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LEARNING FROM A 'LOST YEAR': AN AUTOTHEORETICAL JOURNEY THROUGH ANXIETY AND PANIC

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ABSTRACT

I thought I knew my theory. In the summer of 2018, however, I experienced a mind-body implosion that put me out of commission for approximately twelve months. During that year and afterward, unable to engage in the theorizing and writing I loved—unable to do anything but feel—I discovered that there was a difference between knowing and thinking-feeling theory. In this auto-theoretical essay, I explore the corpo-affective dimensions of anxiety and panic and the discovery of my own deeply entrenched humanist orientations, weaving theoretical discussions of posthumanism with blended poetry and narrative.

KEYWORDS

anxiety, panic, academia, affect, posthuman

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I fell in love with rhizomes in my teacher education doctoral program. Deleuze & Guattari's (1987) rhizomatics became much more than a way to make sense of my data or frame my findings in a way that honored the multifaceted complexity of teaching: I considered it a philosophy by which I wanted to live my life. Over time, I expanded my theoretical focus to include other thinkers like Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, and Donna Haraway, and began to define my worldview as *posthuman*, a neo-materialist onto-epistemological perspective (that is, an integrated theory of knowing-being; Barad, 2007) that emerges out of the convergence of critiques of rational humanism and anthropocentrism (Braidotti 2013/2019). Posthumanism is a theory of immanence that moves our collective reference point from isolated human individuals to multiplicities of human-nonhuman, material-discursive elements, or "ensemble[s] composed of zoe-logical, geological, and technological organisms...a zoe-geo-techno assemblage" (Braidotti 2019, 47), which fundamentally disrupts the logical binaries that are at the heart of western civilization in its current form: body/mind, self/other, person/world, human/nonhuman, and so on (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). This frame is about connection, proliferation, mobility, flux, (r)evolution, replacing *either/or* with *and, and, and* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Posthumanism is about valuing heterogeneity, or no, even more than that, it argues that difference is the natural state of things. It is about exploding into lines of flight, rupturing the status quo, creating war machines. And, importantly, the strand of posthumanism that I follow is critical, insisting on power analyses and disrupting normative thinking/practices that perpetuate inequities (Braidotti, 2013)—something that was missing in some of the other complex, non-linear frameworks I had investigated while pursuing my doctorate.

Posthumanism also foregrounds *affect*, a concept typically left out of research because it so completely defies capture and/or representation by traditional means. Affect, in the neo-Spinozan interpretation, is a relational force (Braidotti 2019), a virtual intensity that is both pre-personal and very personal (Gregg & Seigworth 2010), that arises from encounters between bodies (both human and more-than-human; Dernikos, Lesko, McCall, & Niccolini 2020). Affect changes a body's capacity to act (Massumi 1987/2015; Stewart 2007)—it moves us (Hickey-Moody 2013) and makes us feel (Shouse 2005). Bodies have affective power—the ability to affect and be affected by (Braidotti 2019)—and that power is what defines us and

the assemblages we are embedded in and connected up to. Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 257), taking up a well-known Spinozan statement, offer:

> We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body.

I had no substantial preparation in philosophy before diving into Deleuze and Guattari, and their work is pretty difficult to comprehend both language- and content-wise (St. Pierre 2016; Strom 2018). I especially had a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of affect as a force or intensity and how that differed from the more psychological use of the term to denote emotion. I even purposely avoided writing about it when I could, because I felt was not able to explain it to myself adequately, much less to anyone else. Instead, I focused in on a few concepts that helped me think differently and that I was confident I could bring into mainstream scholarship as lines of flight.

As a result, I have spent the last eight years or so working with what amounts to a pretty small slice of Deleuze's oeuvre, his collaborations with Guattari, and the texts of a few key posthuman thinkers. I plug this knowledge into my work on the scholarship of teaching and learning: I analyze data with it, I apply it to theorizing my own pedagogical practice, I teach it to my own students, and I use it to illustrate alternative, complex perspectives of educational phenomena (for examples, see Strom 2015; Strom, Margolis, & Polat 2019; Strom & Lupinacci 2019). And although it took me a long time and a lot of practice, I finally 'got' the ontological shift that posthumanism entails—the shift from a dualistic, (hu)man centered universe to a monistic, immanent, *zoe*-centered one in which "we-are-all-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and-the-same" (Braidotti 2017, 23). It more than resonates with me, it excites me, lights me up—it provides glimpses of different ways of doing, being, living.

I thought I 'knew' these concepts, but my concept of knowing was still grounded in the Cartesian duality of mind/body, privileging intellectual activity over embodied knowledge (Franklin-Phipps 2020; Hemmings 2012; Ohito 2016). It wasn't until I lost a year of my life—a year of no theory, a year where I could barely think at all—that I really knew it, that I viscerally felt it in a way that went beyond just intellectual knowledge. That I really grappled with what it meant to disrupt my conditioning to see the world as a rational, ordered place and myself as an autonomous individual with agency and free will, able to control my destiny

and what was happening around me. That I really understood what it meant to disrupt the idea that our minds control our bodies. That I really understood *affect in the Spinozan sense*—a phrase I have written many times in my own scholarship. Until this 'lost year,' I didn't realize how deep my conditioning to rationality and control ran. I believed what I was saying and writing about disrupting binary thinking, but I didn't understand it in the corpo-affective way (Górska 2016) I do now.

JULY 2018

Herstmonceux Castle, Southeast England
12th Biennial Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) Conference

I sit in a student desk in one of the many conference rooms that make up Herstmonceux Castle, trying to pay attention to the end of the presentation.

I'm exhausted.
Head feels foggy.
Limbs heavy.
Face flushed.

It feels a little like a hangover, but I only had one glass of wine last night at the Castle pub after we got in.

Must be jetlag.

The presentation ends and I gratefully slide my notebook into my backpack and check the time on my phone.

1:30 pm.
Maybe I'll take a nap.

I tell T, one of the friends I'm attending the conference with, where I'm going. I shrug my backpack over my shoulders, walk into the stone corridor. Past the dining hall. Out the heavy double doors. Along the bridge over the moat.

Sun on my face.

It's hot outside—well, hot for England, courtesy of a summer heat wave blasting through Europe. My ballet flats crunch onto the gravel path that leads to the dormitories—the castle is owned by Queens University—and slip past

a small church flanked by a graveyard dotted with faded headstones. I am surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells of the idyllic English countryside, a place I love, a place I come every two years with three of my dearest friends for the Castle conference. I hate to miss the afternoon sessions, but I feel so worn out.

I'll feel much better after a nap.

The bed and breakfast comes into view. The 16th-century Cleaver Lyng House, a handsome Tudor-style manor, looks like something out of an old storybook. I trudge up the three flights of creaky wooden stairs until I reach the door all the way at the top. Insert the old-fashioned cast iron skeleton key into the lock and let myself in.

So stuffy.
No air conditioning.

The quiet is almost jarring after the lively activity at the Castle. I dump my backpack on the floor, take out my contacts, and change into a soft t-shirt.

In the bedroom, I open the window to let air in.

I grab my headphones and sleeping mask. Slide beneath the sheets. Despite the heat outside they still feel blessedly cool. I set my alarm on my phone for two hours from now, plug in my earbuds, and scan through the apps on my phone. I open SleepStream, select "Atlantic Ocean," and fit my mask over my eyes.

Pitch black.
Waves crash.
I wait for sleep to come.
Breathe in.
Breathe out.
You are nothing more than your work
you are a fake
your work is worthless
YOU are worthless
Body flushes hot and cold.
Something Bad is Happening
Heart POUNDING. *Racing.*
Nothing feels real.
Throat tight.
Can't——Breathe. Can't——Breathe.
OHGODWHATISHAPPENINGTOME
Skin *crawling_crawling_crawling.*
Mouth full of sawdust.

Chest is so HEAVY.
Can't——Breathe. Can't——Breathe.
I'M DYING
I'M CRAZY
I'M SO FAR FROM HOME

In July of 2018 I had a series of panic attacks while at a conference in England. I realized after the first one what had happened, but I was powerless to stop the sensations that continued to course through my body for the next several days, until I finally went to see a doctor who prescribed me an anti-anxiety medication similar to Xanax. As soon as the symptoms lessened, I immediately started trying to pinpoint a reason for the attacks. *Why was this happening to me? What had caused it?* Whenever I'd been sick before, at least I'd been able to understand what was happening and why. I could identify the cause: I had a cold, or the flu, and I generally knew what to expect as the bug worked its way through my body. But with this, I had no direct cause to connect to what was happening to me—I was, literally, in my happy place, at Herstmonceux Castle, at a conference I looked forward to attending with my best friends every other summer. My body-mind seemed to have rebelled against me for no logical reason. I had no explanation for why I was feeling this way, and I had no way of knowing when or if these sensations would come back. It was terrifying.

Heart pounding.
A pulse in my stomach.
BEAT BEAT BEAT BEAT.
Icy fingers sweep up my body.
Impending doom.

That feeling you get when something really awful happens or is about to happen—the moment when it dawns on you that you've made a terrible mistake, like you've left your cell phone or keys somewhere—that's what it feels like.

Body flushes hot and cold at the same time.
Stomach drops like you are on a roller coaster.
Mind flashes, "YOU'VE FUCKED UP BIG TIME."

Although I cut my trip short and returned home, I still woke every morning with panic washing over me. I still had racing thoughts telling me I was nothing, my work was nothing. I was consumed with feelings of abject terror that had no obvious source. I could barely focus my eyes on the page to read or on my computer screen to type an email, and I had to concentrate intensely on what someone was saying to me for my brain to interpret the sounds coming out of their mouth. I felt so awful, the feelings in my body so distracting and disturbing, that most of the time all I wanted to do—all I could do—was sit on my couch and distract myself with silly TV shows until it was late enough to take something to knock myself out for the night.

NOVEMBER 2018

I am jerked out of a drugged sleep.
I'm never going to catch up.
My mind races.
I've done no writing this year.
I've done no reading this year.
I need to be able to write a literature review on posthuman theory.
On teacher learning.
On teaching practices for multilingual learners.
I don't know any of this literature anymore.
Even if I started reading an article a day, I will never catch up.

It's been months since I had the panic attacks in Europe. So much lost time, doing nothing but trying to survive each day.

Can't read right now.
My eyes won't focus on the page.
Can't write right now.
Mind is so foggy, body so tortured.
I have nothing to say.

I now think of my life as divided into two major eras: *Katie Before Anxiety* and *Katie After Anxiety.* Before, the words always flowed. I had things to say, things that mattered.

Now...
I start to panic. My heart thuds.
I just know it.
I'm never going to write again.
If I can't write, I can't be an academic.
I'm going to lose my job.

I don't know what terrifies me more: losing the ability to read and write in the ways I have come to take for granted, losing my researcher/writer voice in terms of having something to say, to contribute.

Or the more practical matter of losing my job.
The latter would immediately mean we'd have to sell our home.
Our San Francisco mortgage requires both our salaries.
And the former...there would be no 'me' left at all.
Finally, my partner comes home.
Thank god.

I hear the garage open, his car engine go silent. Footsteps thud on the stairs leading up to the house. The door creaks open and he calls hello as he enters the kitchen and shuffles through the mail.

I peel myself off the couch and go to him, moving into his body and wrapping my arms around his torso. I feel his hand on my back, patting hesitantly, trying to comfort.

I sob into his worn t-shirt.
I can't do my work right now. I don’t know what to do.
What's going to happen if I lose my job?

His chin rests on the top of my head. "You're going to get better," he tells me. "So you've lost some of your superpowers. They will come back."

I want to smile at how he characterizes my former academic talents,
but I don't have the energy.
And I don't believe him, anyway.

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My diagnosis was twofold: *generalized anxiety disorder* and *panic disorder.* It was hard to accept, and hard to explain to others—'anxiety' and 'panic' are words that are used to refer to everyday emotions that were nowhere close to describing what was happening to me. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the main reference guide for mental health professionals, defines generalized anxiety disorder as having both mental (constant excessive, uncontrollable anxiety and worry) and physical symptoms (feeling on edge, tired, or irritated; having mind-fog, insomnia, and/or tight muscles) that interfere with living a normal life. Panic disorder is defined by the DSM-5 as having panic attacks—which can include racing/ pounding heart, sweating, shaking, tight throat, heavy chest, difficulty breathing, stomach knots, dry mouth, dizziness, hot/cold flashes, depersonalization, and fear of going crazy or dying—followed by having constant fear of another panic attack, and avoiding situations that might cause one.

Despite receiving these diagnoses and recognizing that I did indeed fit these symptomatic profiles in some ways, while also exceeding them in others, there still was no identified cause. I couldn't point to one specific thing and say, *this was it, this triggered it.* What probably happened was that multiple unprocessed traumas (stresses from my dissertation process and early-career experiences with abuse, exploitation, and bullying from senior researchers), in combination with intense burn-out and assorted financial and family stresses, produced a body-mind breakdown. Yet, I could not seem to come to terms with the fact that there was no *one thing* that I could treat or change to break out of this state of all-consuming, 24-hour-a-day anxiety and panic. None of the medications or therapies I tried seemed to help. I was powerless to stop what was happening to me, to ease the feelings inside me, to placate the voice screeching in my head that I was nothing.

JANUARY 2019

It's already one in the afternoon,
so I force myself to move from the bed to the couch.

I bring my pillow and my weighted anxiety blanket with me. Propping the pillow up on top of the large blue back cushions on the long end of our sectional, I lay down and cover myself with the blanket, distributing the weight as evenly as I can.

15 pounds of fabric, weighed down with beads, envelops me.

I'm on my back, with the blanket pulled up to my chin. I let the weight of the blanket sink into the front of my body, from neck to toes. My cat, Blue, jumps into my lap. He, too, lays on his back, his paws kneading the air as he presents his soft, furry tummy for me to stroke.

I oblige.

I used to jokingly call him the "Stage Five Clinger." Now I refer to him—very seriously—as my "Therapy Cat," and I am pathetically grateful for his never-ending desire to snuggle with me, for the tiny bit of comfort the weight of his small body provides.

Hours pass.

I don't sleep but I am not awake, either. I have no respite from these disturbing sensations.

All-consuming fear.
Shaking from head to toe.
Stomach in knots.
Mouth dry.
Pulse racing.

Some corner of my mind, maybe where normal Katie resides, produces the reminder that I need to be planning. Classes start in less than two weeks.

I can't summon the strength to move to the table, where my laptop sits, idle. It doesn't matter, anyway. My mind can't even handle simple tasks like writing a grocery list, much less something as complex as mapping out a semester-length course on critical theories.

These feelings in my body are so intense that they've taken over completely.
All I am is a mass of sensation.
All I can do is lie here.
A worthless lump on the couch.

For almost a year, I existed in a bodily-affective state where all I could do was *feel,* and I. Felt. Awful. It was the kind of awful that made me wish I was dead so I didn't have to feel anymore, the kind of awful where the limits of language make themselves felt (Braidotti 2019) because no chain of words could ever accurately express the sensations consuming me. My life suddenly had become one big dualism (the thing I loved to critique in my writing). There were two distinct eras: Katie Before Anxiety/Panic and Katie after Anxiety/Panic. Whereas Before-Katie loved nothing more than connecting with people, collaborating with them, and proliferating ideas, After-Katie didn't want to see or talk to anyone. I shrank down into myself, so distressed that all I could do was concentrate on surviving, getting through the day. If I was forced to be with other people, I seldom spoke unless I absolutely had to. Even with my husband, my best friend and life-partner of nearly two decades, I had nothing to say. Part of it was that I felt so terrible, and was so consumed with terror all the time, that I could barely form a coherent thought. Another part was that I was ashamed about the state I was in and did not want my friends and colleagues to know the true extent of my debilitation. In retrospect, this closing off of myself due at least in part to shame makes sense. The affect of shame is powerful; as Sedgwick (2003) puts it, "the pulsations of cathexis around shame...are what either enable or disenable so basic a function as the ability to be interested in the world" (97). Shame is also an emergence of a mind-body conflict (Probyn 2010): in my mind, I had always seen myself as a strong person, but that I could not get the anxiety my body was experiencing under control meant that I was weak, broken...mentally ill.

MARCH 2019

Today is one of the rare days where I have to do something for work. I force myself out of bed and sit at my dining room table, sipping water, shaking off the remnants of sleep.

I miss my coffee.

I can't drink anything with a stimulant right now. Plus, it's hard to get anything but water past my lips. My mouth is made of sand. I've been having to force myself to eat anything at all, and I have lost several more pounds in the last week. A lifetime ago, that might have made me happy. Now it just means that I will be that much weaker; it will be that much harder to move my body.

I'm going to be late if I don't get moving.

I drag myself into the shower.
My body feels weighted down, as if I might sink down through the floor of the tub.
My arms are so heavy, it's a chore to reach for the shampoo and work it through my hair.
Rinse.
Repeat with conditioner.
I am exhausted just from my shower.
And I've not even gotten to the hardest part yet.
Drying my hair.

My left arm sags under the weight of the hair dryer, and I prop it up using my right. I'm growing out my pixie haircut because it's too much of a struggle for me to dry it every day and if it's long I can just throw some gel in it and air-dry.

I forego makeup, throwing on soft black leggings and a blue striped stretchy tunic. I've always taken care of my appearance—being 'put together' is, for me, an important part of the professional image I wanted to cultivate.

Now, I'm struck by how much, how deeply, I simply don't care what I look like.

I am an "out of fucks to give" meme. Only not because I'm a bad-ass who doesn't care what people think.

I just don't. have. the. energy. to. care.

I force myself to go through the motions anyway. I have to project an outward appearance of something in the realm of 'normal' at work.

I sit silently in our faculty meeting, in the same maroon swivel chair, at the same table, in the same conference room, as I have so many times before.

Heart pumping.
Cold chills and hot flashes.

Mouth dry.
Completely exhausted.
Mind hazy.

I feel so terrible, the feelings in my body so distracting, that it's all I can do to remain in my seat. All I want is to be back in my home, hiding from the world on my couch.

Perform. Perform. Perform.
Pretend to follow the conversation.
Conjure an expression that says I'm listening.
Nod my head.
Mhmmm. Uh huh.

Just two years ago, a colleague confronted me about taking up too much space in meetings. I so dominated the talk that she felt she could never get a word in edgewise.

Then, I couldn't shut up.
I was full of ideas and enthusiasm. I cared about things.

Now, I can't seem to pry open my mouth. Nothing matters but how awful I feel.

There is a stranger occupying my body, one who must have taken a different path than me, with none of the same experiences or education or ideas, one who literally has *nothing to say.*

I feel my colleagues' concern.
During our breaks a few come up to me, inquire about my health.
Too weary to lie.
"Yeah, I'm having a hard time right now."
They don't press.

No matter how progressive we are, it's uncomfortable to talk about mental illness in the workplace.

Another colleague approaches. "Are you OK? You have been so low energy lately. Not like yourself."

Thanks, Captain Obvious. I'm not *myself.*

But instead of replying with that, I attempt to shape my lips into a smile, although it probably looks more like a grimace.

"Yeah, I'm having a hard time right now."

In June of 2019—eleven months after the first wave of attacks in Europe—I entered an intensive outpatient program specializing in anxiety disorders. One of the first things I learned in the group sessions was that I somehow needed to learn to stop trying to control the anxiety/panic, because trying to control it, or fighting it,actually *increased* the anxiety and panic. I couldn't control it, and then I would panic even more because my attempts to control it were ineffectual, and that in turn would worsen my physical symptoms, which then intensified their warning signals to the brain that OH SHIT! WE'RE IN DANGER! ABORT, ABORT! Of course, I was never in any imminent danger, but anxiety and panic cannot be reasoned with, because they are not rational; they don't operate via the binary logic we've been conditioned to live our lives by—and which I was supposedly always trying to disrupt in my research and writing. Yet, the idea that I was never going to 'get it under control' was devastating.

If I can't control it...
that means it is going to continue to get worse...
and I won't be able to work...
and then I'll lose my job...
and then we'll lose the house...
and then...
Spiral, spiral, spiral.
And ultimately...
I don't want to live like this.
I can't *live like this.*

By early July, an assemblage of factors—including learning mindfulness and self-soothing strategies in the intensive program, identifying that one of the medications I was on was producing at least some of the disturbing feelings I had been experiencing, and finding an anti-depressant that actually worked—had helped me get to a place where my body was calm enough to allow me to think

again, and I immediately began self-reflecting on my experiences of the past year and my learning in therapy in the last few weeks. Through this analysis, I recognized that although my academic life to this point had been writing about a decentered perspective in education, my clinging to humanist, rationalist onto-epistemologies was keeping me from feeling better. The idea that anxiety was something I could get over, that I could control, was actively keeping me locked in a downward spiral of anxiety and panic. I needed to put my espoused radically immanent perspective to work in a different, much more material way, as part of my treatment.

First, I worked to understand how my body and mind were connected and affected one another in the context of my anxiety/panic disorders—in other words, I combined my recent psycho-social embodied knowledge and experiences with my intellectual understandings of monistic philosophy to disrupt the binary positioning of me versus the anxiety and panic, and the hierarchical and agentic positioning of me being able to control and overcome the anxiety. Despite the many times I had written about disrupting the body/mind binary in my work, relationally decentering myself vis a vis anxiety/panic was still a revelation to me. As I sat in my therapist's office, and she mapped out the interactions between mind and body that were sending me into a downward spiral of bodily discomfort, mind-fog, and general distress, I recognized that what she was talking about was basic Spinoza: there are thoughts in the mind or feelings in the body—one doesn't necessarily come before the other—and they are connected, entangled. As the thoughts spiral, the body symptoms intensify. To placate the body, we adopt behaviors that help us avoid anything that we feel is more anxiety-inducing, doing things like laying on the couch watching TV all day, huddled under a 15-pound security blanket, for weeks on end. These avoidance behaviors produce more negative thoughts. In my case:

I should be working.
But I can't work because I feel so terrible.
Spiral, spiral, spiral.
I'm never going to write again.
I'm going to lose my job.

These thoughts translated into even worse physical anxiety and panic symptoms, which in turn fed my catastrophizing spiral. In this way, the two (body-mind) are not separately acting entities, but each is producing the other, and amplifying the responses of the other. To get myself out of these harmful patterns, I had to disrupt something in my mind-body anxiety cycle—move my body in a different way, maybe, since my mind couldn't handle much.

JULY 2019

I drive my silver Honda Fit the half mile up the street from our house and park on the steep hill near the entrance to the trailhead to San Bruno Park and Guadeloupe Canyon, curbing my wheels so I don't get a ticket.

It's the beginning of July. In another two weeks it will be exactly one year since that initial panic attack in England.

I've started a new medication, stopped another, and been attending intensive therapy classes. Something has begun to work. I still feel the sensations that have been torturing my body-mind for the past year—heart racing, difficulty breathing, stomach in knots, fear—but they are somewhat muted now, like watercolor paint strokes.

I get out of the car, zip my jacket against the chill. It's a typical mid-summer morning in San Francisco. Foggy, slight wind, mid-fifties.

I open the metal gate, walk past the sign warning hikers not to eat any mushrooms or feed any animals on the trail. I plug my earphones in and turn on a Nora Roberts audiobook.

Part of our treatment in the intensive outpatient program is learning how to meditate. I suck at it, so my therapist suggested that I try a walking meditation. And, she says, just being in nature seems to have calming properties.

My being here is also a way to practice "opposite action," which means doing something to break out of the cycles of anxiety and panic we often find ourselves trapped in. Instead of doing what has been keeping us locked in the cycle—for me, laying on my couch in a half-sleeping state for weeks on end—we do the opposite of that.

So, I'm here, at this trail that I'm lucky to have nearly in my backyard.

Ready to try anything.

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The first mile is paved black asphalt, winding through a forest. Leaves and twigs snap under my sneakers as I walk. I inhale the fresh air, counting my steps as I breathe.

In-2-3-4. Out-2-3-4.

The second mile turns onto a dirt and gravel path surrounded by thick brush on either side. I continue my breathing exercise and notice the sights and smells around me—the next step of the walking meditation.

Cool air whips my cheeks.
Dirt and gravel crunch under my feet.
Wind whistles through the bushes.
Critters scurry through the brush.
Birds chirp somewhere in the distance.
A tiny brown rabbit darts across the path.
I round a corner and begin an upward climb.
The ocean peeks out from behind the rock.
The horizon opens up.
The Bay and the downtown San Francisco skyline appears,
just visible through the veil of fog.

During the last mile, it strikes me how differently I am being constituted on this walk.

For the last year, most of my time has been spent as a
Hiding-couch-blanket-pillow-cat-Katie assemblage, a trembling, terrified mess.
Today I am Walking-forest-gravel-brush-air-fog-ocean-Katie.
And I am triumphant.
I left my house for more than therapy.
I walked THREE miles.

My lips curve into a real smile as I follow the final part of the trail back to the metal gate where I'd entered.

Getting out of the house and walking the trail close to my house not only made me feel a little better, but it also produced a different response in my brain. *Huh. If I can get out and walk three miles, maybe I'm not as bad off as I thought.* I walked the three miles every day, breathing in tandem with my steps, paying attention to my surroundings as I'd learned to do as a form of grounding in therapy.

By August, my body was strong enough to start running. I noticed that my anxiety was lessened after running the three-mile trail, and my therapist pointed out that not only was it a way to rid my body of excess adrenaline-produced energy, but it was also a form of exposure therapy. By running, I was simulating some of the physical sensations of anxiety/panic: heart racing, sweating, heavy breathing. I was giving my body-mind what it wanted—to flee perceived danger. However, I was also making new neural connections with these physical sensations, ones that produced feelings of satisfaction and pride for running every day, rather than terror that a panic attack was coming on. I recognize this exposure therapy now as what Braidotti (2019) describes as an enactment of an affirmative ethics, in confronting negative affects and "reworking them outside the dialectical oppositions" (168). In this case, the dialectical opposition was me against the feelings of anxiety and panic.

As the weeks passed, I continued to wake up with anxiety, so I would get up, have breakfast, and run. By September, I was running seven days a week. I was so elated that I was feeling better, and so determined to hold on to this success, that I made exercise in the morning my number one priority. If I had to get up at four o'clock in the morning to go to the gym and run, I did it. The affective traces of the horrible sensations and terror I endured for a year that were imprinted on my body-mind drove me, every day, to run on my trail or on the treadmill.

Gradually, I loosened my grip on the idea that I needed to control the anxiety, continuing to rework my relation to my disorder outside the dialectical opposition I had set up. I had to suspend the belief that I was an autonomous individual who could control anything/everything to do with my body (I'd already thought I had, but my conditioning to think of myself as a totally agentic being obviously runs very, very deep). To start, my therapist suggested that I "become an observer" of my anxiety. At first, I had no idea what she meant. I had been fighting the anxiety for so long, seeing it as a weakness that had to be overcome, that I didn't know any other way to interact with it. Instead, the therapist recommended, I needed to accept it. When I felt anxiety, I shouldn't fight it or try to control it; instead I should think about what I'm feeling, catalogue it, and sit with it—this was what she meant by being an observer. We practiced this, sitting in her office, engaging in activities like breathing through tiny straws to simulate some of the physical feelings of anxiety/panic, and then setting a timer for me to just sit and observe, describing out loud what I was feeling and engaging in rhythmic breathing until the sensations started to subside.

We also wrote scripts that I read to myself about the anxiety to disrupt the fear I had about it, speaking to the anxiety, saying things like, "I understand you are trying to protect me." After a few months, I had gained the embodied knowledge to finally understand that this was a relational shift. Instead of positioning myself in opposition to the anxiety and its sensations, I was coming into composition with them, accepting them as something connected to me, entangled with me, which changed my relationship with it. Eventually, I practiced these scripts so much that, when I started feeling panic, I developed a different thought pattern to respond to it. Rather than thinking "OH NO, IT'S HAPPENING AGAIN," and triggering body-mind spiraling, instead I would purposefully say to myself, "This is OK. My body is just telling me that it feels like it's in danger. It's not going to hurt me; it might feel uncomfortable for a while, but it will eventually go away." And it would—my new, non-combative connection with the anxiety produced something different. This new response did not make the anxiety magically disappear, but it did keep it at a level that I had learned to tolerate, rather than tipping into panic, and I was able to go about my day and do the things I needed to. In developing a relationship to the anxiety, I, in composition with multiple more-than-human assemblages—my trail, my medication, my assorted wellness techniques, my scripts, my therapist, and so on—had collectively reworked the negative affects that had rendered me an isolated, terrified lump on my couch, and transformed them into new forms of knowledge and affects that yielded increased relational capacities.

I spent the last year being intensely aware of my body in a way I never had before. As an academic, I had always privileged my mind over everything else and ignored my body. Prior to the onset of the panic and anxiety disorder, before that fateful 2018 trip to Europe, my body probably *was* giving off warning signs of fatigue and burnout way before my mind-body simply couldn't take it anymore and imploded. I just didn't pay attention, because my mind was where my work happened, and therefore was much more important than my body. So, I spent a year trapped in a nightmare—immobilized by bodily and mental distress, unable to do the work that I loved.

Yet, this twelve month period—which I have been referring to as a 'lost year' because I have little memory of it (but also because I produced little in the way of academic publications, which still points to the depth of my neoliberal conditioning)—also taught me about my theory in a very different, embodied, way. It taught me about the depth of my conditioning to humanist ideas regarding

the rational, agentic subject who controls their mind; the ability of the mind to control the body; and wellness—as well as humanity—as determined by my very ability to reason. It taught me about the emancipatory potential of decentering myself rather than existing in dialectical opposition to phenomena/the world, of *coming-into-composition* as my approach to life. I thought I knew this before, this relational onto-epistemology, but I only understood it on a theoretical, intellectual level prior to experiencing *feeling-Deleuze-and-Guattari*, *feeling-Braidotti*. The year of supposedly no theory actually yielded embodied knowledge production that helped me understand posthumanism as my corpo-material-affective reality.

I still experience nearly daily anxiety/panic, but it feels manageable (most days, anyway), and since I've been feeling better, I have been pushing myself to write about my experience as much as possible, as a way to connect outward—to enact an affirmative ethics by increasing my relational capacity, making rhizomes (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Forging connections with others through my writing on social media and being able to connect with my colleagues productively again teaches me about the power of connection and proliferation, what *more* it enables me to do. It reminds me how I always want to position myself in composition with others, always connecting up and stretching outward. It reaffirms why posthumanism is a generative, positive worldview: in our relational encounters, we develop adequate knowledge of our conditions and increase our abilities to transform these conditions, which creates joy (Braidotti 2019).

It also produces in me a desire to formally share about my experiences as an academic with an anxiety disorder, as another concrete way to enact an affirmative, relational posthuman ethics. In doing so, I follow a strong feminist/queer tradition of auto/bio/theory works regarding illness (e.g., Ettorre 2005; Stacey 1997; Sedgwick 2000). However, because the *mental* health of academics is still very much a taboo topic (Price 2011; Brunila & Valero 2018), there are not many published accounts that describe experiences such as mine. Like others who have written auto-works about their experiences as an academic with mental health issues (Campbell 2018; Cvetkovich 2012; Jago, 2002), I recognize how putting this story out into the world makes me vulnerable. But, also like them, my hope that this story might help others, and my desire to push back on narratives of shame and silence around mental health issues in the academy, is stronger than my worry about any risks associated with publishing about my experiences.

Just the first presentation I gave on the topic to an academic audience (Strom 2019) shows how powerful this type of sharing can be: during the Q&A, multiple faculty members stood and disclosed their own anxiety and/or panic disorders and talked about how they were pushing back and taking care of themselves in their settings, or how they could do so in the future. Perhaps by naming what is happening to us—at least partially as a result of the toxic, cut-throat, rejection-filled culture of neoliberal academia and the ways that it promotes rational, individualistic, mind-hierarchized ways of thinking about ourselves and our work—and sharing our thinking-feeling, our embodied-theoretical knowledge, we can find ways to disrupt status quo norms/structures and create alternatives that promote healthy body-minds.

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