Stickiness as Methodological Condition

Cala Coats

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Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) suggested that "precarity is the condition of our time" and that "our time is ripe for sensing precarity" (p. 20). One symptom of our current precarious condition is an existential smoothness, blinkered to the reality of long-term uncertainty through a perpetual flow of empty speech (Guattari, 1995, 2005). While the idea of a smoothness might conjure images of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) smooth space of unbound potential, I am suggesting something else: a precarious smoothness that has lost its porosity and plurality. It is an affectless and oversaturated condition, stuck in perpetual opticality that is produced, in part, by designer capitalism (jagodzinski, 2007). Here, tunnel vision propels an unimpeded flow of familiar, shallow, and recurrent interactions. This precarious flow accelerates through a neoliberal desire for efficiency and instant gratification that forms a mossy, slippery sheen as a numbness and blindness to the perceptual pain of affective connection.

In response to this increasingly normalized condition, it is time to re-condition for stickiness as an affective and polyvocal orientation to the world. An orientation is what we move toward, the familiar or home-like (Ahmed, 2006). Stickiness as orientation embraces vulnerability, welcoming the affective intensity of care and concern (Cullen, 2018; Manning, 2004). A condition is more of an active disposition, the way we participate in and respond to relational encounters. To condition oneself is to become primed for experience and response-ability, to get in shape (Haraway, 2016). Tsing (2015) explained that, "Response always takes us somewhere new; we are not quite ourselves anymore—or at least the selves we were, but rather ourselves in encounter with another. Encounters are, by their nature, indeterminate; we are unpredictably transformed" (p. 46). Stickiness becomes a kind of glue with gooey, sharp, and raw textural variations that emerge from corporeal proximity and discourse, scuffing the smooth surface formed by the neoliberal drift (Ahmed, 2004; Sedgwick, 2003; Tsing, 2015).

Stickiness as Performative Becoming

Art's affective force is sticky. Guattari (1995) suggested that art is the thing around which subjectivity can reform itself, and I suggest that stickiness might become an aesthetic force in education and research, accentuating territories of relations. Stickiness as methodological condition strengthens our capacity to affect and be affected by creating polyvocal connections and collective response-ability (Springgay, 2011). In his ethico-aesthetic paradigm, Guattari recognized the complementary nature of performance art, combining the cognitive and conceptual with affective and perceptive comprehension. He was particularly interested in the orality of performative modes, and their capacity to produce "mutant percepts and affects" as "assemblages of aesthetic desire" transmitted through "affective contamination" (Guattari, pp. 92-93).

Performance art delivers the instant to the vertigo of the emergence of Universes that are simultaneously strange and familiar…. It shoves our noses up against the genesis of being and forms, before they get foothold in dominant redundancies – of styles, schools, and traditions of modernity. (Guattari, 1995, p. 90)

Perhaps stickiness can be viewed as a kind of performative contagion, mutating our relations to the world and each other through transformative polyvocal rhythms.

Sticky Invitation

I invite you to participate in the following narrative piece as an exercise in stickiness. Approach it as a score or as working material for your own improvisation. You may approach it first as an anticipatory set. Perhaps you need to read it silently first to find a flow or develop a familiarity. After the narrative drift, I provide a more in-depth theoretical context of stickiness as methodological condition, and conclude with additional provocations to return to the narrative through sticky repetition, improvisational divergences, collective oratory, textual modulation, and experimental play.

The piece traces my experience becoming sticky with a pinecone, following the drift and abrupt jolts of traveling thoughts. As an artistic approach, my intension is not merely to share my story in a more narrative mode, but to invite readers to become vulnerable with the piece as a conditioning exercise in lingering, improvising, and finding rhythm with the unfamiliar. On the one hand, the narrative maps my experience walking and thinking; but, the piece also operates on a second plane of stickiness as embodied praxis between the author, reader, audience, and the text. My hope is that the invitation to performatively read the piece aloud, in unison, or through improvisation activates a different kind of response-ability, where the piece and performance operate as transversalizing aesthetic practice (Coats, 2019). Guattari (1995) celebrated the power of performance art as a processual praxis with the ability to catalyze affect and change the nature of subjectivities as a co-creative event, and as an experimentation with new modalities of "group being" (Guattari, 1995; hoogland, 2018). This piece is not meant to provide answers, but instead to produce a shared experience, by embodying a part of my world as it is inevitably bound to yours.

Consider how you find a rhythm with someone else's story. It often requires repetition and focus. I have included suggestions for performative inflection, but these are aesthetic choices based on my initial performance of it. They are yours to play with. **Bold sections invite groups to read in unison**. How does performing attune and disorient? How do my words as directives and images pull you along, as you adhere, slip, or diverge? To become sticky is not simply to follow, but to form a rhythm with another through improvisation and elasticity. As you attune to the materiality of your body as aesthetic experience, consider how your utterance forms a stickiness to text and movement. How do your performative responses emerge from memories and associations? How is the tone of your voice appropriated from another encounter? How does your performance reveal a stickiness to your past or present?

Cue flowing water[1]...

(read as if setting sail)
A thought's logic isn't a stable rational system.... A thought's logic is like a wind blowing on us, a series of gusts and jolts. You think you've got to port, but then find yourself thrown back out onto the open sea.
(Deleuze, 1990, p. 94)

MEMORIES CLING
My family and I moved to Arizona from Texas last year. Recently, while on a camping trip, I noticed a pinecone floating down the creek adjacent to our campsite. As the kids prepared the sleeping bags and firewood behind me, I walked with the pinecone, following along the water's edge, curious where the creek would take it. East Texas is carpeted with pinecones. Their ubiquitous presence makes them almost invisible over time. I hadn't seen … or maybe I just hadn't noticed a pinecone since leaving … and at that moment… watching the all-too-familiar pinecone drift in the water— the distance from my previous life registered with me.

(surprised recognition)
"There it is again!"[2]
What causes you to pause? When does an object register with you?

GETTING STUCK

(deep breath)
That day by the creek, I could see that a short distance ahead of us, the water was churning more heavily. The pinecone became stuck in a dam bound together by a plastic bag entangled with twigs, knots of fishing line, colorful packaging covered with familiar text, and other discarded minutiae. The efficiencies and conveniences of suburban life felt both familiar and alien in the openness of this temporary natural home. The pinecone's pointy edges clung to the detritus, as water flowed rapidly around it.

Where does potentiality and creation register in our bodies?

(read as a teacher)
Female pinecones' sharp woody scales form a protective seed shelter until maturation. While the resin and sap that coat them are both nourishing and healing for pine trees.
(slowly)
But away from the tree, the nurturing and protective stickiness of resin and spikes binds the pinecone to the world differently. I wondered if the pinecone was well-served by its pointy exterior, or if the house that protected its seeds, that bound it to the trash and the leaves, was a danger in this instance.

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1 https://youtu.be/VUHHUhFkOCU
2 A refrain that Isabelle Stengers (2011) employs from Whitehead's concept of the sense object.

Is stickiness a detriment or benefit?
Would the pinecone be better off with a smooth surface, making it able to drift without disruption?
Being adrift has been described as our neoliberal condition—one of perpetual drift, unable to focus for long, or to slow down long enough to dig deep.

How do methodological performatives with procedural rules and representational boundaries create the proverbial ruts in which we become stuck to residual expectations of familiarity and data-driven outcomes; where the desire for more generalizable data merely creates conveniences and efficiencies, like the mound of mass-produced fast food wrappers that bound the pinecone?

In our desire to codify methodologies, are we willingly blinkering ourselves, like the horse in a parade who can only see straight ahead… **drifting, drifting, drifting**… blinded to the periphery, for fear of the overwhelming anxiety that might emerge from a consciousness of all that is moving around us?
…
As ideas form in gusts, do we allow them to cling to us or do they float away or drown under the weight of managerial performatives in teaching and research or the pace of life?

Where does potentiality and creation register in our bodies?

RESIDUAL CONTAMINATION
Could stickiness be the index of a potential for becoming other? Rather than becoming stuck in the proverbial rut?

How might an ethics of stickiness as connection embrace the residue of a life's experiences?

> *"…shift research from an information society to an in-form-ation society, from being to becoming…. reanimating thought as the ontology of lived life – becoming with the world and stressing the movement of things."*
> *(jagodzinski and Wallin, 2013, p.17)*

Artist, Ana Teresa Fernandez, has created a series of paintings and photographs that illustrate and document her performances of repeatedly jumping into a body of water wrapped in a white bedsheet wearing black stiletto heels, each time, fighting her way back to the surface of the water.

She describes the bedsheet as the stage for questions of labor, gender, sexuality, and fertility – the site of so many of life's most intimate experiences. Fernandez explained the reality of the performances in relation to life, where **with each struggle, there comes the potential of realizing life differently… and also the potential for death… which may bring a rebirth**.

FLOWING WITH THE WORLD

(the resolution at the end of a fairy tale)

The pinecone eventually began to bounce and dance again, finding its way to the edges of the detritus, going underwater briefly as the water flowed around it. I wanted to intervene by throwing something else in the water to break up the mass and unhook the pinecone, but I figured that would actually push the trash further downstream, contaminating more flows. Finally, a strong enough wave allowed it to break free from the mound, throwing it back out into the water, and carting with it bits of leaves and string. I realized that it would inevitably carry the residue of suburban convenience, and histories of land use and contamination.

The stream is already constituted by contaminants born from global industrial development and mass consumption… as is my body and that of the pinecone. **We share the same tainted water, air, and soil. We don't simply wash through the stream – it washes through us.**

(another deep breath)

Where does potentiality and creation register in our bodies?

The encounter with the pinecone began as a moment of recognition – of realizing my past was with me again, where the object became a mirror and a rupture. As we moved together, its stickiness formed a new path, as affective binder that eliminated the bifurcation of seed, water, body, time, and land. Stickiness became a capacity to become affected – attuned to ways we are collectively constituted by and part of the same world— to the life of the pinecone as research event. Rather than a search for a truth or an inquiry into the yet-undiscovered; **it is time for a call to care, becoming affected, and attunement to the world** – or what Oscar Wilde (1891) called a "temperament of receptivity" (p. 43)… **looking less for what has not been discovered and more closely at that to which we are already bound.**

…End flowing water

A Sticky Context

"The ideal I'm envisioning here is a mind receptive to thoughts, able to nurture and connect them, and susceptible to happiness in their entertainment" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 1).

Stickiness as Orientation

Sticking has been articulated as connective potential through attunement and assemblage-forming, and in relation to emotion as cultural and discursive binding (Ahmed, 2004; Tsing, 2015). We are all stuck to the specificity of the cultural, material, and historical conditions by which we are constituted. These conditions bind us and are bound to us. "Each being carries with it its own world, a world that subsists in its encounters. But its every encounter implies another world" (Cullen, p. 61). Stickiness as affective disposition is an awareness of the agentic, assemblage-building force of the world, but it is also an outward-reaching desire to form with the world.

In response to precarity's force of disaffection, Tsing (2015) proposed the "arts of noticing," as a way of looking for "what has been ignored because it never fit the timeline of progress" (p. 21). Noticing is more than visual awareness. It is a curiosity about the way that world comes together, and what forces assemble to generate new paths. Similarly, Ahmed (2004) suggested that,

> *The capacity for wonder is the space of opening up to the surprise of each combination; each body, which turns this way or that, impresses upon others, affecting what they can do. Wonder opens up a collective space, by allowing the surfaces of the world to make an impression, as they become see-able or feel-able as surfaces…. the very*

orientation of wonder, with its open faces and open bodies, involves a reorientation of one's relations to the world. (p. 183)

Curiosity and wonder become connective capacities that activate affective intensities and germinal attachments to other entities, where concern as gathering force creates the potential for a deep bio-egalitarianism with the more-than-human world (Braidotti, 2011; Butler, 2004; Massumi, 2002; Tsing, 2015). As Manning (2016) explained,

> *It requires an attentiveness to the field in its formation. This attention is ecological, collective, in the event. It is relational, relation here understood as the force that makes felt the how of time as it co-composes with experience in the making" (p. 51).*

In my narrative, I walk with a pinecone, witnessing and realizing the profound precarity of my current life as we move together. The relational encounter enhanced my affective capacity, as I recognized the state of my body such that it involves another, and my singularity within a precarious neoliberal assemblage (Bennett, 2010).

Stickiness as Elasticity

Stickiness operates on planes of both encounter and reflection as an onto-epistemological concept of subjective becoming and ethico-political entanglement – a dimension of creativity that lies in the nascent force of the aesthetic (Massumi & Alliez, 2014). Conditioning for a sticky orientation invites the affective trauma of removing our blinkers, the blinders worn willingly to limit our field of vision, by attuning to precarity's inherent vulnerability. This process involves

a de-habituation of a neoliberal orientation that is rooted in individuality, efficiency, and competition. Conditioning in this sense is not like weight training or a repetition aimed at mastery; instead, becoming sticky is a conditioning for openness and malleability in a perpetually uncertain world, allowing impressions to form and a residue of experience to collect (Ahmed, 2004, 2006; Haraway, 2016; Singh, 2018; Trafí-Prats & Caton, 2020).

In this sense, stickiness as methodological condition is not about a desire for acquisition or parasitism, but a symbiotic condition of elasticity that forms with and folds into the world. This quality emerges by building intensive rhythms with the world, dwelling with and binding to singularities as an assemblage-forming orientation in fluid methodological spaces (Ahmed, 2006; Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; Manning, 2004; Tsing, 2015). Intensive openings are sensed through relational encounters as "movement begins to fold into another movement, we feel its elasticity, opening the movement's shape to its inevitable deformation" (Manning, 2004, p. 34).

Intensive openings are sensed through lingering, a technique of both slowing down and moving with, which encourages attunement by dwelling with discomfort. Affects register in lingering events, where "experience has to be pulled out of the indeterminate, activated from the virtual of the not-yet" (Manning, 2004, p. 37). Relational movements operate in the space between constraint and improvisation. The notion of constraint is critical to understanding how stickiness is expressed. Manning (2004) describes how walking as relational technique, constrained by the requirement that one foot must always be on the ground. The

limiting rule of walking, as opposed to unlimited choices of movement, created a repetitive interval, and this time-space of the relational interval becomes the opening for potentiality to be expressed and realized. This is where the stickiness forms and elasticity emerges. Allowing oneself to foreclose a desire for certainty by lingering with relational elasticity develops an improvisational ability, like a jazz musician building rhythms with the world (Butler, 2004; Manning, 2004; Massumi, 2015; Nxumalo et al., 2018).

Stickiness as Aesthetic Methodological Process

Research orientations that prioritize predetermined methodological structures with rigid interpretive analytical frames often operate through a precariously smooth tunnel vision, where the world is muted beyond the well-worn rut of the methodological frame by a dependence on validity, generalizability, efficiency, and scalability. In contrast, methodologies rooted in becoming, ambiguity, and emergence accept that all knowledge is partial, and that methodological processes are world-building (Fox & Alldred, 2015; Koro-Ljungberg, 2016). The evolving forms of post-qualitative research are inspired by a simultaneously growing body of posthuman and new materialist theories that acknowledge the precariousness of our interconnected and interdependent world (Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2012; Dolphijn & Van der Tuin, 2012; Haraway, 2016; Singh, 2018). This resistance is echoed in a history of radical art approaches that similarly facilitate breaks from habitual understandings of art's form and purpose.

Arts-based methods invite discomfort and illuminate truths in ways that allow

for indiscernible findings, eliminating boundaries and revealing borders. They create aesthetic experiences oriented to participation, openness, and intuition through responsiveness and interconnectedness with the more-than-human world (Leavy, 2015; Manning, 2016). Manning (2016) argues for techniques rather than methods in art-based research, focusing on affect, excess, and intensity as active modes of becoming: "…inventing metamodels that experiment with how knowledge can and does escape instrumentality, bringing back an aesthetic of experience where it is needed most, in the field of learning" (p. 44). Arts-based methods that exceed a representational frame embrace art's affective force, concerned less with what art is about, and instead with what art can do (jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013; jagodzinski, 2015; Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2001). In this sense, art is a manner of being with the world as affective event through emergent processes rather than an object that represents life as abstraction (Springgay & Rotas, 2015).

To explore stickiness as affective conditioning, I have borrowed the technique of the performative score, which is a performance and conceptual art practice using linguistic statements as art. Conceptual "scores" can function as autonomous verbal artworks but they are not necessarily literary (Friedman et al., 2002). Score development was common for Fluxus artists, and had its roots initially in the work of Dada artists and is often credited to John Cage. Artists vary in their expectation of participation or enactment by viewers, and many have been "played" as performance events. Scores as method are also employed in a variety of other art practices, such as the social, curatorial, and pedagogical, as well as dance and other performance arts (Lippard, 1972; Lucero & Shaeffer, 2020; O'Connor, 2019; Obrist, 2013; Sholette et al., 2018).

Scores have an interesting relationship with pedagogy and practice-as-research (O'Connor, 2019), as they are often didactic, performative, and instructional, similar to teaching tools. Using the score as a conditioning exercise invites a performative experimentation through relational emergence. In this article, I map a relational movement (Manning, 2004) in my narrative with the pinecone, and I attempted to generate a different kind of relation to the story through a connective and collective performance of reading it. I invite you to return to the piece, becoming sticky through performative engagement with that which "we might imagine as trivial" (Tsing, 2015, p. 20). Shared cultural utterances, such as those that take place at church or cultural performances produce assemblages through mutually generated rhythms and collective vibration. The performative utterance demands a different kind of energy and responsibility of readers, as they internalize the text as a textured, affective, and relational medium (Sedgwick, 2003).

Stickiness as Return

I conclude with an invitation to return to the drifting narrative through a set of provocations that may be applied to the original text or to create new paths inspired by it.

1. Repeat the performance with others.

2. Develop a new refrain to insert and read in unison.

3. Linger with one passage. Have group members select different lingering passages.

4. Rewrite the part that follows your passage.

5. Close your eyes. What do you see in the story? Recreate it.

6. Create a counter-flow.

7. Eliminate the academic. Make it more academic.

8. Visually recompose.

9. Where are you stuck?

10. Find your pinecone.

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