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Relations of care and affirmative disruptions in academia: A conversation with Katie Strom

Vínculos de solidaridad y interrupciones afirmativas en el mundo académico:
Una conversación con Katie Strom

Enllaços de solidaritat i interrupcions afirmatives al món acadèmic: Una
conversa amb Katie Strom

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Abstract

This article features an intra-view with critical posthumanist Professor Kathryn (Katie) Strom and the co-editors of the intra-view section of this journal Jacky Barreiro and Magali Forte. Throughout their conversation, Strom shares her determination to co-create relations of care and affirmative disruptions in the neoliberal context of academia while giving concrete examples and explaining how her feminist praxis evolved. The three authors discuss several initiatives Strom and others have implemented, inspired by Braidotti's (2019) notion and praxis of affirmative ethics among other feminist scholarship, to create spaces of support for graduate students and early career scholars. This piece encourages readers to view and understand feminist processes as affirmative disruptions to foster affective flows, challenge conventions, and inspire innovative scholarly pursuits.

Keywords

affect; affirmative ethics; relational care; feminist theory; critical posthumanism

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una entrevista con la profesora posthumanista crítica Kathryn (Katie) Strom y las co-editoras de la sección 'intra-view' de esta revista académica, Jacky Barreiro y Magali Forte. A lo largo de su conversación, Strom comparte su determinación de co-crear vínculos de solidaridad y interrupciones afirmativas en el contexto neoliberal académico y da ejemplos concretos explicando cómo su praxis feminista evolucionó. Las tres autoras discuten varias iniciativas que Strom y otros y otras han implementado, inspiradas en la noción y praxis de ética afirmativa de Braidotti (2019) entre otros estudios feministas, para crear espacios de apoyo para estudiantes de posgrado y académicos que inician su carrera. Este artículo anima a los lectores a ver y entender los procesos feministas como interrupciones afirmativas para fomentar flujos afectivos, desafiar convenciones e inspirar búsquedas académicas innovadoras.

Palabras clave

afecto; ética afirmativa; vínculos de solidaridad; teoría feminista; posthumanismo crítico

Resum

Aquest article presenta una entrevista amb la professora posthumanista crítica Kathryn (Katie) Strom i les coeditores de la secció 'intra-view' d'aquesta revista acadèmica, Jacky Barreiro i Magali Forte. Al llarg de la seva conversa, Strom comparteix la seva determinació de co-crear vincles de solidaritat i interrupcions afirmatives en el context neoliberal acadèmic i en dóna exemples concrets explicant com la seva praxi feminista va evolucionar. Les tres autories discuteixen diverses iniciatives que Strom i altres i altres han implementat, inspirades en la noció i la praxi d'ètica afirmativa de Braidotti (2019) entre altres estudis feministes, per crear espais de suport per a estudiants de postgrau i acadèmics que inicien la seva carrera. Aquest article anima els lectors a veure i entendre els processos feministes com a interrupcions afirmatives per fomentar fluxos afectius, desafiar convencions i inspirar cerques acadèmiques innovadores.

Paraules clau

afecte; ètica afirmativa; enllaços de solidaritat; teoria feminista; posthumanisme crític

Introduction

In this article, the two co-editors of the Intra-view section of *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, Jacky Barreiro and Magali Forte, engage in a conversation with critical posthumanist Professor Kathryn (Katie) Strom. Taking after Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action, Barreiro and Vroegindewij (2020) propose that an intra-view is a way to "show the mutual constitution of questions, responses, comments and technologies from which new understandings and questions emerge" (p. 139). This intra-view emerged while we planned, met, and talked on Zoom, and various agencies (emails, questions prepared ahead of time, unexpected answers, time, etc.) became entangled to make visible feminist processes that often go unacknowledged in academia. As Professor Katie Strom shared her academic journey with us, it became clear that her scholarship centers around co-creating and nurturing relations of care and affirmative disruptions in the neoliberal and capitalist world of academia we all try to navigate. We see this intra-view with her as a timely conversation to help push flows of affect that contribute to doing scholarship differently. We invite readers to explore these ideas and see what they might generate, in a way that is both affirmative and disruptive, for their own thinking and practices in academia.

Intra-view

Jacky Barreiro (JB): Hi Katie! Magali and I are happy to have this conversation with you today. We think that your scholarship and the work you do to support graduate students and early scholars navigate academia aligns well with disruptive feminist ideas and practices of relational care. We see your work as steeped in a kind of affirmative ethics that is inspiring. Magali and I read some of your papers and two in particular made a strong impression: *That's not very Deleuzian* (Strom, 2018) and *Learning from a lost year* (Strom, 2021). Both

papers highlight the power imbalances that early scholars can face, especially when gender is involved. The way in which you openly share your vulnerable experiences and how this vulnerability transforms into feminist strength caught our attention. What prompted you to do this affirmative work?

Katie Strom (KS): It's a combination of multiple things, one being my own trajectory and experiences, and another the nature of posthuman and complexity perspectives—they demand relational work. Some of it also had to do with the general nastiness that characterizes academia. Overall, the affirmative work is a way for me to enact a feminist posthuman praxis.

In terms of my formative experiences, I began my career thinking my goal was to be Marilyn Cochran-Smith – an influential, productive scholar whose work was strong both in terms of theory and practical applications.

Then something happened that changed everything. In 2017, a colleague of mine and I put out a special issue in which we used a particular phrase synonymously with 'putting theory to work,' an expression that I've also used in several publications. The special issue went through double-anonymized peer review and was reviewed by all the authors. So when it came out, my co-editor and I were shocked to get a letter from two senior scholars. They accused us of unethically appropriating their work because of that phrase which they used to describe a particular methodological approach. I immediately wrote back with an apology, which was more of a knee-jerk reaction than anything, because these were two feminist posthuman scholars we really respected prior to this. But the more we thought about it and consulted other senior scholars in the field, we realized we actually weren't in the wrong, because we didn't use the phrase in our special issue introduction in the same way they did. We were not talking about a methodological approach but about the need for different frameworks and conceptualizations of teacher development.

Their ideas were used in some of the articles in the special issue, and those cited them appropriately. I was completely devastated and also scared – and things got worse. At the time, the feminist posthuman educational research community across the world was still pretty small and everyone knew everyone. The two senior scholars wrote to every person in that community and told them not to work with me. People started pulling out of projects with me, junior and high-profile scholars alike. They also contacted the publisher of the special issue to try to get it retracted, but thankfully the publishers told them their claims were without merit. Not everyone was cowed into shunning me, and a wonderful, supportive group of feminist posthuman scholars invited me to work with them on another special issue on posthuman feminism, which helped me pick myself back up. But it took a toll. In combination with other stressful events – like Trump becoming president and trying to make ends meet in the high-priced Bay area – I developed a severe anxiety and panic disorder. And so, from 2018 to 2019, I was basically house bound. Honestly, if I hadn't figured out ways to manage the anxiety, I would not be here right now. I was in such bodily distress all of the time that I couldn't think straight, much less write or teach. When I finally learned to manage the anxiety, I realized that I had been irrevocably changed by this. I no longer wanted to be Marilyn Cochran-Smith. I wanted to be an affirmative mentor to junior folks coming into the academy. I wanted to work to make sure that this kind of thing wouldn't happen to other people.

I was also reading Rosi Braidotti, and I absolutely adored her perspective, because she brought an explicitly critical perspective to the posthuman.

JB: Yes, the idea of affirmative critique.

KS: Exactly. Affirmative critique is the idea that we have to really understand and dig into

our conditions, and then figure out how to act differently. Looking straight in the face of the ugliness and trauma of academia, at the ways it impacts us, and then, asking myself 'What can I do differently?' was a way to do that for me. Part of that entailed being open about my own mental health struggles and about the bullying I experienced. Another part was leaning into relationality. I have always had an orientation towards making connections. It just makes me happy to work with other people and to see the things that we can do as multiplicities. I saw a need for that connection with early career scholars doing posthuman work because I kept hearing, 'I'm the only person who's doing this work in my setting.'

There is also this sort of territorializing piece around posthumanism, especially around postqualitative research. I was hearing from a lot of graduate students and early career researchers that they would love to work with posthumanism but that they were scared to get it wrong, that others were going to call them out for not doing it right. So I thought, I'd love to create a space where people can connect and meet other people, where they can grapple with concepts without being judged, where we can all say, 'This is really fucking hard, so let's work together to learn this stuff and think about the ways that we can create lines of flight, disrupt processes in academia that harm us and break us down.'

JB: Thank you for sharing this moving story and your experience with us, Katie. I think it helps us better understand what has brought you to this work, after all that happened to you. Just this morning, I was looking at something you wrote as a response to somebody on Facebook who was asking for support and wanted to know how to start qualitative courses with their students. You responded in such a lengthy and thoughtful way. It's obvious that you take the time to respond with care to these requests on social media, in a very affirmative way.

It's also inspiring to learn about your response to something that shook your ground at the beginning of your career. You didn't let this take you down. You got right up and turned this traumatic experience into a strength. I find that very encouraging and courageous. I really appreciate the work that you're doing. That takes me to a question we have about these initiatives you came up with – the socials and the workshops that are part of the Posthuman Nexus group ([pHn](#)). Could you tell us more about all this incredibly important work that you're doing for the benefit of many others 'on the sidelines' – or maybe this is actually something that is front and center for you?

KS: So, these things were kind of bubbling up around people being isolated in institutions, dealing with academic nastiness, facing the hidden curriculum of getting a job, of presenting yourself, and of wanting to keep learning, amidst all of the demands of the neoliberal university. And there were also the complex and problematic pieces of posthumanism, the need for a space to be able to think through these. Plus, I also love hearing about people's research – I find that I always think, 'Oh, that's so cool! That makes me think of this,' or 'That connects with my work here.' I think this kind of connection is important for sustaining our own hope in this larger mess that we're in.

And so, during Covid, I connected with another posthuman scholar, Bretton Varga, and I told him I was thinking about starting a group focused on connecting and supporting posthuman researchers, especially those in the early career stage. And he said, 'Let's do it.' We had a call, we brainstormed, and we decided on starting with some socials and with a couple of events. And it just grew from there. We thought about the things that we could do in the time that we had, and that's how it works still. We do a social once a month, we do book clubs, writing time. The book club session I run helps me too. I need to keep reading and if I am accountable to a

group of people, I will do it. And we recruit folks to lead groups so we can accommodate different time zones and be as inclusive as possible.

I'm also really inspired by Katherine McKittrick's (2020) ideas about how we can work outside the lines of capitalism – and for us, the neoliberal university. What are the ways in which we can do work that sustains us, that is disruptive in academia, that moves us towards our larger goals of affirmativity and collectivity – and also get credit for them in the neoliberal university, so that we can survive on a daily basis? So, academic service is one conduit. Early career scholars need to engage in service activity, and rather than sitting on another boring university committee, why not run a book club? Why not do something that is going to be fun and revitalizing, and, at the very same time, continue your own learning? Then I offer to write a letter for anybody who gets involved with the Posthuman Nexus so that they can document it as academic service in their dossiers, and to thank them for dedicating their time to lead a social or run a book club session. That becomes something that 'counts' – as far as the neoliberal system goes – towards tenure. It's also really important for our own sustainability because, too often, the social justice work that we do is 'on the sidelines,' as you said. It's in addition to our daily jobs because it's not something that's valued by the neoliberal university. So, we have to make that work more central, to be smart about the way in which we frame it, by using the kind of language that is going to help us describe this work in ways that it fits the system's criteria. And those of us who have a more senior status and some influence can support others by doing things like writing letters to document their service and leadership. That can make a huge difference.

Bretton and I continue to think about ways to decenter ourselves and have other folks be able to run different pieces, because that's

really the only way it can become sustainable for us. Because I'm not an expert. I have a certain set of experiences where maybe I have something to say about a very small slice of things, but I don't want to be centered as the expert who people are going to get a lesson from. I want the Posthuman Nexus to be a place where people can come, and make meaning together, to build a collective agenda. I really hope that's where it goes in the future. We're open to rhizomatic developments and we've had that orientation since the beginning.

JB: You also started a group to help doctoral students apply to the AERA (American Educational Research Association) conference. And there was also the affirmative peer-reviewing practices workshop. What moved you to these other initiatives?

KS: The AERA workshop was something I started out planning for our doctoral students and alumni (at California State University, East Bay) in 2021. It was a small group of people that first year, but every single person got their proposals accepted. So I did it again in 2022, and since it was virtual, I opened it up to all doc students and early career folks. In both 2022 and 2023, the number of participants doubled, and almost everyone was accepted each year. The workshop is mostly about how to write a successful proposal, but there are also pieces around getting to know AERA and strategizing where your work fits. The conference is huge, with tons of SIGs (Special Interest Groups) and 13 divisions, each with multiple strands within those. How do you figure out what's going to be the best fit for you? So I start the workshop with learning about AERA and navigating the submission process. Participants go to the AERA website and read through the Divisions and SIGs, choosing several to look at in more depth. Then I put them in discussion groups, and I have them talk about where they think they might submit and why. If you put your work somewhere where it's not a great fit because

you're not aware of the whole spectrum of possibilities, you have less chances of being accepted. It really is half the battle to just get it into a place where people are going to be excited about your ideas. The other piece is writing. I encourage people to think of a conference proposal as a genre with particular patterns of language that meet specific purposes. We know that AERA reviewers can be assigned up to ten proposals. So they are usually skimming with a checklist of required sections in mind. So you can write with that checklist in mind. For example, you can clearly signal with a topic sentence in each section so the reviewer can quickly find each element that is required: 'My purpose is X. My theoretical framework is X. My methods are X,' and so on. And then, you flesh out that sentence into a paragraph. I also do a follow-up series in the spring with guidance on writing the conference paper, crafting a presentation, and navigating AERA on site. Honestly, it's been a lot of fun to run these workshops, and I've met a lot of amazing people.

And as for the affirmative peer-reviewing practices, that was work I did with Tammy Mills, a very dear friend who works at the University of Maine. We met in our doctoral program and have been writing together for a long time. She has been a conversation partner when it comes to neoliberalism and academia, how it affects us and how we can do things differently. And so, during the first Spring/Summer of Covid, we were doing a diffractive book review for *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, this same journal. We were reading two books together: *Mapping the affective turn in education* (Dernikos et al, 2020), which is edited by Dernikos and colleagues, with Braidotti's *Posthuman knowledge* (2019). We created a double-sided journal where on one side we pulled quotes and on the other side we made connections. And then we got together every week to talk about our readings and to make

meaning together, documenting what it produced for us and asking, 'How is this pushing our thinking?' and 'What is this sparking for us?' One of those sparks was about ways we could apply Braidotti's notion of affirmative ethics. So we were thinking about this idea of spheres of influence, asking ourselves: 'What can the positions that we are in afford us, in terms of power, to influence spaces of academia?' Well, at the time, we were co-editing a special double issue on complexity perspectives in teacher education, and we needed to recruit a lot of reviewers. So we started by creating affirmative criteria for the peer reviewers, because, as editors, we could say, 'You need to write to these criteria.' Then, we came up with the idea of recruiting doctoral students and early career researchers who maybe hadn't reviewed before but wanted to know how to do it. We put together a workshop for them on reviewing from an explicitly affirmative stance. We started out by talking about the affect of reviews, of getting those reviews back. We did that using Massumi's (2002/2015) definition of affect, the way that it can amplify or diminish us. Because when I get back awful reviews that are not necessarily helpful, they don't give me a path forward. They just make me *not* want to do the work because it's such a painful experience. But what if our experience of receiving peer reviews was supportive and filled with guidance for improving our writing (because we can always improve). That's affirmative. It's not 'This is amazing and perfect.' In an affirmative review, I'm pointing to the strengths, the ways that your piece moved me, and it's also suggesting some areas to move forward with. It's so important to be concrete with affirmative feedback, by giving specific suggestions where to go with revisions. It's about taking the ideas forward, taking an affirmative perspective and being proleptic about it. Vygotsky has this concept of prolepsis – it's about looking to the future with your students and communicating it to them. It's about saying 'I know you're going to

get there, I completely believe in you. I know you're going to learn this and I'm going to be with you on this journey.' And then you provide support so they do the hard work. Believing that somebody can do it and articulating it, I think that's half the battle. We can absolutely be proleptic in our reviews, and I think it makes such a huge difference for people on the other end of those reviews when we are.

JB: And I think that this idea of being affirmative and of putting it into practice in different areas is spreading out. I have been thinking about it quite a bit myself. Because it comes from your work in this area, it has actually been a form of mentorship for me. And in conversations with others, affirmative work is also defined as lifting others up as we move forward. It's so important to ask ourselves how we can do that in our practice.

Magali Forte (MF): When you were talking about both the AERA workshop and the affirmative peer-reviewing practices workshop, I was struck by the push-and-pull dynamics that seem to be at work there. On the one hand, you give practical tools to students and early career scholars to navigate things like conference proposals, which is more like working with the constraints of the academic structure. And on the other hand, you also encourage people to think about and to enact different and somewhat disruptive ways to review from an affirmative stance. To me, the affirmative peer-reviewing practices are working at dismantling some of the 'ugliness of academia,' as you called it before. I wonder how you live in this in-between stance, how this whole push-and-pull, working within the system and also trying to undermine it at the same time, affects you.

KS: I see it as very connected, and I'm really pragmatic about it. Within an affirmative ethics framework, you *have* to know the system so well in order to work at dismantling it in ways that people don't realize. So writing that

conference proposal, I'm talking about the structure but I'm not necessarily talking about the content. Your content can be as radical as you want it to be, and as disruptive as you want it to be. But put it in a structure that reviewers are familiar with. Half the time, we know that reviewers are not even reading in depth. The criteria doesn't ask 'Is the objective completely amazing?', or even 'Do you agree with it?' No, the criteria says, 'Do they have a clear objective?' So we have to be strategic.

The other truth is that we are never outside the system, as Braidotti points out. There are a lot of folks who really feel like you have to apply posthuman or new materialist concepts in a perfect way. But the reality is that there is no 'pure' way of applying these theories. It's like when Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write that "[t]here are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots" (p. 20). This hybridity, this "AND" logic, is one of the fundamental characteristics of posthuman perspectives. We always have to negotiate within the system, and since we and the system are co-constituted, everything we do is going to be hybrid. So we can dig into the system very deeply, get to know it so well, and then do things differently. But in subversive ways, where, at least in the beginning, the system doesn't recognize that's what we're doing. And then it's too late (muah ah ah!).

JB: Two things come to mind here. One is Audre Lorde's (1984) idea that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." I'm wondering if there is some tension there because you are using the system to dismantle the system. But, at the same time, as you said, we're always embedded in the system so we can't really work outside of it. This is making me think about something Vanessa Andreotti said in an interview (The EMERGE Platform, 2019). That, in some ways, we support the system because it does

something for us as well. What do you think about these potential lines of tension?

KS: I actually think that just because something is associated with the system, it doesn't mean that it's all bad, that we should throw everything out. For example, when I introduce the idea that our writing at the doctoral level is normed on whiteness and can be exclusionary, some ask, 'Why do I have to learn how to do this then? Why don't we just toss it out the window, burn it all down, and do our own thing?' And my response is 'Well, one, because we have to get you this degree before you can do the burning, and two, because there are some things that are actually useful that we can take with us as we're morphing into something that is more aligned to our values and more authentically expresses our worldviews.' One of the characteristics of academic writing, if you do it well, is that it's extremely well scaffolded. So my approach to writing is a pedagogical one – the writer's job is not just to stick content on the page, it is to structure it in a way that you are building bridges for your reader to go on the journey with you. Of course, it's important to understand that it's not the *only* approach, that it's okay to do something totally different. But it's also okay if that type of structure works for you. And again, sometimes the disruptiveness is not the structure, it's the content – we can use a recognizable structure for us to get our radical ideas through the system.

JB: I actually see the writing process you were just describing as an *English* writing process. Being Hispanic, I'm thinking 'There are other languages, and language also comes with a particular kind of thinking, and with a culture.' Jairo Fúnez-Flores says that Hispanics, non-North Americans or non-Western thinkers need to read scholarship in English from the Global North but that Global North scholars are not, for the most part, reading scholarship from the South. So, I'm thinking about the system and facilitating it as a

Hispanic sitting in an office in Canada, after having obtained a PhD in Canada, but I can see these tensions too. The irony of it doesn't escape me – doing this and being part of it as well, and thinking 'Well, that this is not the way, but the *English* language way.' We also have to acknowledge that academic writing acts as a gate that keeps a lot of people out. And I see your work, Katie, as opening the gate. I really hope that we get to a point where the vast majority of English speakers read more of the scholarship being done in the rest of the world, especially scholarship from the Global South.

KS: I think that so much would have to change in the US for us to value other languages and other ways of being. I think the average person doesn't even realize the way that we see the world is just *one* particular way, and that there are others – much less that it's extremely political. So the most important thing for me is just continually stressing to students that there are multiple ways and that you can create hybrids from them. It's really your purpose that should be driving the forms that you use, and maybe your purpose is to uplift cultural ways of knowing and being, and then that will drive what you choose. But, as Deleuze says, we are segmented all around and in so many ways. For example, in a three-year EdD program, we're segmented in terms of the time that we have is limited, so we can't expose students to all the different ways we would like. Every time you draw a boundary around what you expose them to, then, that's political, and potentially limiting. But you can make sure that you connect with them and learn about their interests so you can make suggestions. It's about making sure everybody understands that whatever you're talking about is *one* way, not necessarily the 'correct' way. And also situating it in terms of power relations, so that we can make informed decisions about it.

JB: And since we are talking about power relations, as you are aware, academia often fails to account for the pervasiveness of its own whiteness and Eurocentric views. As a white feminist and posthumanist scholar, how do you feel about that?

KS: I came into posthumanism already with a critical perspective, bringing Freire, Maxine Greene and bell hooks with me. And so, that was always part of my meaning-making, assembling critical perspectives with ontologically relational ones. I also think that, as a scholar, it takes a while for you to get the confidence to say, 'Actually, I'm going to create my own kind of mash-up and my own assemblage,' rather than thinking you have to follow the 'experts' and mimic what they do.

So, the entry point for me was thinking about subjectivity. I spent years grappling with this notion of subjectivity and Deleuze, and the fact that most interpretations end up throwing out the subject and saying, 'We have to completely decenter ourselves, and the subject does not become part of the analysis.' And then, I realized that this is a central point that critical scholars, Indigenous scholars, Black studies scholars, Global South scholars are saying, 'That's irresponsible, disingenuous, and it also erases those of us who have never been able to be human.' Through Haraway, Braidotti, and Barad, I came to understand that, if we take the human out of things, we're actually just reproducing that voice from everywhere and nowhere. We cannot take an immanent perspective if we are not in it ourselves. And because the vast majority of posthumanist folks are white folks, we're actually perpetuating whiteness if we're not problematizing it in our own perspectives. Your whiteness, and whatever your assemblage of positionality is, has to be part of your analysis. Whiteness, race and racism – all of these are forces and systems that need to be accounted for and that need to be part of every analysis.

So, I started reading more and more Indigenous, Black, and Global South scholars, and looking for folks who are using posthuman or complex ideas alongside critical and decolonial ones. For example, Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) assemblage some Foucault, Ahmed and affect theory, with critical whiteness studies to think about whiteness and racism as affective forces and the implications for education. These provide more tools for me, not to throw things out, but to refine an assemblage that allows me to use posthuman concepts in an ethical way.

MF: Another question we crafted is about your paper *That's not very Deleuzian* (Strom, 2018). Both Jacky and I read it early in our doctoral journeys, and it resonated with the difficulty we were experiencing reading such dense texts as Deleuze and Guattari's work. And at the same time, with the joy and thrill of reading stuff that was different from other academic texts from our field that are usually less philosophically-oriented. We also heard the kind of criticisms and comments - 'Oh, that's not what Deleuze and Guattari meant,' or 'I don't think that's how you're supposed to apply this concept' for example - that you describe in this article. It was interesting to see this judgmental comment - 'That's not very Deleuzian' - coming up in three different encounters for you, and probably more times than that too. We see these comments as drawing boundaries rather than opening lines of flight.

So, we wonder how the idea of being referred to by other people as a posthumanist scholar sits with you. Do you define yourself as a posthumanist scholar? And how do these labels work for you? What do you think or feel that label of being either a Deleuzian scholar, or a posthuman scholar might do to someone as a person, to their work, and to their thinking?

KS: When we have to name something, it's really for practical purposes, because we

need to be able to talk about it. So, it has a function, but it's always inadequate. I also think words evoke different affects depending on where you are in time and space and in relation to others. So, earlier in my career, I would have been thrilled if folks had seen me as a posthuman scholar. And then, in the last several years, there's been some backlash toward posthumanist theory coming from Indigenous, postcolonial, and Black scholars, and not without merit. I went through a few years of really grappling with the questions, 'Who do I want to be as a scholar?' and also 'What can I do to make sure I'm not erasing Indigenous and Black knowledges and epistemologies, and not appropriating them?' My imperfect solution was to engage in theoretical assemblaging, which I just talked about - to cite a range of folks who are discussing these ideas. Perhaps there are some slight nuances between them, but they collectively entail broad ontoepistemological shifts pointing toward relationality and affirmative difference and vitality and the more-than-human.

I also think that we need all of the tools in the toolbox. Some scholars say 'We don't need this,' but then that is actually a binary perspective. Posthumanism has particular tools to offer. And I think that being really purposeful and putting to work critical posthumanism in conjunction with other theories is valuable. And it is also important to call out posthumanism when scholars are using it in ways that reproduce the very Eurocentric ontoepistemologies that they were critiquing in the first place. So I think it's always both/and, acknowledging the affordances and the tensions, because we are able to think with multiple ideas at the same time. Any framework you have is just one way of understanding the world that maybe does something for you. So, you have to keep these complexities upfront and always bring that critical perspective, that power analysis.

MF: I like that you said that we need ‘all of the tools in the box.’ I think we live in such a complex world that it's hard to discard some theories. Coming from a more conventional kind of qualitative tradition and from ethnographic approaches, I try my best not to forget about these, and to acknowledge what's still pertinent about them in many ways, what worked well, and what still works in certain contexts. And I have my supervisor, Diane Dagenais, to thank for that, because she's had such a brilliant career using these approaches and also thinking with sociomaterial theories before she retired. As she says it herself, it's about widening our gaze as researchers and being willing to consider theories and approaches in a relational perspective. That's what you were saying too, Katie. We have to ask ‘What is it that needs to change, that needs to shift?’ *and* we need all the tools in the box to answer this question.

JB: When I started with New Materialism, I started by reading Latour and the Actor-Network Theory. It helped me understand the relationality of the world and that's how it shifted my thinking into recognizing who's speaking relationally in different areas. And then I realized that other people had been saying the same thing. The more you read as a student, you realize you do not have to be in just one silo but you can open. And I think that's what has happened in general with posthumanism. You start looking at this from one perspective, from one point and understanding that helps you step into relationality. And then you can actually understand other scholarship and see the relationality there. For me, posthumanism has been this Western way of speaking about relationality. And obviously, it's not the only way. We know that Indigenous people have been talking about relationality earlier. But that's how I came to this, and that's the way a lot of people came to understand the

relational ontology of the world lately, through posthumanism.

KS: Part of my research has to do with language and working with teachers to understand language and multilingual learners from an assets-based perspective, from an affirmative difference sort of perspective. One of the things we talk about is that the language that you grow up with is so entangled with who you are. It creates you in a way, and so you have so many attachments and affects that it evokes. I actually think that is also true of our intellectual genealogies, because for many of us, our doctoral programs are a time of intense growth, and we develop attachments to our professors, our mentors, and ideas we learned with them. So, I don't think we need to throw these out. We need everything. And so, again, it's an ‘and.. and... and...’ kind of logic. Posthumanism provides some useful tools – we just have to be cognizant of the power relations and the ways that we are using them.

MF: Hence the ‘critical’ that comes with it. Natalie Clark (2009), who's a Welsh, Irish and Métis scholar, asks: ‘Who are you, and why do you care?’ I love that second part of the question – why do you care about the work you do, the research you engage in, the texts you read, the intellectual genealogies you engage with? It's a genuine and complex question. I have found it so inspiring to see feminists and feminist posthumanists bridging the artificial gap between the personal and the academic and sharing who they are as whole persons, and why they care about the work that they're doing. That's something that we've seen a lot in your work specifically, Katie. This leads us to the piece you wrote about anxiety because it is personal. Jacky and I read it together and were both quite moved by it, as it made us feel and reflect about our own encounters with anxiety, not only within the academic realm, but also in our personal lives. This kind of writing pushes us to acknowledge that everything is tied, and

that the different pieces of our identities do not exist in separate boxes. Why was it important for you to write and to publish a piece about your experience with anxiety in an academic journal (*Capacious*)?

KS: *Learning from a lost year* (Strom, 2021) actually started as a Facebook post. I had a series of panic attacks during the summer of 2018 that literally rewired my brain. Before the development of the anxiety disorder, I was so productive – I was doing all the things! But afterward, I dropped off the face of the earth academically. For nearly a year, I could barely get off my couch. I felt so awful, all the time, I couldn't think straight, and I would have these spirals of 'I'm never going to write again.' But after a lot of cognitive behavioral therapy and finding the right meds and lots of other things – I call it an 'everything-and-the-kitchen-sink-anxiety' assemblage – I started slowly being able to think again. And once the fog cleared, I sat down, and I started writing these very thickly descriptive vignettes about what it felt like. I thought to myself, 'I never want to lose the memory of how terrible this was,' because I knew that getting better was also about having boundaries, taking care of myself, and I did not want to slip back into old patterns ever again.

On the one-year anniversary of those first panic attacks, I posted a reflection on Facebook about what I'd been through the past year, and it resonated with a lot of people. At the time, I had just gotten tenure, so I thought, 'Okay, I now have some job protection. I am going to leverage this privilege to write about this, to put it right out there.' And people wrote to me from all over the world saying, 'I read this, and I don't feel alone.' And so, I think that it is probably the most impactful piece I've written (and it's not even what I research!).

MF: Yes, and, again, there's such a genuine aspect to it that I see in other pieces that

you've written, and in the many other things that you do, not just in your writing. And I think that's beautiful, I think that's something really inspiring. Towards the end of this particular piece, you share that you realized that writing about your anxiety in such a personal way makes you vulnerable. This idea of vulnerability came up quite a bit at the ECQI (European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry) conference I was just at, not as a bad thing, on the contrary, as something that's in sync with the flows of affect that are part of every encounter we have in our inquiry practices and in our teaching. As something that we need, that helps us relate to one another. The word 'vulnerable' comes from the Latin word *vulnus* which means 'wound' in English. This makes me think about something that one of my mentors, Dr. Vicki Kelly, said quite a few times when she worked closely with me and other Faculty Associates last year at SFU in our in-service teacher education programs. She encouraged us to think about the fact that difficult situations, such as the one you shared, Katie, always have absolutely everything to do with who we are and with what we do in the world. They affect us and become the sources of our strengths. They contribute to our awareness to move forward, to the decisions we'll make in the future. That's something that, when we can, we *should* be very open about. They are these nourishing fields of affective resonances that allow us to connect to one another, and to have compassion and love for one another. I think that, sadly, that's something that is often left out, even removed from the academic sphere.

JB: As you were saying, Katie, 'this is not part of [your] research agenda,' so I see it as one of these excesses that end up getting lost because they are not usually recognized as scholarly work. And I think that's one of the arguments of feminist thinking – scholarship is broader than just cognitive processes or rational thinking. We leave so much out trying

to follow this rigid kind of scholarship. Whereas for me, it's about bringing the whole being into it, along with the good and the bad, with what happens in the family, what happens in the kitchen, what happens everywhere. It is all part of who we are. Magali and I have been invited to contribute to a podcast conversation to talk about feminist thinking and practice. When I wrote my bio for it, I ended it with 'Jacky lives happily in Burnaby with her wife Vivi.' And then the person who invited us sent shortened versions of our bios back, the ones they were going to read aloud at the beginning of the conversation. And they had taken out that sentence. So, I wrote back and I said, 'I want that sentence in there' because it's part of my identity. I am a lesbian, and I live with my wife, and that is part of who I am, how I read, how I think, how I write. I cannot separate these things. If we pretend that these things don't exist, then we only focus on this cognitive rational aspect. Your article brings back the whole self at the centre. When Magali and I were reading it, that's what I was feeling – a full person!

KS: Well, I think that was sort of the beginning of wanting to make relations of care in academia a more central part of my work. And it's interesting because I've had to think about how it relates to my articulated research agenda – and it's micro- *and* macro-levels of engaging with these relational onto-epistemologies. At the micro level, it's the studies of teachers in the classroom to understand teaching in more complex relational ways; and how we can use complex perspectives to help teachers problem-solve in more complex ways and to develop orientations towards pluriversality. And at the macro level, it's about making a worldwide shift to this kind of relational and affirmative thinking. And so affirmative academia is one piece of that. It's about opening up these things that are ignored, the things we tend to pretend are not there. It can be so hurtful to

have an important part of your identity erased, as in the example you have just given, Jacky. In my case, I realized that I had had the anxiety for a really long time, and I just kept ignoring it and pushing it down and just white-knuckling through it. And then my body just said 'No more!' and exploded, imploded. During treatment, my therapist said 'You can't ignore it. If you do, it's just going to get worse.' So I worked at acknowledging it and at being okay with it. It was actually the most important thing for me. So now, when I am having a bad anxiety day, the thing that helps me the most is saying to myself, 'This is okay. It's okay to have anxiety.' And so, it's no longer something bad that I'm going to ignore. It's something that's just a part of my daily reality.

JB: And that's why what you share touches and resonates for so many others because we are all embedded in late capitalism and its affects.

KS: Yes, hence the importance of decentering it and saying 'This isn't something bad that exists within me alone.' If we don't talk about it, we develop shame, and we hide it. And that makes me go back to the idea of leveraging privilege as somebody who has had wonderful opportunities to publish and to present in lots of different venues. And so, if I can talk from a position of a little bit of influence to say 'Look, I'm struggling with this,' then that's going to open up possibilities for more conversations and for people to feel more connected. And then, this isn't just a 'me' problem anymore – it illuminates a collective wound.

MF: Given everything you've just explained, we are wondering how your understanding and lived experience of relational feminism might help open up the current scope of new materialism.

KS: One of the things that's always drawn me to feminist theory is relations of care. I've always, ever since I can remember, felt passionately about equity and justice. I grew

up in Montgomery, Alabama, the cradle of the Civil Rights movement. And so that's always been a part of my consciousness, but it was much later that I explicitly integrated an approach that is caring, that advocates that having explicit relations of care isn't a weakness (because schools make us think it's only about the intellectual). Braidotti's *Posthuman Feminism* (2022) pushed me to do a lot of thinking more explicitly about how to nurture collective relations of care in academia – and in ways that are sustainable too, because care can also be exhausting. It's also exploitable. For example, in my program, when your students don't finish their doctorate in three years, you don't get paid or get units beyond that – yet you are expected to continue to provide free labor because don't we care about our students and if they finish?

I've tried to think about the ways in which we can have these relations of care and get folks to participate in them while also thinking strategically about how to meet the requirements of the neoliberal university, as I mentioned before. Writing letters to document service, writing recommendation letters for jobs or promotions, thinking with folks about how to make their affirmative work 'count' as we discussed earlier – that is all part of my care practice. Tammy Mills and I have done this by publishing peer-reviewed articles about some of the affirmative interventions, and that allows us to meet that peer-review quota while we're reading, exploring and talking to each other about these things that are important to us.

MF: Brilliant! And it's done in such an honest and relatable way too. There's that question – the entry point as you called it – that you two ask in that diffractive book review you wrote together: 'What the fuck is affect?' My personal response as a reader was, 'Ah, thank you for asking that because that's exactly what I was thinking!' I literally felt relief that I wasn't the only one thinking that. So, it was as

much the thinking-with as the feeling-with that counted.

KS: Yes, and this actually also comes from some of Jessica (Ringrose)'s and EJ (Renold)'s impact on me. In 2018, they invited me to be one of the speakers at the second-generation conference of the [PhEMaterialisms](#) network. It was almost exclusively women that were speaking there, and they were being very real and calling things out that are typically the quiet part you don't say out loud in academia, and saying 'Fuck!' It was empowering and I think that it's also a feminist way of doing this thing where we are not the dutiful daughters, where we are not playing the lady-like, quiet, demure academic. We're going to say – and to write – 'Fuck.' But we know that we have to be strategic, we have to protect those that don't have tenure yet. So, maybe those of us who do have it are saying the 'quiet' parts aloud, in solidarity. This makes me happy.

JB: There are ways of doing that can be so truthful. We could do academia more often in a way that supports each other, that helps each other grow, in a relational way.

It's been really great having this conversation with you, Katie, seeing the behind-the-scenes with you, in such an open way. And it's been great to get to know what your process has been in the many different events that you're leading and that brought us to want to have this conversation with you in the first place when you responded to our call on Facebook for the intra-view section.

Is there anything else that you would like to discuss before we end?

KS: No, no, I really have appreciated the conversation, and it's always nice to have the opportunity to reflect. We're always constructing our understandings, and so every time I say something out loud and in conversation with others, I'm learning, and I'm getting more certain about the sort of nomadic journey that I'm on. I think 'Okay,

people are resonating with this, and this seems like it's really worth it.'

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