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Speech acts as contingent encounters: realizing agency in contaminated worlds

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Speech Acts as Contingent Encounters:
Realizing Agency in Contaminated Worlds

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Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
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Prologue

Agency can be defined as the capacity to act or the state of doing so. I have agency the moment I believe that I do, and belief is *realized* in the act of performing it. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry travels back in time with Hermione to rescue his godfather, Sirius. While waiting, he watches for the mysterious source of his earlier deliverance from the dementors via the perfect cast of a patronus spell. As his past self nears demise and no figure appears, Harry suddenly realizes the spellcaster can only be him, and in a moment of truth, he perfectly casts the spell for the first time, empowered by the knowledge that he had already done so. I have agency the moment I realize my ability to act is nothing outside of me, nothing within me, but realized in the act itself, in the present, not the future. How could I have agency any moment before the one I realize it? “Realize” can mean to become aware of something, and it can mean to achieve something. Agency is *realized* in both senses of the word at once.

Harry Potter realizes his agency in the casting—the speaking—of a spell. Belief is realized in an act; an act of speech. Beliefs are formed by thoughts, which in turn are memories of spoken words. How else then, could agency be realized than in the act of its declaration? Language is always a dialogue, always a network of relations. No thought, no act of speech can happen outside this process of relations; everything I say addresses you, acknowledges you in some way. Out of this language network arise narratives, capable of lasting across time through the construction of ordered systems. Society, “the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community”¹ is thus the result of order-forming narratives.

My aim in this paper is to explore how agency is realized at an individual level within the context of a society dominated by a pervasive framework of influence, imposing its narratives of

¹ Oxford Online Dictionary.

order into every corner of life and threatening the local narratives of agency. Agency in this world becomes a privilege even while it remains an essential aspect of human well-being.

We can find agency threaded as a dialogue through and between various texts which address how language can limit or open perception. Donna Harway and Anna Tsing invite the use of novel vocabulary to challenge what narratives are available to think with, looking to unexpected collaborations where these narratives already take place—where the capacity for alternate stories are realized already. No concepts are safe in this process; collaboration is messy. Western society and thought appear to have taken us on a trajectory toward sameness, toward a sterile, singularly defined world free from contamination. This narrative of conquest over nature is becoming unthinkable in the face of ecological ruination—secure we are not. The ways of operating for unexpected collaborations—antithetical to the mission of global sameness—are not discoverable within the confines of determinate description; they require the “art of noticing;” an intention to open attention to the “indeterminacy of encounter.”²

Order and rules, once centralized in and enforced by monarchical states, have since been fragmented, dispersed into the fabric of society at a granular level, as an abstract panopticon. Society—the aggregate order of people—functions as a system of communication, enabled and upgraded through technology. Our techno-cratic society is built on systems of language through metaphor and myth. Metaphors structure our narratives implicitly according first to our orientation through sensation, then to a hierarchical system of coherent metaphors.³ Examples of agency can be discovered in narratives outside the order of modern society, and contained in these narratives of collaboration are a well of metaphors we can use to think with more imaginatively. Metaphors frequently create understandings of our world abstractly by linking

² Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), 29, 36, 38, 46-47.

³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (1980), 25.

direct experiences. For example, we conceive of ourselves and the world in terms of containers, objects with an outside that separates it from an inside. Common phrases including: *You don't know the real me*, *I can't get inside his head*, and *she opened up to me about her feelings* all demonstrate this metaphor which implies a sense of separation between ourselves and others.

Perceiving people as individual containers frames the act of speaking as fundamentally difficult, since I understand that somehow I have to transfer the voice inside me out of my container and into yours. If agency is realized in the act of its declaration, so is the capacity to speak; it cannot be contained if it exists first as a dialectical process. My ability to perform a speech act is realized in my address to you. This address, like my capacity to act, has no traceable origin; the conversation does not *begin* happening, it only *continues* to happen. My agency is realized in the act of speech by interfacing with the ongoing process of conversation. To fully realize my agency I speak first then notice my audience, and then myself. Noticing the context of both sides of a speech act allows me to amplify my voice in the conversations I interface with. Like sailing in the wind, the agency of my voice is not realized in its isolation from other voices but by the careful noticing and response to them; my capacity to speak—my ability to respond—is realized in my responsibility to the conversation already happening; this act of noticing is my response-ability.

In this paper I have set out to live in the conversations of several authors who in some way notice and converse about relationships between agency and the act of speech. Each section has a life of its own as a *patch*, its own character which contaminates the other patches to varying degrees. Each author tells about language in a novel way. If agency exists as I say it does, I only have to listen to its happening in their words.

So Far

“This is a moment of exploding stories; it is an eruption of opportunity, for the hurt and the bereaved, for the vulnerable and the vicious. It’s a messy time that it is dangerous to try to make tidy; a complex time it is tempting to make simple.”

—Julie Salverson

I have tried beginning this patch many times. When writing I get as many restarts as I wish, but abandoning one version and starting a new one hasn’t changed what I have to say and the more times I attempt a fresh start the more I am cognizant of the concept “*staying with*.” Donna Haraway’s *Staying With the Trouble* is about staying with what we have in front of us, where we are; staying in the mess without holding our breath and gripping tight to hope (or wallowing in despair). It is about staying with; thinking with – critically and empathetically. Haraway invites us to reevaluate how we think and conceive of the world; the concepts and ideas we work with (world with). In this patch I explore the attitudes and concepts in *Staying With*, then explore their usage among other authors committed to staying with and thinking with precarity and indeterminacy as opportunities to discover agency.

Trouble is easy to locate. As a biologist Haraway is cognizant and vocal about the trouble of current and impending ecological devastation brought by climate change and pollution.⁴ She is critical of hope – faith in a technological (or any other) salvation – and despair alike: “Neither despair nor hope is tuned to the senses, to mindful matter, to ‘material semiotics,’⁵ to mortal earthlings in thick copresence. Neither hope nor despair knows how to teach us to play string figures with companion species.”⁶ Despair comes out as cynicism expressed even by those

⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), 2.

⁵ Material Semiotics is a concept which explores how social practices are woven from threads which are both semiotic (carrying meaning) and material; for more, see Bruno Latour

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

working toward a “resurgent world.”⁷ Haraway’s invitation is to question hope and despair – attempts to escape the mess of non-innocent entanglements that we live in—and in staying with the present to play games with “string figures;” a storytelling practice in which she weaves together science fact, science fiction, speculative fabulation and speculative feminism into *knots* that challenge preconceived notions about what, where, and how it is possible to make agency (Haraway refers to these practices collectively as “SF”).

Haraway’s string figures are suggestive, living beyond the assumptions that reinforce established patterns of thinking and acting while engaging fully with trouble: “Naming trouble is a soul-troubling task;” it is easy to understand the appeal of narratives that provide conclusive endings, utopian or apocalyptic,⁸ the question to ask is: “how do we name the loss and the damage but not miss the agency and life force—in ourselves, those we work with, and the planet?”⁹ In *Loopings of Love and Rage*, Julie Salverson stays with the trouble of social issues close to her in Canada, from engaging with local communities concerned with prospective military infrastructure to navigating the #MeToo movement and the resulting multi-facing conflicts and pressure.¹⁰ In this context the trouble is real, and painful; “how do we listen? Is [listening] a reasonable request to make of each other?” becomes a not-so-simple question.

Staying With asks us to reconsider assumptions built on *autopoiesis* – self-making – and bounded individualism; products perpetuated by the cultural narratives of “Capitalocene” and “Anthropocene.”¹¹ Haraway argues these narratives (myths) are a “setup, and the stories end badly.”¹² If our dominant narrative of earth is framed by the anthropocene, our perception of and attitude toward available futures is reflective of that narrative’s limitations. The anthropocene

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3.

⁸ Julie Salverson, "Loopings of Love and Rage" 35.

⁹ Salverson, 34

¹⁰ Salverson, 34.

¹¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30.

¹² Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 49.

and capitalocene are fundamentally steeped in bounded utilitarian individualism, the myth of progress, and human-centered exceptionalism. With these narratives as a background it is plain to see why even scientists working toward a better future may despair about our prospects for achieving a future worth living in.¹³ Staying with the trouble means staying in the present; it is here that we create the future – narratively and together. Without escaping to the imagined future end of trouble and without staking the possibility of meaningful engagement on the success of individual actors (or their limited scope of what success entails), we require [and are opened up to] other possibilities for *staying with* and *thinking with* our present in “lively” yet serious ways.¹⁴ As Eduardo Kohn puts it: “Haraway is asking us to imagine what kind of world can what kind of *we* world in what kind of worldly way.”¹⁵

“Sympoiesis” is central to the *we* centered narrative of *Staying With The Trouble*; it rejects any notion of self-making (“nothing makes itself”¹⁶), and replaces it with the notion of “making-with.” *Making-with* situates us as collaborators operating in assemblages, and being situated in this way is essential for playing games with string-figures. *Making-with* is not innocent, because collaboration is messy. It is not sterile, uncontaminated. For Haraway, contamination is essential to staying with the trouble; essential for sympoiesis. Salverson engages with this idea in *Loopings of Love and Rage*: “To be a witness, I must find the resources to respond. It isn’t only passing on a story that matters; I must let the story change me. This makes me vulnerable in the face of another’s vulnerability.”¹⁷ Making each other *with stories* is prototypical of SF: it is not only metaphorical or literal; not only a fact or a fabulation but a weaving together of these worlds – a rejection and escape from the binaries of capitalocene and

¹³ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 4.

¹⁵ Eduardo Kohn, “What Kind of World Can What Kind of We World?” 99.

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, (2016), 58

¹⁷ Julie Salverson, “Loopings of Love and Rage,” 37

anthropocene — from human exceptionalist stories. What we make literally (materially) comes from the stories we make with, and our making of stories comes from our making materially; “The risk of listening to a story is that it can obligate us in ramifying webs that cannot be known in advance of venturing among their myriad threads.”¹⁸

Haraway is not calling for “reconciliation or restoration,” but is “deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together.”¹⁹ I follow the string figures of Haraway and others inspired by her figuring in their commitment to exploring agency as it is built in ordinary spaces full of trouble and committed to “ongoingness,”²⁰ to engaging with complex issues and the “indeterminacy of encounter”²¹ as a means of getting on together in “unexpected flourishing.”²²

Haraway’s first guides in her play with String Figures are pigeons. Perfectly situated in the unassuming ordinary aspect of modern life, pigeons have a deep, rich history of encounters and collaboration with humans, entangled in pre-colonization conquests and beyond.²³ Pigeons are non-innocent and non-monolithic on their own— spreaders of disease and ecological damage but also important food for a supply-chain of predator birds. “Pigeons are competent agents... who render each other and human beings capable of situated social, ecological, behavioral, and cognitive practices.”²⁴ In particular Haraway recounts the adventures of *Pigeon Blog*, a collaborative art and science project where racing pigeons are used in an open-source project to measure air quality. This artistic eco-activism pigeon racing project defies categories in its worlding of different actors engaged in sympoiesis – making-with each other. “Who would

¹⁸ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 132.

¹⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

²⁰ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

²¹ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 38.

²² Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 38

²³ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 14

²⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 16

render whom capable of what?” The concept of “play” is integral in the act of *making-with*— in contrast with “work,” which implies a solemn activity along rigid parameters toward a defined goal. “Play” introduces indeterminacy, artistic imagination and room for joy into processes of making-with. Work is generally connoted as inherently more serious. The artistic and indeterminate (outside categories) quality of the pigeon racing project thus brings up a potent question: “‘Is human-animal work as part of political [and art] action less legitimate than the same type of activity when framed under the umbrella of science?’ Perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible.”²⁵

Play is not innocent. *Pigeon Blog* has faced numerous moral complications from protests among animal rights groups to commodification for military use.²⁶ But play can be as serious for the endeavors and concerns of adult humans as it is for those of children, and it need not replace the activity accomplished by “work” but rather might guide the parameters and application of what work does— in the case of *Pigeon Blog* humans and pigeons collaborate on a mission to measure air quality.

This paper is my own play at string-figures; weaving together strands of perspective about agency that challenge preconceived ideas of what is possible for humans to do in our ordinary lives relative to our concerns, especially in view of global issues we are increasingly aware of but not necessarily response-able toward. If we knew what kind of world to world, how far could we get if we were to align our thoughts to narratives that help realize agency? How can words themselves transform our perception of agency? If having agency is partially a matter of reflection, then it matters what words we use to think with. Where can we discover these words

²⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 25.

²⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 24.

to think with, and how can we ground their use meaningfully in our experience? Each of these patches finds a different way to respond to these questions.

Contaminated

“What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms.”

—*Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing*

Agency is realized beyond human stories, and human agency is interdependent on interspecies stories of collaboration: “Interspecies entanglements that once seemed the stuff of fables are now materials for serious discussion among biologist and ecologists who show how life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings.”²⁷ Tsing explores these entanglements by following the *lifeways* of the matsutake mushroom. The mushroom is involved in serious projects with human pickers and non-human colleagues including pine trees and the post-industrial forests of the pacific northwest. Tsing teaches us how the mushroom can be the protagonist of a story that exemplifies a way of life unfamiliar to our own without being entirely separate from it. The mushroom's story is found in “contingent histories” that brought the mushroom to Oregon and later the pickers from South-East Asia. The plurality of stories here are gathered by Tsing in a manner that demonstrates their essential interconnectedness. Telling these stories, Tsing asks us: “how does a gathering become a ‘happening,’ that is, greater than the sum of its parts? One answer is collaboration.” Tsing explores how contamination is inherent in collaboration: “unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves.” Contaminating encounters produce transforming collaborations; this is the way of life Tsing exposes us to in telling the history of the mushroom.

Tsing is playful in suggesting these words and serious about asking us to attend to the stories we think with. Our stories often frame *precarity* as the antagonist, but Tsing takes the risk

²⁷ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 88.

of letting precarity be a feature in the story she frames, even suggesting it could be “the condition of our time.”²⁸ If precarity is an underlying feature, doesn’t that threaten agency? It does, but this threat of precarity lives alongside the opening-up of the possibilities we can imagine.

The problem of precarious survival helps us see what is wrong. Precarity is a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others. In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another, with or without their intent. When I sprain my ankle, a stout stick may help me walk, and I enlist its assistance. I am now an encounter in motion, a woman-and-stick. It is hard for me to think of any challenge I might face without soliciting the assistance of others, human and not human. It is unselfconscious privilege that allows us to fantasize—counterfactually—that we survive alone.²⁹

This passage is packed with answers to this question of vulnerability. I cannot take, I cannot even observe anything without being affected by it. Whether I encounter something by reading it, by picking it up, or by eating it, all these forms of encounter in some way contaminate who and what I am. Agency is realized within precarity because it is realized in the embrace of a vulnerability exposed when we enlist help. Realizing my agency means realizing my vulnerability. When I speak, I become visible and vulnerable. My voice, my face, my choice of words, are all laid bare. I cannot control your reaction to any part of me that you see.

Acting necessarily faces precarity, and in so acknowledging it, proves that we can have agency by surviving an encounter with risk. Within the polyphonic story of the mushroom, Tsing explores one participant up close: the pine wilt nematode lives in the pine trees that collaborate closely with matsutake, and has its own precarious life built on contingent encounters. “Pine wilt nematodes are unable to move from tree to tree without the help of pine sawyer beetles, who carry them without benefit to themselves. At a particular stage in a nematode’s life, it may take advantage of a beetle’s journey to hop on as a stowaway.” Viewed from afar, the pine wilt is

²⁸ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

²⁹ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 29.

simply an invisible force of disease plaguing the Japanese pine forest, yet up close it is a delicate encounter between a range of species: “nematodes must approach beetles in a particular stage of the beetle’s life cycle, just as they are about to emerge from their piney cavities to move to a new tree. The nematodes ride in the beetles’ tracheae. When the beetles move to a new tree to lay their eggs, the nematodes slip into the new tree’s wound.” This kind of close attention to encounters is deeply important. The nematode is small, easy to miss. Our ordinary perception of its existence fits into a conception of nature as a something just happening; dead, dumb, brutal. What we get from the personal story of the nematode is entirely different from our standard conception of it. It is delicate, it engages in an encounter which requires attention, requires attending to the lifeways of at least two other species: the beetles and the pine trees. The nematode is successful because it responds to the encounters and lifeways of other species. Its devastation of pine trees in Japan derives from its encounter with humans: its immigration to Japan from America. The pine wilt nematode has agency because it pays attention and responds to the assemblages it lives in. The name itself references these collaborations— it cannot simply be a nematode, it is a “pine wilt” nematode, its identity is contaminated by its encounter with pine trees. The pine tree may be the one who suffers in this story, but the nematode is no less entangled and thus dependent on the life of the pine tree—even in conquest, every lifeway is contingent on an ongoing collaboration: “The livelihoods of the nematode—and the pine it attacks and the fungus that tries to save it—are honed within unstable assemblages as opportunities arise and old talents gain new purchase.”³⁰ Agency is realized in an act of encounter with an-other. Every encounter is precarious because it *will* contaminate us in some way—we are exposed and vulnerable to change, always at risk to be weakened. The choice to live is a choice to encounter precarity in collaboration. Living is never safe, Tsing makes it clear

³⁰ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 157.

that safety through isolation is a fantasy at best, whereas the possibility of life is greatly expanded when more openings for collaboration are allowed; we must embrace the patchy mess of possible living and dying together.

Tsing tells this story from the perspective of the mushroom and the nematode and communicates that they are active participants. “As long as we imagine that humans are made through progress, nonhumans are stuck within this imaginative framework too.”³¹ To imagine humans and human agency built on narratives beyond progress requires that we explore how humans are literally made from interspecies entanglements: “rather than limit our analyses to one creature at a time (including humans), or even one relationship, if we want to know what makes places livable we should be studying polyphonic assemblages, gatherings of ways of being.”³² Even the landscape can be described as active, and if we understand that agency starts before humans do, we can appreciate that agency is not something we make alone, nor is it a quality that differentiates us from our fellow organisms.

Humans are social creatures; we too, “have always been involved in multispecies world-making,” we are most active as participants of nature “when our living arrangements make room for other species.”³³ Tsing paints us this picture of the polyphonic assemblage then, with a story that represents how humans are made through other species, and how we also already participate in the rise of other collaborations: “pines, with their associated fungal partners, often flourish in landscapes burned by humans; pines and fungi work together to take advantage of bright open spaces and exposed mineral soils. Humans, pines, and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds.”³⁴

³¹ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 21.

³² Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 157.

³³ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 22

³⁴ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 22

Changing the narrative means looking for new stories, and rethinking old ones. It means trying on new words and most especially salvaging old ones. Contamination is usually a negative thing yet we cannot live without it. That doesn't mean contamination won't kill us, it simply means living is complex, and if we attempt to reduce our visions for living to a narrative which denies the stories which make life possible in the first place, we risk missing the bigger picture of life as an interwoven system. We digest food with the help of bacteria, we (mammals) are aided in birth by a viral adaptation, we breathe air and drink water purified by plants and fungi.³⁵ In this broad sense of contamination I am touched by it at every turn. Contamination is seen as negative because it is always indeterminate. The result of an encounter is never safe because it is never predictable. It isn't only that precarity carries a risk of change, it actually describes a condition of certain change. The only question is what kind, and how dramatic the change will be. Matsutake thrives in a landscape of reckless deforestation. The possibility of life in ruins is readily apparent from the view that *all* life happens in some sort of crack, some sort of mess. Agency is thus possible, not through control but through *noticing* the processes actively occurring at many scales.

³⁵ The aid of viral genes in birth has been studied extensively in sheep, and some research suggests similar adaptations exist across mammals; see Dunlap, Kathrin (2006). Fungi are being used increasingly as a method of purifying water, and soil, suggesting a hopeful trend toward multispecies collaborations

The Practice of Reading

The following passages reference Michel De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in which he explores the relationship between individual consumers and the totality of society, specifically questioning the view of consumers as passive recipients of the media and infrastructure they reside in. De Certeau instead frames consumers as producers of the media they consume and the places they walk; owing to the interpretive dimension of consumption and the invisibility of meanings not written down.

Knowledge as we experience it is dominated by descriptions which arise directly from far-reaching distribution sources (universities, national newspapers) and indirectly from tangible, sayable quips. As a result of tangible, written information growing, we form habits which make less space for practices of personal significance and expression. Personal (local) practices are essential for revealing agency because they direct our attention to our immediate surroundings where we have more opportunity for influence. Agency depends on a close relationship with our immediate experience, but mass-media often interrupts this space in our lives with a culture of sameness and a set of values oriented toward rational description above personal subjectivity. Concepts like Love evade description but in giving us meaning to connect with each other, remain pervasive in our everyday practices. De Certeau argues that individual persons intuitively make meaning within the networks of mass media and culture in order to navigate daily life and “produce” meaning in it, and that contrary to belief they are not passive, but the meaning they produce exists where it cannot be directly studied and recorded; meaning is made in spaces which evade the sameness of hyper-rational discourse and culture.³⁶

³⁶ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 170

De Certeau discusses the practice of reading as a way consumers “poach” meaning from the products given to them. This practice “makes places habitable” by introducing local, personal meaning to places which may have been intended for a more general purpose. Barthes describes this phenomenon in *The Death of the Author* when he explains that “it is language which speaks, not the author.”³⁷ Inherent in the system of knowledge and media distribution discussed by De Certeau is its “univocal” nature. The construction of rational order through mechanization may be possible in numerically based systems (De Certeau speaks of the phonebook), and these are the systems which pervade everyday practice, but this type of control is not possible in the practice of reading: “to read is to wander through an imposed system.”³⁸ There may be a meaning intended by the authors and distributors of media, but according to Barthes, every line of text operates like the dialogue in a Greek tragedy: “it’s text being woven from words with double meanings that each character understands unilaterally.” It is the reader, Barthes says, who “hears the very deafness of the characters speaking” and makes his own conclusions; “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”³⁹ Similarly, De Certeau recalls: “recent analyses show that ‘every reading modifies its object,’”⁴⁰ that is, the act of reading *is another form of agency* in which I as a reader produce meaning by molding a text to my perspective. Reading thus allows the consumer to operate in this undefined, irrational space within the rational surface of a text, which provides a veil of descriptions within which the consumer can produce meaning outside the technocratic order. The reader “takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position;”⁴¹ what he makes does not interface back into the system thus defined by the assumption of a position in the domain of meaning. What a reader (a

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 143

³⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169

³⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 148

⁴⁰ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169

⁴¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169

consumer) makes in the practice of reading organizes a subjective totality of the texts they have read and “combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings.”⁴²

Generalizing from the practice of reading, De Certeau applies this idea of a consumer who reads meaning into a text to include other practices. Practices such as walking can be discussed under this same concept of “poaching” meaning from the products of the city beyond their original intended use. This opportunistic way of operating reeks of contamination; the kind of collaboration attended to by Tsing which is not always mutually consenting or even beneficial but which always requires close attention from the active party. The question of realizing agency is thus answered in the revelation that the descriptive infrastructure manifested in the culture of our modern technocracy cannot possibly close all the gaps between intended interpretations/intended uses.

De Certeau tells us about the field of theories that describe the ordinary person, specifically in the role of the *consumer*. The individual consumer is not a concern so much as the network of relations between them. Like with Harway and Tsing, the assemblage, or a network of relations, is prioritized as the starting place for understanding the particular practices it contains. The practices of life explored by De Certeau take place in an urban landscape, as he considers how consumers operate within the framework of power that makes the urban city possible. The “procedures” that make up this framework are generalized by De Certeau to describe a way in which the ordering of knowledge itself constitutes a set of “vast frameworks” by which the individual is “increasingly constrained” and, being unable to escape them, can “only try to outwit them.”⁴³ This tactical outwitting of the “technocratic” order makes room for

⁴² Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169.

⁴³ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xxiv.

an “arts of theory” that we can explore in relation to the concept of agency and some of the other concepts previously mentioned.

Agency is realized in the act of speaking; the reflective aspect of this realization comes out of language. In the process of becoming cohesive enough for the state of society to form something like a city, knowledge had to be constructed. De Certeau discusses the numerically oriented nature of large systems, which make allusion to the numerical aspect of physically measuring, as in the field of cartography. Realizing agency is reflective; I *identify* or observe the agency I have. Reflection is a process of accessing memories, which De Certeau argues are dominated by the descriptive language of the *document* (written, as opposed to spoken language). My sense of self as derived from reflection—along with my perception of agency—is only effective if it is unified (or at least prioritized into a hierarchy) and I thus rely on categories or narratives which make coherent what I know from reflection. This practice of making stories also interfaces with and is refined by my encounters with my environment. My practices of everyday life constitute a reflection of both the direct actions I take and the narratives I consume. The thoughts I experience are inherently linked to a network of discourse with the other human members of my assemblage. This assemblage has historically been more local, that is, the discourse feeding into my thoughts, experience, and reflection has been physically more restricted by a network of language practices primarily based on small communities.

Metaphors We Love By

According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, metaphors provide implicit structure to the concepts we operate with by using concepts to structure each other. Repeatedly used is the central example: ARGUMENT IS WAR, which can show that we *think* of an argument—an abstract concept—in terms of war; that is, we use the tangible components of war to give identifiable structure to an argument.⁴⁴ Structuring the concept of an argument in this way allows us to think and talk about arguments as distinct from conversations that are not arguments. Without metaphor, we could still *have* arguments, but they would be difficult to *identify*. Structuring one concept in terms of another has the effect of using an analogy to its fullest. Unlike most metaphors, analogies tend to be utilized explicitly and within a clearly defined scope. We understand that analogies are limited, and we use them to make comparisons between a single or a few certain aspects of two unrelated phenomena.

The use of metaphors creates side effects—called entailments—brought on as the result of the full range of implications possible when two concepts are imagined as the same thing.⁴⁵ We think of an argument in terms of a war; we also have a hard time thinking of an argument without a negative charge of emotion, even if we have no rationale for associating a particular argument with negativity. The entailment suggesting an argument is hostile doesn't prove that this metaphor causes negative emotion purely, or at all. There are other underlying mechanisms which might explain why we feel this way about arguments. But we should at least consider the effect the entailment *might* have, and taken with the host of other metaphors and their entailments identified by Lakoff and Johnson, it seems apparent that metaphors do bias our perception in a number of ways.

⁴⁴ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.

⁴⁵ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 11.

Lakoff and Johnson propose that unconventional metaphors can give rise to new understandings of our experience by making them more coherent. The specific example I highlight here opens up more room for agency by structuring active entailments in place of conventionally passive ones. In chapter 21, Lakoff and Johnson introduce the metaphor: LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART,” a figuring of concepts packed with novel entailments. Lakoff and Johnson argue that this metaphor is coherent because “it makes sense” of our direct experience with love; it provides a meaningful structure for our aggregate, abstract personal experiences of love by structuring it according to a concept which is less abstract.⁴⁶

We can think of entailments as a patchy set of consequences that happen when we understand one concept in terms of another. Given the existing complexity of the concept *collaborative work of art*, it makes sense that the entailments are broad and many; here are some of them:

- Love is work.
- Love is active.
- Love requires cooperation.
- Love requires dedication.
- Love requires compromise.
- Love requires patience.
- Love requires shared values and goals.
- Love demands sacrifice.
- Love regularly brings frustration.
- Love is primarily valued for its own sake.
- Love cannot be achieved by formula.
- Love is unique in each instance.
- Love is an expression of who you are.
- Love reflects how you see the world.⁴⁷

“Each of these entailments may itself have further entailments... which may, on the whole, either fit or not fit our experiences of love.”⁴⁸ Our worldview—our perception of ourselves, others, in the

⁴⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 139.

⁴⁷ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 140.

⁴⁸ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 140.

past and present and future—is informed by complex metaphors, and is built with them atop a foundation of direct experience, orientational metaphors, and ontological metaphors. With the introduction of a novel metaphor that is coherent enough with the totality of our memories, Lakoff and Johnson say that we experience a “reverberation down through the network of entailments that awakens and connects our memories of our past love experiences and serves as a possible guide for future ones.”⁴⁹ In other words, novel, unconventional metaphors present us the opportunity to update our worldview by structuring our experience to some degree differently, and this updated worldview may allow more space to imagine ourselves as active participants. We can view agency as a variable subject to reflection. I maintain that agency is an underlying constant, not something created or acquired like a substance. Realizing agency is not like accumulating some-thing. I see its realization as a subtractive process which happens chiefly in speech—an activity which requires dedicated practice.

LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART contrasts with more conventional metaphors about love that Lakoff and Johnson include by adding more depth (a greater number and variety of entailments) and involving more active entailments compared with the passive ones featured in metaphors such as LOVE IS MADNESS, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, and LOVE IS HEALTH. Lakoff and Johnson says that metaphors “highlight certain features while suppressing others.”⁵⁰ LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART emphasizes the active parts of love “through the notion of WORK.” The conventional metaphors emphasize passivity by highlighting features of the concept LOVE which occur as events outside our control. For LOVE IS MADNESS, we can see passivity through the entailment that love involves losing all sense of rational self and decision making. This entailment may in fact be coherent with our direct experience of love, but it is ultimately

⁴⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 140.

⁵⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 141.

subordinate to the overall system of metaphors we use. If it clashes with our dominant metaphor of love, we are less likely to validate or emphasize the specific entailment that love necessarily involves losing our rationality. LOVE IS HEALTH allows more space for active control, given the concept of health starts from a neutral value and our health varies a lot according to our actions. Yet health is also very passive and as Lakoff and Johnson says: “the passivity of health in this culture is transferred to love.”⁵¹ That under this metaphor our understanding of LOVE depends also on our understanding of HEALTH echoes the contingent nature of life spoken of by Tsing.

LOVE IS HEALTH ultimately carries a troubling set of entailments, including that love ultimately deteriorates with age despite our best efforts to sustain it. LOVE IS A JOURNEY seems a more promising metaphor, and likely one that will remain significant to our culture for quite a long time still. A journey is full of mystery, active work, and potentially positive development. A JOURNEY also aligns with our understanding of *time* as a journey with the entailment of movement in a particular direction. This entailment of movement is deeply understood as a good thing, but it also means that when our love *isn't going anywhere*, we get anxious, rather than considering that lapses in development (rests, breaks) could be a perfectly acceptable part of the experience of love. The process of making room conceptually for this type of nuance is enhanced by the LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART metaphor.

LOVE IS A JOURNEY also implies that love has a single direction and likely some kind of destination. Like the other conventional metaphors, it also entails LOVE as an inanimate, unified entity. In LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART we can identify entailments which highlight the aesthetic, personal quality of LOVE, as well as the creative, collaborative nature of a shared art project. In art, two (or more) people have to interface with both each other, and with the project as a separate entity. Because the work is creative as well as collaborative, interfacing with

⁵¹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, (1980), 140.

internal identity does not conflict but is actually necessary to develop LOVE. Creativity also means there is not an inherent, objective right or wrong outcome or direction, but there *is* a goal to work towards. This unconventional metaphor, by adding more entailments and highlighting active effort, gives us more agency when thinking about love.

With Tsing in mind I can suggest a similar metaphor: LIFE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART, or a different equation: LIFE IS LOVE. What would it mean for LIFE to be structured in terms of LOVE, specifically assuming we structure LOVE in terms of the LOVE IS A COLLABORATIVE WORK OF ART metaphor? Right away this takes us back to Tsing and Haraway because life becomes a collaborative art project, and this on its own opens new meaning for LIFE. Some of the entailments of the LOVE metaphor can be restated for life:

- Life is work.
- Life is active.
- Life requires cooperation.
- Life requires dedication.
- Life requires compromise.
- Life requires patience.
- Life requires shared values and goals.
- Life demands sacrifice.
- Life regularly brings frustration.
- Life is primarily valued for its own sake.

Do these entailments structure our experience of life coherently, and if so then how? Some of these entailments fit already, perhaps already entailed by other metaphors; *Life is work*, *Life is active*, *Life requires dedication*. This complex, unconventional metaphor also provides a way to build on the work of Tsing's proposed narrative of collaborative life; if collaboration is deeply tied to life, then imagining it as such can help us see collaboration as a basic feature and not a bonus feature of how we operate (not something extra). Life as specifically an *art* project entails

the very narrative Tsing and Harway put together about how we remake each other in the contamination of art-science projects.

Life can be structured in terms of work and creativity on its own, but there are entailments specific to structuring LIFE in terms of LOVE. To enhance these, I propose the entailment: “Love is attentive.” For Tsing, attention is vital to the *arts of noticing* the lives of different species. The care in Tsing’s work, her care with the stories of the pickers, mushrooms and pines demonstrates a kind of love. This is not just about interpersonal romantic love; it now expands to structure the meaning of LIFE. By making LIFE a collaborative art project, we open up more space for play, and encourage listening with careful attention.

Exempt

So. Not a real sentence in English, only a fragment. Yet, the complete description of an *impression* in its momentary, fleeting existence; complete in the way a flash of light is complete. *Impression* informs my understanding of agency and speech acts with Haraway, Tsing, De Certeau, and Lakoff and Johnson as an art of thinking prospectively—open to the sudden interruption of a flash, exempt from the often conclusive tendency of language. Every spoken thought has an ending, every paragraph has a conclusion; words begin on one corner of the page and end on the other. Being open to the experience of something which cannot be described conclusively allows us to reside in a space where language is visible as an open-ended process. Connecting to the world of fleeting moments through *impression* allows us to sense the “rhythms of the assemblage”⁵² that occur in large part outside the work of language. Agency is realized in language when language is used to sense the rhythms provided through impression. Roland Barthes recounts a description of how haiku represents what I understand as Tsing’s “temporal rhythms”⁵³ in language:

when we are told that it was the noise of the frog which wakened Basho to the truth of Zen, we can understand... that Basho discovered in this noise, not of course the motif of an ‘illumination,’ of a symbolic hyperesthesia, but rather an end of language: there is a moment when language ceases (a moment obtained by dint of many exercises), and it is this echoless breach which institutes at once the truth of Zen and the form—brief and empty—of the haiku⁵⁴

Barthes uses imagination to view Western thought and make its signs (their implicit use) visible by way of reflection. This open self-awareness is only possible through contrast; a direct awareness of society is inherently circular, as Niklas Luhmann explains in *Theory of Society*:

⁵² Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), 24.

⁵³ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), 106.

⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 74.

“The attempt to describe society [cannot] be made outside society.”⁵⁵ Barthes' description of Japan and the haiku makes Western dependence on language more visible; not by “illumination” but by cutting descriptions (signification?) short, exempting us from definite, conclusive meaning. This “end of language” sounds like death in English, But the “echoless breach” cannot be death, it is simply a place exempt from description.

Barthes uses the phrase “by *dint*,” meaning “by force of” (*à force*). It is by this force that impression interrupts (meets?) thoughts and conception. The “emptiness” of the haiku is not a space to be filled in; it is not passive, it is sudden and forceful. “The haiku reminds us of what has never happened to us; in it we *recognize* a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings.”⁵⁶ Agency is similarly unmoored from time: it has no original source, it does not come *from* anywhere, not outside or inside me (Lakoff and Johnson made the inside-outside distinction archaic), it is not forceful as an idea but only as impression which has force prior to language; the force of a sudden shout—*I speak*.

Agency is realized in a moment; made real by its sudden arrival from impression. Arriving from impression and operating in precarity, agency makes sense as something remade each and every time it happens; a spontaneous process which defines the possibility of agency in the first place. The “emptiness” in the echoless breach of meaning that forms the haiku is the gap left open for imagination, it establishes a “vision without commentary,”⁵⁷ as similar to agency which establishes an influence without premeditation. For Barthes, haiku demonstrates through language the very fleeting reality which language does not normally acknowledge. In its “flash” it “reveals nothing; it is the flash of a photograph one takes very carefully but having neglected

⁵⁵ Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society, Volume 1*, 1.

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, 79.

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes. *Empire of Signs*, 82.

to load the camera with film.” Haiku is *in* language but not of it; it is of an impression; a sense of life as we perceive it.

Agency as realized in the speech act similarly faces this gateway between the precarity found in fleeting moments and the conclusion-oriented nature of language. If I don’t believe I have agency, I definitely do not at that moment, but with the understanding that I *do* have agency already, it suddenly becomes both possible and realized; for it is in the act of changing a thought interpretatively that agency shows itself.

Before speaking, I have only the idea (the concept) that I can or cannot do so (I *should* be able to speak; other people can). It is at the very moment that I speak that suddenly I have agency and my sense of what my capacity should be is superseded by impression in the moment that action suddenly takes place. It is the happening of impression that reveals agency and transforms my idea, my conception that I have it.

Epilogue

Tractor-trailers, hauling freight across the open country, their drivers, working, sleeping on the road. Factory workers, organizing and reorganizing. A package at my door (is it for me?). What is agency in the face of the dependency layered throughout human stories? Truckers embody a myth of freedom in their work—which makes our world possible. But that myth does not align with the experience of so-called independent truckers, who face the woes of regulatory fees and fines, a race to the bottom in competition for rates, and slights from carriers and even unions.⁵⁸

In view of many real human stories and histories, what good is a reflective act of speech? Every statement is a story, and no history is transparent. Truckers may not have the freedom from control which they often do in popular stories about them as a group, but the end of that broader story is not the end of their personal journeys. In a 1982 study, Michael Agar finds through the lives of nine truckers that they are caught in many layers of trouble. Yet, in telling their own stories, these truckers make personal choices about what to highlight and use rhetoric to communicate their trouble in specific ways, whether that be harsh insights into the risk of their industry, or a story of personal triumph.⁵⁹

The agency I have been able to delineate does not appear as autonomy, action is not independent from what causes it or what it causes in turn. There is no exemption from the networks that weave our lives, it is in our movement through these networks, our response to them, that agency shows up. If I tell a story framing agency in the choices I make, that story influences how I perceive my experience and the likelihood I will seek or expect further room for active choices in my life. If I have agency through the stories I tell, then I choose to tell a story where I have agency; I chose agency in *this* story, and now I declare it finished.

⁵⁸ Michael Agar, *Independents Declared: The Dilemmas of Independent Trucking*, 93.

⁵⁹ Michael Agar, *Independents Declared: The Dilemmas of Independent Trucking*, 169.

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