128).

Sophie Tamas (2009) emphasises, in her study of writing trauma, the discursive normalisation of a necessary coherence in writing the self, an authority, a 'safe voice'. This is something dangerously prescriptive for someone writing the everyday, the chronic, the long-term traumatic patterns and effects, that preclude the performance of power and authority and demand thoughtfulness, solitude, fragmentation. The pressure, Tamas writes, is an insulation:

> We have to seem okay even as we describe how far from okay we have been. If I talk about disorder and danger in an orderly, safe voice, I protect both myself and my reader from actually dealing with it. We are insulated by discursive norms, observing the storms on the other side of the glass. Our losses and undoings are rendered as illustrative anecdotes and substantiating war stories. I know that trauma leaves me lost and speechless, and that my memory is invested in safety, not remembering. What breaks my heart also breaks my tongue (3-4).

Inherent contrasts, that underpin the writing of trauma, haunt this kind of writing (of everyday trauma). Raw, yet uphill, is what we *want* from a text about depression. Indeed, the ubiquity of chronic/episodic depression imbues the writer with a responsibility to trudge uphill, in the close of the text, to point beyond the black of their sun into a hopeful future, no matter how dishonest this might be. Truly circuitous texts about mental illness serve little benefit to readers other than perhaps a diagnostic manual. As Zadie Smith (2009) writes about the inimitable, and indeed chronically depressed, David Foster Wallace:

> What's 'recursive' about Wallace's short stories is not Wallace's narrative voice but the way these stories *run*, like verbal versions of mathematical

> procedures, in which at least one of the steps of the procedure involves rerunning the whole procedure. And it's *we* who run them. Wallace places us *inside* the process of recursion (276).

While David Foster Wallace is best noted as a fiction writer, his most provocative piece of writing, on the subjective experience of depression, is hardly fictional. Wallace's own experiences, with isolation, addiction, medication and the ins-and-outs of medicated depression, forged a piece of 'fiction' that curdles the stomach of anyone familiar with the spidery support networks that the fugue of depression decays away. Wallace's *The Depressed Person* (1998) is the kind of low-lying short piece that dries a reader's appetite in recognition of the self; a lengthy, repetitive, frustrating, banal piece that evokes the subjective experiences of psychosomatic disturbance. The fracturing of mind and body and the manifestations of this in relationships are something very difficult to write about; for some writers, like myself, in the low passages of my mind, I have no words except self-flagellation.

Wallace was able to remember. He is self-conscious, irritated, writing the melancholy of a nameless character made ubiquitous by an unpleasant truth of depression. The self-absorption, the drive to map oneself out, to write oneself out, over and over, inside or outside of one's own head, in search of answers. Wallace writes of the *assemblage* that constitutes the clinical world of depression, the causal relations that perform an ontological assemblage between *things* and *life*, between *parts* and whole.

The assemblage of depression can be considered holistically, but the parts—the banal office stationery, the slow walk home, the forgotten cup of coffee—are not resonant, in this particular *depressing* affective significance, without the consideration of assemblage. As DeLanda (2006) writes, the:

> … autonomy of wholes relative to their parts is guaranteed by the fact that they can causally affect those parts in both a limiting and an enabling way, and by the fact that they can interact with each other in a way not reducible to their parts, that is, in such a way that an explanation of the interaction that includes the details of the component parts would be redundant (40).

Thus the *life*, the *everyday life*, of depression, might be seen as the relational significance of the practices that keep one moving, that keep one going. In lieu of describing the experience, the immaterial experience of objectless grief and of melancholia, one might build an account on the material reality of the everyday.

David Foster Wallace (1998) takes the material significance of events and formative trauma for the depressed individual and makes them, almost in caricature, perform the trauma, recounting the problems and highlighting the significance of circumstance, of event, and of relations. He writes, 'despairing, then, of describing the emotional pain itself, the depressed person hoped at least to be able to express something of its context—its shape and texture, as it were—by recounting circumstances related to its etiology (57).

Writing Silence: The Anaesthetised Self

Perhaps a methodology of writing the silences of depression is best summarised by a turn away from the subject in order to write. One must seek affective resonance outside the self, in the generativity of scenes and the potentiality of patterns. Through employing a new materialist approach to writing the experiences of depression, reductive and self-defeating humanist accounts of trauma and melancholia may be progressed further into more productive accounts that approach the assemblage of everyday life.

Apperception is inherent in the contemporary experience of depression, whether it be the practice of running and re-running things already read, watched, listened to, or the walking and re-walking of the dog, or as simple as the practice of tipping one's head under falling water in the shower. But perhaps this apperception is what lets us continue, what lets us manage, what lets us be. Writing this apperception, the practice of everyday life in the face of depression, might constitute a reach beyond the self. Reaching out beyond the self to touch affect, reaching moments, blurred boundaries, relations, the moments of sound that mark the silence.

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