

Affective Engagement in Knowledge-making

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the discussion animating the track “Doing research in technoscience as affective engagement” organised at the VIII STS Italia Conference. By acknowledging the inheritance of feminist STS scholars in expanding the theoretical scope of care beyond its traditional sites, this session was devoted to exploring knowledge production as a matter of care as well as a form of affective engagement and entanglement with multiple Others while doing research. Two contributions were presented. The first ethnographically investigates Canadian blood donation practices by drawing on Haraway’s SF figure to develop what the speaker calls ‘Sanguine Figuration’. The second presentation relies on research of women’s animist practices amongst horses in Swiss Alps through a filmmaking practice influenced by Haraway’s work on the *natureculture* continuum and situated knowledge. Both studies embody efforts to develop non-representational research practices and experimental approaches showing the affective entanglement between researchers and researched, subject and object. Further, these contributions have highlighted the importance of conceptual creativity and imagination in building an apparatus that enables accounting for affective engagements in doing research in STS.

Keywords: Affect; body; entanglement; posthuman feminism; post-qualitative.

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I. Introduction

Affect can be described as a moment of intensity, a reaction in/of the body at the level of matter, and affectivity can be formulated in terms of ‘affect/being affected’, with modes of intensification, movement, and capacities (Gherardi et al. forthcoming).

The ‘affective turn’ in Science and Technology Studies (STS) is experiencing renewed interest, manifested in research works exploring affective entanglements and embodied ways of knowing in science. Feminist thinkers, in particular posthuman feminist scholars (e.g., Alaimo 2010; Braidotti 2013; Niccolini and Ringrose, 2019) have contributed extensively to studying the transformative potential of affect in research and knowledge creation. Within STS, we could mention Donna Haraway’s (1991; 1997) foundational work on the situatedness of knowledge, which points at knowing and thinking as inconceivable without a multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we *think with*. Building on Haraway, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2012; 2017) emphasises, in a non-idealized way, how relations of thinking and knowing require care, and how such relationality is not without conflict or dissension. Therefore, we – as researchers – should be aware that our knowledge practices always entail important consequences (see the concept of ‘cut’ in Karen Barad’s agential realism theory (2007)), which are not always positive for every-body and every-thing (Cozza et al. 2021). Echoing Puig de la Bellacasa, and focusing greater attention on affect and care in sociology, and particularly in STS, Latimer and López (2019) propose the concept of ‘intimate entanglements’ as a material-semiotic device to think not beyond, or together with, but alongside multiple and troubling countless Others, humans and more-than-humans that are deeply implicated in and contribute to practices of knowledge-making.

In STS, laboratory studies (Knorr Cetina 1981; Latour 1979; 1988; Lynch 1991; Traweek 1988) have widely articulated the role of technoscientific assemblages in generating knowledge: scientists, practitioners, particles, cells, fluids, matter, animals, plants, objects and technologies contribute altogether to doing and redoing science and the world. As for the affective turn in laboratory studies, Myers (2006) makes visible the roles of embodiment, affect and performance in scientific knowledge production, with ethnographic attention to the expressive body-work of molecular modelling. Aiming at innovating STS analyses of the performativity of scientific knowledge, she usefully reminds of Erving Goffman’s suggestion that ethnographers – and researchers more generally – “must ‘tune’ their bodies ‘in’ to the daily activities and practices of those they study. This would require subjecting one’s own body to the rhythms of another’s

practices in order to gain a richer interpretation of the plays of affect, gesture and language among members in particular group” (p. 8).

More recently, Smolka et al. (2021) have proposed the concepts of ‘disconcertment’, ‘affective labor’, and ‘responsivity’ to analyse the role of the body in interdisciplinary collaborations. That is, they develop a heuristic meant as “a provisional tool that helps us think of disconcertment as a form of responsivity. Responsivity emerges among interdisciplinary collaborators who became increasingly sensitive to how researchers from other disciplines think, talk, and behave. Sensing and responding to differences may be disconcerting, but engaging with disconcertment becomes easier with practice, what we refer to as ‘affective labor’” (p. 4).

Similarly, Hillersdal et al. (2020) contribute to the ongoing discussion within STS, inspired by the strand of research that has centred on emotions and affects in the practices of science (on the role of emotions, see, e.g., Barbalet 2002; Kerr and Garforth 2016; Parker and Hackett 2012). In particular, by drawing on Haraway’s (1997) notion of ‘response-ability’ (i.e., the capability to work with sensitivity to difference) and Verran’s (2001) concept of ‘generative critique’ (i.e., the ability to develop other ways of seeing and doing problems), Hillersdal and colleagues point out how affective tensions can be generative of effects not only on modes of collaboration, but also on the knowledge we – as researchers – contribute, and the ways we engage the world in our scientific practices. They have the merit of clarifying the important distinction between affect and emotion. Affect is “relational and not belonging to particular individuals or representing private emotions. Instead, affect is understood as the effects of situated practices of social bodies” (p. 70). Such a remark warns off defining ‘what affect is’ but rather invites to focus on ‘what affect does’ in knowledge-making practices (Gherardi et al. forthcoming).

The track “Doing research in technoscience as affective engagement”, which I organised together with Silvia Bruzzone and Lucia Crevani (Mälardalen University, Sweden) for the VIII STS Italia Conference, was grounded on such an understanding of affect as doing, caring and becoming-with multiple Others. In the following, I summarise the purpose of the track and the main contributions of the two presentations that animated the discussion.

2. A Conversation Around ‘Bloody-fleshy’ and ‘Wild’ Affective Engagement

The track originated from our (convenors’) urgency to understand care as a commitment with the worlds that we, and our fellow researchers, are

part of and study. We developed our proposition by acknowledging the inheritance of feminist STS scholars in expanding the theoretical scope of care beyond its traditional sites, of health care and domestic labour, to include knowledge production (Martin et al. 2015). We positioned our invitation into the transdisciplinary post-qualitative debate on affect as “the capacity to affect and being affected” (Massumi 2002, p. 5) through encounters while doing research. From this perspective, the researcher is not conceived as an external, neutral, detached observer, but rather as an actor engaged in becoming-with-data (Bispo and Gherardi 2019). This view urges “finding ways to re-affect an objectified world” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, p. 99). Hence, for this track, we invited contributions exploring the idea of doing research as a form of affective engagement and entanglement with the humans and more-than-humans to whom we – as researchers – relate while doing research.

Six abstracts were accepted for presentation, but only two were finally presented. In particular, the discussion revolved around Tyler Anderson’s (Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada) research, titled “Blood lines: Notes toward investigating affective-discursive entanglements of knowing and being through Canadian blood donation practices”, and Anna Joos Lindberg’s (independent videographer and visual anthropologist) study “*Wild Woman*: Disrupting the disembodied researcher. The personal essay-film as feminist research methodology”. Without any pretension of being exhaustive of the theoretically rich, (post)methodologically exciting, and affectively engaging work of Anderson and Joos Lindberg, I summarise their main contributions, as well as what caught my attention and interest as an STS posthuman feminist scholar.

As the title of his presentation discloses, Anderson is investigating Canadian blood donation practices. As defined in his conference abstract, blood is a natural technology of the body and a meaning-making referent, something that speaks loudly about the entangled natures of knowing and being. In Anderson’s words, “blood is affective: the intense wave of ‘giving life’. Blood is discursive; blood quantum that decide racial ‘purity’”. He continues: “[a]s an object of study in a Feminist STS tradition, blood is a fierce material and abstract signifier that demonstrates importantly how the Actual is always more than itself and how complex processes of understanding tend to become flattened into discrete Things to be acted upon, and how these objects of knowledge are made to speak some sort of Truth to being”. In his presentation, Anderson “put forward how these epistemological tensions can be meaningfully addressed by tending to affect”. To this end, he turns to Haraway’s canonical body of work and the figure of ‘SF’ that she introduces in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). SF stands for “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative

feminism, science fact (...) SF is a method of tracing, of following a thread in the dark (...) SF is a practice and process; it is becoming-with each other in surprisingly relays” (pp. 2–3).

Anderson interprets and transforms SF into his research. Indeed, he has developed an extremely fascinating sign, called ‘Sanguine Figuration’ to stay with the troubles that come with ‘blood’ as a complex and multiple object of inquiry. In an unpublished chapter of his doctoral dissertation, generously shared with me – upon my request to know more about such a fascinating figure – Anderson says that he coined this term “in a Harawayian sense to capture the current moment and what it means to be a fleshy, bloody body in an age of extinction. It refers to an analytic – modes of thought and thinking that figure the body as discursive, affective, *and* material; as naturecultural; as biosocial; all the while refusing essentialisms; refusing naturalizations and concretized markings that condemn the body-as-fixed-object. *Sanguine figures* understand the body as dynamic and generative. As the place where it all happens. And as a lively place to induce change” (forthcoming, p. 2). He clearly develops a feminist STS approach to blood through a no-representational material-semiotic technology which, in Harawayian terminology, corresponds to a practice and art of fabricating meaning with signs, words, ideas, descriptions and theories to link meaning and bodies. But he is also developing his own affective methodology to account for how multiple subjectivities – including himself – are entangled in blood donation practices, as well as their agentic capacities to affect.

Joos Lindberg's study shared with Anderson's an intention to stay with the troubles. She rejects any toxic ‘objectivity’ by learning, in her own body, how to generate situated knowledge in encounters between people and communities (Haraway 1988). In her research on women's animist practices among horses in a remote corner of the Swiss Alps, Joos Lindberg – building on Haraway's work – disrupts traditional distances between researchers and informants, subject and object, by employing the sensory faculties (mainly sight) of filmmaking as opposed to a textual and representational methodology. *Wild woman* is a feminist essay-film (2020, 19 mins) that Joos Lindberg shared at the conference track and which she produced as part of her MA dissertation, completed in October 2019 at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology. It is a provocative film where the represented natureculture continuum may, at times, be disturbing or appear to embody an overflowing bond between humans and more-than-humans (i.e., horses) to which, especially in a Western anthropocentric culture, people are unaccustomed. Joos Lindberg acknowledges that the fieldwork also involved interrogating herself as a woman (immersed in a contest of

‘wild women’), even before her role as a researcher (initially tolerated but not welcomed).

In this regard, discussion was led by the fact that – in appropriating Haraway’s dilemma regarding the importance of how scholars can get into, rather than out of, the field– Joos Lindberg did not try to buff out of her research project the discrepancy between her own anthropological perspective and Caroline’s (an informant) pagan perspective. Rather, Joos Lindberg embraced the affective labor (Smolka et al. 2021) performed in the encounter with forces in a world unknown by secular science (see also annajoos.com). Joos Lindberg allowed her authorial control to be challenged by, for example, including scenes showing her incomplete control of such a multispecies ethnography (for example, when Caroline refused Anna’s technologically mediated presence). However, as Joos Lindberg disclosed, precisely this conscious vulnerability eventually enabled a conversation between her informant and herself. Joos Lindberg’s stance for an affective engagement in research embodies the feminist practice of rejecting the mythical “god trick of seeing everything from nowhere [because] this eye fucks the world to make techno-monsters” (Haraway 1988, p. 581). She was not afraid of letting the ethnographic field *leak* into her epistemological possibilities as researcher. On the contrary, she was and is interested in experimenting with such a ‘leak’ between informant, researcher, personal life and the ethnographic field, and what it *does* or, rather, how this ‘leak’ affects the overall research assemblage.

Both presentations generously fostered discussion and, afterwards, populated my thoughts on affective engagement in technoscientific knowledge-making practices.

3. Conclusion

Tyler Anderson’s sanguine figuring and Anna Joos Lindberg’s feminist filmmaking embody efforts to develop non-representational research practices and experimental approaches in studying affective entanglements in technoscience. Their fieldwork speaks about fleshy and bodily multiplicity and multispecies entanglements that interrogate them on different levels, leaving traces of affective encounters on their research practices as well as their being and doing. Their bodies of work not only reminded me of the scholarly importance of interrogating the adequacy of the onto-epistemological apparatus which I mobilize when approaching my subject-object of inquiry, but also invited me to ponder whether I, in my knowledge-making practice, produce adequate interpretations of real-life conditions in fast-changing times. To account for such affective material-semiotic

complexity, posthuman scholars (Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018) remind us of the importance of conceptual creativity, which means trusting in the powers of the imagination. Haraway's figurations are excellent examples. This is not only for the sake of inventing new terms or concepts, but for a research apparatus that accounts for the relationships between critique, creativity, and ethical accountability, rather than applying the form of intellectual laziness which still confines many (STS) researchers to a practice of 'following the actors', as per the mandate of the pragmatist research program of the 1920s. What I deem important is questioning the great divide between subject and object by more 'objectively' – in a Harawayian sense – acknowledging the affective engagements with the sociomaterial assemblage that we, as researchers, *become with* in our fieldwork. In this, I stay with Susan Leigh Star who, already in 1995, pointed out that "we must vastly complexify the way we think and talk about matter" (p. 20). This track was an attempt to further work in that direction.

Post-scriptum

The two presentations – focused on blood transfusion and entanglement between humans and animals (namely horses) – evoked in me Marion Laval-Jeantet's (2011) (artist, transcultural psychiatrist, and Associate Professor, University Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne) performance *May the Horse Live in Me*, a project questioning scientific methods and tools and exploring trans-species relationship, in which the artist injected herself with horse blood plasma.

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