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The Cost of Living: An Autoethnography

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Bio: Donna F. Henson (Ph.D., Arizona State University) is an Associate Professor of Communication in the Faculty of Society & Design at Bond University. Her research interests currently center on meaning-making post-trauma, rumination and narrative, autoethnography and relational communication.

Abstract

This autoethnographic piece reflects on the cost of living and loving in this beautiful and broken, “crisis ordinary” (Berlant, 2011; 2012) world. In the interplay of the creative and critical, lyrical and liminal, I write on the human imperative to find heart in a hope-less place. I find inspiration in the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz and kindness in communication and, in so doing, advocate for the small nothings that bring us solace and personal preservation in the face of big wicked problems and distant-witnessed disaster.

Keywords: autoethnography, performative writing, poetic inquiry, writing as a method of inquiry.

The Cost of Living: An Autoethnography

The futility of words in a ravaged world where freedom is measured by masks or missiles, depending on luck and circumstance. Where the depth of your disaster is weighed by cultural commentary for those who built their houses on the sand... in the bush, on the flood plain, on the morally bankrupt mortgaging of cut corners and cut losses. Where human rights are questions answered by violence and silence.

A theatre full of children and women was bombed yesterday. A maternity hospital the day before. Somewhere they're digging out survivors from the rubble remains of living history, in the face of sniper fire and endless shelling.

Trauma unfolding. Lives lost.

They're making a loneliness and calling it peace ("ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant"; Calgacus, in Tacitus, AD 98, see Roberts, 2021).

This tiny everyday, every now, pales in comparison to the awesome, awful—the horrific and terroristic. There's no sense, any now, anymore.

Tell me now about the price of your petrol. The cost of living.

I dare you. Double dare you.

Double down and double up in the face of the inconceivable. Hide your face and close your eyes. As is the usual order of things.

The cost of living.

She writes her conscience, checked on the balance of her privilege. Petrol is not her problem. But it's all about perspective, she says. She knows. This sliding scale of personal disaster. She's lucky, not hers, not now. The fuel not for her fire, only an index of affect. The sum total of all our fears and failings. She hears herself and stops. Stilled by the distance between us, knowing it's the price we pay for politics and power and privilege.

Where misery is relative, there's no winning—only degrees of losing.

Her rage is founded on benign sexism, rendered by blatant misogyny, and sharpened by the brutality wrought by the worldly empowerment of deranged and deadly men. There are things we can't unsee. Floods and fires, and fending for yourself in the face of incompetence and arrogance and ignorance. Death and destruction, politics and prayers: a plague on all our houses.

She watches from the sidelines. The dissonance incurred in the calculation of comfort to crisis. The acts of performative giving. Of helping. Donating. Public generosity. The cast off and cast asides of home and privilege. The give a little, give a lotting of those who *care*.

Your home is underwater, turned to ashes, bombed to smithereens, but here, have this scarf I never wear. It should help in a nuclear winter.

She writes her conscience, signed on the checks and balances of the not me-not-now-not-ever... karma made me do it. The ill-wind draught-dodging acts of white saviour-dom. The Red Cross-my-heart-and-hope-it-doesn't-happen.

To me, to me, to me.

She's finding it hard to focus these days. Her mind drifting, perhaps afraid to alight on any single thing. It seems risky to dwell on disaster and disease, war or floods and fire. Sorrow everywhere. She settles for despair and distraction: an over-educated woman, her cat, and the literature on post-traumatic growth. Her precarity alleviated by privilege, where once she cursed the tyranny of distance, now she measures the miles in heartbeats and human rights. America, it seems I hardly knew you.

She thinks sometimes that we're not made for the burdens of this big-wide world. Crisis-ordinariness (Berlant, 2011; 2012) is not for the faint of heart, the precarity of the everyday too fraught with consequences. She misses living local, the proximity of global trauma too sad, too hard, too much.

She wonders if there's a limit to our capacity for cruelty. For distant-witnessing disaster—the devastation of human rights and hard-rights and trigger-happy hate and apathy. If the too-much and not-enough of man-made mess and tragedy is inversely associated with our empathy. Retaining our humanity in the face of unrelenting disaster and depravity, seems an uphill exercise on this flat earth. Like one at war with gravity.

She fears the false dichotomies of caring and not. The all or nothings of interpersonal emotion. The temptations of polarity and proximity, presence and absence. Grief and love. She risks remembering the in-between. The 'Both and Always Never-land' of shoulds and don'ts and could-be, maybe, definitely not. The dialectics of inadequacy and action, despair and hope.

War and peace and everything in between.

She lives somewhere in the shades of hope and despair, doing what she can, when she can, if she can. Too little, not enough, and all she has to offer. Working to save the only life she can (Oliver, 2001), knowing the world is both broken and beautiful.

Lest we forget that this is the way it has always been. One falls in love, and two fall out.

We stand and fall, fall hard and fast, fall for it all, or fall where we stand.

The die rolled by an invisible hand. The illusion of control all we have in the face of world-tilting axes of adversity and catastrophe.

She seesaws daily, moment-to-moment, in the face of things she can't unsee, can't unknow. She's a walking-talking contradiction. A paradox of words and meaning. Full of cliches and pretty, petty words. The temptations of truth-telling proving too much, too easy.

But, still, talk to me, sweet words of solace—in the face of big wicked problems, drops in the ocean, and the only thing that ever has. Show me hopes and dreams and silence when it matters. Whisper small nothings, knowing nothings might be somethings. Smile, laugh, and knowing happiness is natural, where meaning is not (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker & Garbinsky, 2012), be open to the present possibility of joy. Silver linings, rainbows, and unicorns. Coming back to the trivial and trite, a shadowed reckoning that in the long-time stretched out now (Berlant, 2008, p. 5), life is a series of conversations and all we can be is kind.

All we can do is love. She holds on to the you-can't-fill-from-an-empty-cup cliches of personal preservation—knowing these to be as true as anything in this mean and scary world.

She holds on to the lush fragilities of beautiful though broken. A “sinuous and scorching thread of energy” (Hansford, 2022, p. 7), the fallen petals and silhouetted stories of time before and after.

You can't give what you don't have.

Let us still for a moment and love the body before us.

Love the body beside us. The bodies between us. Let us start small and kind and understanding of the silent stories that make us, break us and become us. Let us know that in the unravelling, in the thin time, we all “have no name for what we truly wish...” (Housden, 2001, p. 105). And maybe, when we start small, start with ourselves. Talk to yourself like you’re someone you love.

“Look at yourself” (he says, Czelaw Milosz), “Look at yourself

The way one looks at distant things

For you are only one thing among many.” (Milosz, 2002, p. 57).

And once filled, look at distant things the way you’d look at love.

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Talk to yourself like you're someone you love.

The words come easily. The practice and process is harder. It's dirty, this kind of love. The difficult kind. Love in the face of a thousand imperfections. Love in the face of failings and frailties. Love in the layers. Love in "the dithering" (Robinson, 2015).

This much she knows.

"Make kin and kind" she says, to my childless, child-free self – as I sit (hide) cloaked in shrouds of smug sustainability. [As if it were decided, not this accidental fictional/future framing of "you-know-it-would-be-so-much-worse" if she had loved and lost her own. As if it were determined, you think, by some intentional dissembling in the face of inevitable disaster, on the edge of extinction. As if she were another Donna.

But love is a red dress and a cat named Boy and my "oddkin" and I are a "loopy we" of the loonier *kind* who [have to] imagine a flourishing, a shifting, a turning, in the affective and elemental making-space and times between play, compost, and circumstance.

In light of that lovely introduction, thank you!, I'd like to begin by lowering expectations. I'm a recovering quantitative scholar of interpersonal communication and emotion and let me tell you that at least one perspective suggests that our emotional experience, our happiness in any situation (or indeed, in life), is equal to or greater than the difference between our perception of the events in our life and our expectations.

So. (She says, to a room of qualitative academics, you do the math).

By way, of lowering said expectations. I have a confession to make. Or two. Maybe more.

I never submitted an abstract for this conference this time round. I don't know if anyone noticed. Past Donna did, back in 2019. She thought she knew something. Present Donna? Well she – I (this fractured identity thing gets very confusing) – engaged in some (failed) attempt to establish boundaries and balance in her life, largely because, and... I'm just going to say it.

Any resemblance my work has, at least to date, to posthumanism, has been entirely accidental.

I know! I'm sorry. You could all probably have done better. Chosen better.

When asked if I would be a keynote for this conference, I was left speechless. (Obviously, exactly what you hope for in a keynote...). Speechless, flummoxed, baffled, and bemused (all excellent words).

Because, as it turns out, I have composter syndrome. It's a recent diagnosis. It's like imposter syndrome but without the systemic oppression or "thinly veiled racism and sexism." (On another note – I like to call imposter syndrome 'socialised insecurity' – but that's a different story. Another day, another Donna).

Today, I am hopeless/hopeful. A being in pieces.

Fragments and fractions and fictions. Made new, made-over. Looking for love in the layering. Love in "the dithering."

My love. Look!

Oh, look! She says. My compost file of killed darlings. My pile of bad and worse, grows higher, taller, teetering on the edge of something. Or nothing.

As is the usual nature of things.

I come back to the bones of it all.

That feeling, on the cusp, on the edge, striving, hoping, snapping, *something*. (Berlant, 2008; Stewart, 2007). A visceral unravelling, dissolving, in the liminal moment. In the land, in the sky. Etched in the dirt of this living Earth as it breathes beneath. Invisible threads of silent, scorching, energy entangle us, tie us, in constellations – and conversations – of we.

Stop, listen. She says. (You and me and the all and the everything). A whispered silent knowing settles within.

I may “never recover from the lightness of your touch.” As in the even now, your footsteps in the sand leave bruises on my heart. Stop, listen! Please! She adds. She pleads. “The Urbicene has a lot to answer for. It’s the “hard miracles” that matter now.” (Kingsolver, 2022)

It's the hard miracles that must be made mundane.

I look to the sea, to the sky, to the ground beneath my feet – the very substance of our mattering. Hard miracles. I look for the spaces, places, and distance between us. Hard miracles. I live in this hard place/thin place. “This place of wanting and contradictions and impossible realities.” Hard miracles.

The Urbicene encroaches, and my city-mouse self retreats, out of my body and into my head. “A living fabric of a trillion interconnected species is a hard miracle to believe in, or fight for, if we’ve only ever known the one of them who’s us. Not impossible, but it’s a project, getting harder all the time. We can only love what we know.” Barbara Kingsolver,

my goddess, my muse. The Urbicene (2022). <https://orionmagazine.org/article/urban-rural-divide-the-congo-barbara-kingsolver/>

I stepped on an ant today. At least, I think I did. Maybe. It was an accident but I worry for the consequence – the butterfly effect of my affect fluttering into the big-wide-worlding. The social emotion of my little history impacts our unfolding.

“It matters what thoughts think thoughts; it matters what stories tell stories” says Haraway (2016, p. 39). Haraway meets Hamilton in my head and I find myself haunted: “Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?”

My compost lives and dies in the earworm ever after. The ant’s another story.

There are so many things I don’t know.

My today is a sum total of fears and failures, accidents and algorithms. A piled up layering of less-than-helpful history and uncertain tomorrows. An assemblage of minds and memories and bodies and the space-between, filled with ghosts and othering: a series of conversations and all I can be is kind. Hard miracles.

I’m struck by how often the world seems to find kind hard. As if care were a four-letter-word of the other kind.

It’s a dirty kind of love. Let me count the ways.

I've had enough of romance. Fairy tales and happy ever-afters are a promise of future failings, for I'm not perfect and neither are you and, love, these expectations will exhaust us, we can only disappoint each other. Love is the journey. Staying. A hot passion, warm intimacy, and a cold decision, made and remade (Sternberg, ?).

Love is dirty. fractious, scorching energy, the all and the everything, remains elusive and denies and defies description. She's stuck in false starts and abrupt endings. "The words won't go where" she wants them.

Ruptures, epiphanies, moments of grace, elements of joy. Ecstatic places, transcendence. We can only love what we know. We only fight for what we love.

Make kin, she says. Make kind. I try, and fail.

Failing seems inevitable in this big-wide-wild. And I find myself stuck in the thought, in the inkling, in the fear of our collective failure, and a dithering ensues.

Writing matters (Stewart)