

“Solos” with Sourdough and Drying, Cracking: Dramaturgy with Other-Than-Human Species

ROSA POSTLETHWAITE

ABSTRACT

The interest guiding this text is: how to articulate an ethics of dramaturgy with other-than-human species on the basis of current theoretical developments within post-humanist thinking and experiences of dramaturging with sourdough? This research is in dialogue with post-humanist theorist Karen Barad (2003, 2007), dehumanist theorist Julietta Singh (2018), and recent post-humanist perspectives on dramaturgy from Bleeker (2020), Woynarski (2020), and Žeželj (2022).

By understanding practical experiments, through reading post-humanist literature, ethical questions become condensed and articulated, not as a set of rules or points of evaluation/reflection, but as a “diffraction grating”¹ to share with the research community. My practice research PhD, “Dramaturgy with other-than-human species”, consists of live art projects that explore dramaturgy practice with sourdough, a microbiome of yeasts and bacteria which is commonly used in bread making. For the projects, I was guided by Robbrecht’s definition of dramaturgy as “the web of talks, thoughts, images and sensualities that brings us towards the conceptualization of what we are actually doing (‘the work’), and often resembles an ‘unidentifiable object’ during an artistic process”.² Over two projects “*Solos*” with sourdough (“*Solos*”) and *Drying, Cracking* (*Cracking*) I attempted to do dramaturgical conversation with sourdough.

KEYWORDS

dramaturgy, post-human, diffraction, ethics, conversation, other-than-human

1 Barad 2007, 81.

2 Robbrecht 2017, 138.

“Solos” with Sourdough and Drying, Cracking: Dramaturgy with Other-Than-Human Species

Introduction

The interest guiding this text is: how to articulate an ethics of dramaturgy with other-than-human species on the basis of current theoretical developments within post-humanist thinking and experiences of dramaturging with sourdough? The ethical questions become condensed near the end of this article, not as a set of rules or points of evaluation/reflection, but as a “diffraction grating”¹ to share with the dramaturgy practice research community.

My PhD, “Dramaturgy with other-than-human species”, consists of live art projects that explore dramaturgy practice with sourdough, a microbiome of yeasts and bacteria which is commonly used in bread making. “*Solos*” with *sourdough* (“*Solos*”) was an eight-week project culminating in a performance-to-camera with four sections.² I have placed “*Solos*” in speech marks in the title of this project to playfully point out the continual presence of other-than-human species and things in the performance. In this project, I adopted and adapted Annette Arlander’s practice of letter writing to an other-than-human³ in order to explore an I – You relationship with a sourdough microbiome. This led to a four-part performance-to-camera piece, which aimed to point to and shift the power dynamic between us, using the dramaturgical metaphor of dethroning. The second project *Drying, Cracking* began in March 2023 and is ongoing at the time of writing (May 2023). In this project, I asked questions in close proximity with the sourdough. This led to an improvised performance where the sourdough was poured onto my skin and dried there. The co-mingling of sourdough and skin microbiome created a different kind of awareness to our separation or lack thereof. The focus of both projects was to attempt to do dramaturgy with sourdough.

During the projects, I aligned myself with Robbrecht’s definition of dramaturgy as: “...the web of talks, thoughts, images and sensualities that brings us towards the conceptualization of what we are actually doing (‘the work’), and often resembles an ‘unidentifiable object’ during an artistic process”.⁴

Dramaturgy as a “web of thoughts, talks, images and sensualities”⁵ invites ways of understanding other-than-humans as agential. While working with sourdough, which is living/non-living,⁶ human/

1 Barad 2007, 81.

2 Filmed by videographer Marley Starskey Butler in July 2022.

3 Arlander 2021a.

4 Robbrecht 2017, 138.

5 Robbrecht 2017, 138.

6 Sourdough is perceived as living because it is a microbiome of yeasts and bacteria. Both yeast and bacteria are examples of living microbes. Water and flour, on the other hand might be understood in Western nature-culture as non-living.

other-than-human, plural, cold, bubbling, and fragrant, thoughts, talks, images, and sensualities emerged. Working with sourdough activates thinking about living/non-living and human/other-than-human-ness. It exemplifies Bleeker’s argument that dramaturgy involves human and other-than-human intra-actions.⁷ Mine and the sourdough’s is a developing practice which is full of contractions and the potential for harm. I suggest that acknowledgment of power dynamics, “difference and unknowability”⁸ might be important starting places for a more ethical practice with other-than-humans.

In the first section of this article, I situate my practice research. In the second, I discuss literature on European dramaturgy theory that engages with eco-feminist ethics, and post-humanism. The post-humanist thinking becomes a “diffraction grating”⁹ through which a dramaturgy practice is re-formed. In the last section of the article, I analyse practice research with sourdough, proposing ways to articulate an ethics of dramaturgy with other-than-human species.

I am a performance artist and PhD researcher at Coventry University, UK and Aarhus University, Denmark.¹⁰ I work across live art, dance, socially engaged art and theatre. I am a white, middle-class British person with citizenship. English is my first and only language. I am supported economically by the UK PhD stipend and by my family. These privileges, among others, have afforded me possibilities to be an artist and researcher. I am a queer person; I identify as both a woman and as my gender being non-binary. My pronouns are she/they. I have a long-term mental health illness.

My positionality shapes my specific path to questions about other-than-humans in art practice. Due to my familiarity with UK performance practices (as a student and practitioner), I am responding to traditions in European contemporary performance practice. In particular, the ways in which Universal Man and his “others” are constructed in performance. Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti write: “This modern divide (Latour 1993) of culture from nature follows on a long intellectual tradition of European thinking that separates and asymmetrically orders thought and praxis. It is a divide that plays out differently; it bifurcates, meanders and dove-tails into a subset of other violent hierarchies, such as [so-called - R.P.] wild/civilized, or Universal Man *vis-à-vis* women, [native people - R.P.] natives, [queer people - R.P.] queers, animals, and other Earth Others at large (Shiva 1988; Plumwood 1993; Bryld and Lykke 2000).”¹¹

Such ways of thinking promote Universal Man’s colonization of peoples and lands, including genocide, ecocide, slavery, extraction, capitalism, and climate change. In response, artists are working to present ways in which Earth Others are not separate from humans, or less-than. The challenge here is to not conflate differences between oppressed “others” while enacting solidarity. I am positioning myself to begin to describe the situation of the research and the violent hierarchies it is entangled in, at times disrupting and at times maintaining. Following Haraway’s assertion that research is situated, it happens “someplace and not no place, entangled and worldly.”¹²

Introducing the sourdough to you is difficult. They¹³ communicate to me through images and sensualities. Especially through smells. At the time of writing, they smell very strong, shocking, almost alcoholic. The sourdough starter, a slightly bubbling cream-coloured thick liquid living in a recycled jam jar, was passed onto me by a friend, artist Gillie Kleiman in January 2022. Sourdough, I have called an other-than-human species, but this could be questioned, as within post-humanist thinking the hierarchy topped with Universal Man is disturbed, along with separation and categorization.

I started working with sourdough after attending a workshop led by artists Carolyn Deby and Tom Simkins entitled “Wild Yeasts”, at Herbert Gallery, Coventry in October 2021. Deby facilitated activities that explained how wild yeasts are used in fermentation processes to make bread, beers, and ciders. Sourdough was also culturally familiar to me as a British person living in the

7 Bleeker 2020, 2.

8 Žeželj 2022, 72.

9 Barad 2007, 81.

10 I am a PhD student on the co-tutelle programme “Mobilizing Dramaturgy” within the two institutions.

11 Åsberg & Braidotti 2018.

12 Haraway 2016, 4.

13 I started referring to the sourdough as “they” rather than “it” after reading *The Democracy of Species* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2021, 19).

Covid-19 pandemic, where flour sold out in many supermarkets due to the increase in people baking. I wanted to reflect, perhaps with humour, on the cultural phenomena of people in their 30's, with expendable time, seeking to learn useful practices for living.

The following is a note on reasons for starting to work with sourdough: *Why? Because they're domestic, because they're light, because of depression, because they can be passed on by hand, because their cut-offs can be made into pancakes, because they're hipster, because of lockdown, because of queerness and fermentation communities, because of vaginas, skins, guts, because, where does it end? Because the gut is the other brain, because I need to listen to my gut.*

Practice Research

The methodological approach I am taking in this PhD is an iterative practice research methodology. I am using methods that may be familiar to live art practitioners and dramaturgs in order for this research to support practice in the field. Practice research involves attending to specific moments during the process of an emerging art practice. Mark Fleishman describes this methodology as attempting "to become aware from within the midst of the endless process of becoming and then to attempt to translate this for others through a variety of modalities."¹⁴ Such a methodology could provide accounts and analysis of becoming with sourdough. Practice research might elucidate knowledge about sourdough's agency in a specific and located way, countering the universalising language of human and other-than-human (which, contradictorily, I use in this text). However, this methodology has limits. An on-going ethical question for this research is: even when re-orientated, are art research practices necessarily the tools through which to engage in creating more egalitarian spaces with other-than-humans?

I am using diffraction as a metaphor for an approach to practice research. I will briefly describe the phenomenon of diffraction in physics, via Barad¹⁵ to unpack this. Barad describes a situation in which ocean waves strike a high barrier with a large hole or gap in it, a grating.¹⁶ As the waves move through the gap, "the waveforms bend and spread out".¹⁷ The waves emerge through the barrier shaped like half circles.¹⁸ The barrier is serving as a diffraction grating, a type of apparatus that "gives rise to a superposition of waves."¹⁹ For Barad, the apparatuses "have no intrinsic boundaries but are open-ended practices".²⁰ The metaphor of diffraction foregrounds the importance of the specific apparatus used because the apparatus causes effects (it causes the bending). Relating this to research, it matters which apparatus I use to understand dramaturgy practice as this causes effects to the practice. The diffraction apparatus I am using during this period of research is theories on practice research and post-humanist dramaturgy. I also hone in on my dynamic positionality in the world, as I am part of the apparatus, making meaning from this practice.

Diffraction is an "overarching trope" in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) and the metaphor Karen Barad uses to describe the methodological approach of "reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter."²¹ Rather than putting texts against one another, Barad reads them dialogically, non-hierarchically, "through one another"²² to engender "creative, and unexpected outcomes".²³ Fundamentally, approaching reading diffractively involves "marking differences from within and as part of an entangled state" in contrast to reflecting "objects held at a distance".²⁴ Taking this approach, the researcher must acknowledge themselves as part of that which they observe and acknowledge that their actions create differences in the world. In this text, I explicate the process of developing dramaturgy practice through theory, rather than making comparisons or reflections.

14 Fleishman 2012, 35.

15 Barad 2007

16 Barad 2007, 74.

17 Barad 2007, 74.

18 Barad 2007, 74.

19 Barad 2007, 81.

20 Barad 2007, 146.

21 Barad 2007, 71.

22 Barad 2007, 30.

23 Barad 2007 in Geerts & van der Tuin 2021, 175.

24 Barad 2007, 89.

In future writing, I will also attend to how this practice impacts onto post-humanist dramaturgy and practice research theory.

To consider the ethics of this practice, I first looked at *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees* by Annette Arlander. This is a practice research project where Arlander “spends time with specific trees and poses for camera together with them.”²⁵ In a work-in-progress talk²⁶ on the project, presented at the International Center for Knowledge in the Arts (Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen) and available on their Vimeo page, she describes a new strategy, namely “writing letters to the tree with the tree.”²⁷ She gives the example of an artwork, *Writing with a Pine (with text)* (2020) which shows Arlander sitting on a Pine tree in Örö, Finland and writing a letter to that tree using an “associative writing”²⁸ method. A combination of letters she wrote during the performance has been recorded as a voice-over and edited onto the action in the video.²⁹ In the letter, Arlander describes the letter as a “meta-letter of sorts” as it “aims to consider the practice in terms of its ethical and artistic implications.”³⁰ While Arlander does not call this act of addressing the tree and considering what they are doing together as doing dramaturgy with the tree, following Robbretch’s definition, it could be regarded as such.

In the recorded meta-letter Arlander acknowledges that the conversation may be “clumsy” or “one-sided”, however she sees potential in addressing “you”, the individual Pine tree, in contrast to “speaking for you or on behalf of you” – a strategy she recognises as “ethically challenging”.³¹ Arlander’s practice takes the “risky strategy”³² of emphasising individuality as a step toward decolonising our relationship with “nature.”³³ She explains this on the project website with a quote from ecofeminist Val Plumwood “colonial thinking tends to emphasize a very strong difference between “us” and “them” and to see “them” as all alike, stereotypical, non-individualised.”³⁴ By creating an “I – You” relationship, the performance attempts to acknowledge the individuality of the agents present and their capacity to respond.

Julietta Singh observes that within post-humanism “little attention is paid in its discourses to the specificity of neocolonial relations of power and materiality.”³⁵ Her conceptualization of “dehumanism” aims to draw attention to these relations, bringing “the posthuman into critical conversation with the decolonial.”³⁶ Without a decolonial stance within this research, I risk claiming a “human” subject “unmarked by categories of difference”³⁷ including differences in terms of race, gender, sexuality, disability status, and other protected characteristics. A “dehumanist solidarity” is Singh’s neologism to describe the desire to live beyond mastery.³⁸ Her method for enacting dehumanist solidarity is to trace “some of mastery’s qualities, drives, corollaries and repetitions”.³⁹ Another starting point for my practice research, alongside Arlander’s proposal to explore individualism, is the ambition to trace mastery’s qualities within live encounters between myself and sourdough.

In trying to disturb humanist hierarchies, I must also be aware of the potential to cause further harm, even by distraction, to humans who are dehumanised by the Anthropocene/Capitalocene⁴⁰. Another ethical question for dramaturgy practice is: by focusing on located individuals rather than “humans” and “other-than-humans” might a reparative practice be possible?

25 Arlander 2021a.

26 Arlander 2021b.

27 Arlander 2021b, 24.49min.

28 Arlander 2021b, 26.49min.

29 Arlander 2021b, 26.49min.

30 Arlander 2020 in Arlander 2021b, 30.20min.

31 Arlander 2020 in Arlander 2021b, 36.15min.

32 Alander observes that this is “risky” in this time of neoliberalism “in which individuality is already emphasised” (2021b).

33 Arlander 2021a.

34 Arlander 2021a.

35 Singh 2018, 4.

36 Singh 2018, 4.

37 Tavia Nyong’o in Singh 2018, 5.

38 Singh 2018, 1.

39 Singh 2018, 1–2.

40 Haraway 2016, 44–51.

Post-Humanist Dramaturgy

Performance theorists have discussed the ethics of interspecies artworks, usually with a focus on live encounters between humans and animals, including Cheng (2007), Cull Ó Maoilearca (2020), Fitzgerald-Allsopp (2020). Recently, there have been texts by Bleeker (2020), Woynarski (2020), and Žeželj (2022) taking a post-humanist approach to understanding dramaturgy, which considers not only living other-than-human species but non-living things, as agential. One such approach, Barad's "agential realism"⁴¹ has become a diffraction grating through which I engage with, and impact on, my dramaturgy practice with other-than-human species.

Barad's post-humanist theory of "agential realism" aims to rethink the relationship between materiality and signification⁴². Barad offers "a *performative* understanding of discursive practices" where the material body of the observer is part of the world (and not observing from the "outside")⁴³. Agential realism challenges thinking in which matter is only granted existence through language and nature is rendered passive and reliant on human subjectivity. This account of nature as passive produces the aforementioned separation and a hierarchical relationship between humans and other-than-humans. I share the motivation of post-humanist theorists to present other-than-human beings and things as more-than a resource to be used and discarded by humans. This is a consideration important to my research with sourdough, and provokes ethical questions and contradictions as they become a resource for my artwork and research.

Arlander's letter writing does not provoke a discernible response from the Pine tree, something that she acknowledges, while not closing down the possibility. She critiques her practice of letter writing, suggesting that just being nearby the tree allows her to focus on the tree's responses to her actions: "breathing together, growing together, sharing our participation in zoe, in life, and engaging in transcorporeal exchanges, with all the chemicals and magnetic or other waves, and various substances floating between us and through us."⁴⁴ Whether she is writing, or merely sitting, she will be engaging in such exchanges. As am I while writing a letter near the sourdough. It is easy to blow directly onto the surface of the sourdough starter and see, visually, the change in shape. It is perhaps easier to imagine the transcorporeal exchanges of airborne bacteria as they take place than it would be to imagine them with a Pine tree. Though that does not mean such exchanges are more or less happening in Arlander's action.

Verbal attempts at conversation seem, as mentioned, "clumsy" and "one-sided."⁴⁵ With the other-than-human's subjectivity being imposed on by humans. Nevertheless, is it hard to ignore the images and sensualities of the sourdough, shaping the conversation and thus the dramaturgical web. I will return to this problem and the ethical questions that emerge through practice in the final sections of this article, through analysis of the two projects I initiated with the sourdough.

In Bleeker's text "The Mise en Scène of Post-Human Thinking", she makes the case that human encounters with the non-human, the inhuman, the sub-human, and the post-human are a *given* in dramaturgy practice.⁴⁶ She argues the aforementioned theory of agential realism, described in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* – "[i]ndividuals do not preexist their interaction rather (...) through and as part of their entangled intra-relating."⁴⁷ All moments necessarily involve intra-actions happening between individual things, humans, and other-than-human species.

Barad's theory of "agential realism"⁴⁸ has been critiqued by Graham Harman, who argues that rather than a "realist", Barad is a "relationist"⁴⁹ because in their theory agencies emerge from intra-action rather than pre-existing. Slavoj Žižek has critiqued Barad's theory as "naturalism".⁵⁰ Elizabeth de Freitas outlines both Harman's and Žižek's arguments in "Karen Barad's Quantum

41 Barad 2003.

42 Barad, 2007, 132.

43 Barad, 2007, 133.

44 Arlander 2020 in Arlander 2021b, 36.44min.

45 Arlander 2020 in Arlander 2021b, 36.15min.

46 Bleeker 2020, 2.

47 Barad 2007, ix.

48 Barad 2003.

49 Harman 2016, para. 10.

50 Žižek 2012 in de Freitas 2017, 745.

Ontology and Posthuman Ethics: Rethinking the Concept of Relationality” using these to present Barad’s work as articulating a *new kind of empiricism* for the social sciences.⁵¹ While there is no space to engage deeply with these discussions in this text, criticism of Barad’s theory of “agential realism” impacts on ethical questions about dramaturgy with other-than-human species and will form the basis of future work.

One of the artworks discussed in Bleeker’s text is Tim Knowles’ *Tree drawings*. For the drawings to be made, Knowles attaches an artist sketch pen to a tree branch and sheets of paper and an easel are set-up so that the trees movement creates drawings. Bleeker states that *Tree drawings* show agency to take shape “within an ecology of relations.”⁵² The tree drawings do not materialize solely due to the actions or intentions of Knowles, or the trees, but materialize from the tree’s intra-actions with the page, the wind, the local buildings, the climate, and with the audience.⁵³ This work involves the human artist setting up the action so that the artwork is legible to a human audience *as art*. The artwork can be presented in gallery spaces in order for humans to understand (among other things) that art expression is not only available to humans. Other-than-humans can be understood through these artworks as other-than materials or props for human expression. However, these collaborators are unpaid, and un-consenting. This example is against human exceptionalism, but on the terms of the other-than-human being masterful, rather than the human (and other-than-humans) being un-masterful, which I explore in my practice to enact a dehumanist solidarity.

Woynarski promotes ecodramaturgies because they are non-anthropocentric. Though she notes, through Bennett’s work that such a claim is a performative self-contradiction: “a human elaborating a non-anthropocentric performance theory.”⁵⁴ Woynarski finds this contradiction to be generative rather than paralysing – “it can call attention to the way in which we as humans are inextricably embedded in the more-than-human world.”⁵⁵ I am taking a post-humanist stance as a “human” - e.g. recognising the human as a fiction, both due not falling into the category of universal “Man”, and the reality of the microbiome of yeasts and bacteria present in the so-called human body. Therefore, the binary between human and other-than-human becomes disturbed. While I continue to use the terms “human” and “other-than-human”, the practical work makes this complicated. Constructing and then collapsing the category of “human” was key to the “*Solos*” exploration, emphasised by the failing quality in my acts of dethroning the human as will be discussed. Rather than non-anthropocentric, my practice focuses on relations between a human and a other-than-human.

Important to my research is Tery Žeželj’s recent paper on “Dramaturgy as a more-than-human practice.” It presents an argument for dramaturgy practice within an eco-feminist approach that cultivates “responsivity to our material entanglements.”⁵⁶ Žeželj starts by stating that interspecies collaborations highlight “the differences and the unknowability that emerges between bodies”⁵⁷ and that addressing this is important to move beyond strategies of recognition that, Neimanis writes, are “too limited and, to put it bluntly, too self-referential (and self-preserving?) to serve as an adequate basis for interaction with bodies of alterity.”⁵⁸ Considering sourdough doing dramaturgy, I need to question if such recognition is only preserving such art practices for ourselves (the artists). In order to experience the complexities of human and other-than-human intra-actions in a more egalitarian way, should I be attempting sourdough nature/culture activities rather than attempting to include sourdough within European dramaturgy nature/culture? Despite the collapse of the boundaries separating “human” and “other-than-human”, this intimacy does not necessarily mean an all-knowing relationship, lacking in difference or otherness. Supporting the scaffolding of a dehumanist dramaturgy practice, I acknowledge difference and unknowability.

My engagement with post-humanist dramaturgy theory drew out four key ideas which formed

51 de Freitas 2017, 741.

52 Bleeker 2020, 7.

53 Bleeker 2020, 7.

54 Bennett 2010 in Woynarski 2020, 77.

55 Woynarski 2020, 77.

56 Žeželj 2022, 74.

57 Žeželj 2022, 72.

58 Neimanis 2011 in Žeželj 2022, 72.

a diffraction grating shaping my conversational dramaturgy practice with other-than-humans. 1) The notion of human and other-than-human, being called into question, being contradictory, and collapsing as individual, binary concepts 2) That by doing dramaturgy practice with other-than-human species, I am restoring dramaturgy practice rather than meeting sourdough on their terms 3) That such practice involves intra-actions within and part of an ecology of relations 4) Difference and unknowability is present when observing the self, other, and the ecological relations that we are within and part of.

“Solos” with Sourdough

“Solos” was the first live art project exploring dramaturgy practice with sourdough. The practice took place at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, over eight weeks, March – August 2022. The on-going maintenance art: living, coexisting, cleaning and feeding myself and the sourdough (the sourdough feeding back) form a so-far invisible aspect of this research and took place at my rented flat in Coventry. The initial dramaturgy methods, adopted and adapted from *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees*⁵⁹ were: 1) Breathing together, 2) The I – You Game, which was an improvisation game in which “I” described myself and then “I” described “you”, the sourdough starter, and repeated this pattern for a set amount of time (see Figure 1.). This was inspired by Arlander’s development of an I – You relationship with the Pine tree through letter writing. And 3) Associative letter writing to the sourdough with the sourdough. The other methods were 4) Reflective writing, 5) Reading literature on post-humanism, 6) Following impulse to compose performance.



Figure 1. Artwork by Rosa Postlethwaite, Videography by Rosa Postlethwaite / Screenshot from I – You Game (Day One) / Description: A white femme-presenting person sits on the floor opposite a small jam jar with sourdough starter in it. The person is wearing an orange jumper and purple trousers. The sourdough is a thick, greyish-beige coloured liquid inside the glass. The lid to the jar is open and on the floor. The person looks at the sourdough, their mouth is open as if they might be speaking. The person and the sourdough are sitting in a dance studio with white walls. Copyright: Rosa Postlethwaite 2022.

59 The individuals, species and contexts of these practices are, of course, different. One such key difference is that the Pine tree is not “domesticated” like the sourdough is. The sourdough relies on me to “feed” it, and therefore the power-relation is different than Arlander’s and the Pine tree.

Transcription from I – You game day 1

*I am human
You are sourdough starter
I am yeast and bacteria
You are yeast and bacteria and other things
I am sitting
You are maybe sitting
Erm
I am shaking
You are shaking
I am plural
You are plural
I am here
You are there
I am warm
You are who knows
I am liquid or solid, or gas
You are liquid, solid or gas
I am breathing
You are something like breathing but not breathing*

What emerged in the I – You game was one-sided verbal contact with the sourdough. The structure prompted a creative response, activating doing-thinking about self and other as separate subjects. By filming the action on a phone, I made my understanding of sourdough legible to other humans. The subsequent recording offered a list of likenesses and differences between individuals based on my situated knowledge. Stating at the top “human” and “sourdough” goes against Arlander’s invitation to focus on the individuality of the organism – or in this case microbiome. Focusing on comparison, the exercise could be explained by the metaphor of reflection, as it solidified positions. When the exercise worked to challenge hierarchies, it included faltering for example “you are something like breathing” which glimpses at unknowing, and un-mastering.

Letter to sourdough day 1

Dear Sourdough

I called you Sour Joe to a friend who asked me what your name was. Need a name I suppose. A pet. I was to be master.⁶⁰ A way to be-with. A way to be at home. A family rather than strangers and aliens sharing such close space. So although I don’t know if I want to call you Joe, whether or not that would be right, I hear the name in my head now. I suppose it does not matter to you. Or maybe it does, in the way that discourse matters. You become kept in a particular way. Even my breath as I write should change patterns at this point of writing a name. That thing changes. That feels too inconsequential particularly to university research. I am a small person wearing velour pyjama bottoms in purple and a burnt orange jumper. With an orange soft blanket round my shoulders and my knee. You are in a see-through glass jar with a circular lid and a picture of cherries. You are small and quite still but of course not completely.

60 Singh discusses naming as a way that humans gain authority to master “the natural world” in *Unthinking Mastery* (2018).

Arlander's "meta-letter" writing exercise was a means of thinking about the ethics of creating an I – You relationship while making it. As in Arlander's performance, though with much less clarity, and argument development, my letter discussed the risks of anthropomorphising sourdough in relation to mastering. In this case, anthropomorphising through naming – "I called you Sour Joe". In the letter, I perceived naming the sourdough to be a way of mastering them because naming separates us and makes me paternal. In the later part of the text, I use writing to zoom out. I write myself as a "small person wearing velour pyjama bottoms", and then describe the sourdough as "small." This suggested that the sourdough is like me. In consequential exercises I swapped the order of the I – You game, so that it became You – I. This is still an exercise in mirroring, but was perhaps a gesture at sourdoughmorphising (starting by articulating a characteristic of the sourdough and then describing myself based on this sourdough characteristic) rather than anthropomorphising.

In *Writing with a Pine (with text)*, Arlander suggested that more risky than anthropomorphising is denying the Pine tree's capacities to detect others and form language ("perhaps through volatile chemicals").⁶¹ In my letter I pointed to this, knowing that my breath will contain microbial life in proximity with the microbial life of the sourdough – "Even my breath as I write should change pattern." This kind of awareness opened up a more diffractive understanding of the relationships, whereby the sourdough and human individuals intra-acted, and emerged from disturbances.

These exercises activated and documented ideas that were responsive to the sourdough and mobilised impulsive performance composition. During composition, there were many more agents in the web including: the white walls of the performance studio, the sound of Donna Haraway's voice, a table, music by Christine and the Queens, and these presences were also emphasised in the final performances-to-camera. Taking a post-humanist approach, I consider the "web" as a material-discursive form through which to understand more-than-human assemblages emerging through and as practice. Each of the four compositions (which made up the final film) explored acts of dethroning the human experience. I was unsure of how to trace "mastery's qualities, drive, corollaries and repetitions"⁶² in this project. So, I aimed to disturb a representation of human mastery over other-than-humans. I used the dramaturgical metaphor of dethroning to instigate actions when I perceived the representation to show my dominance over the sourdough. I used the word "dethroning" to mean undercutting or undermining authority. In the case of the work, dethroning meant to cause the failure of my dominance over the sourdough starter.

The compositions were (more or less) repeatable, contained, and representational of our relationship rather than being immediate presentations focusing on unknowing. My tactics were largely about dethroning: covering my face (looking less like a large charismatic mammal), editing the performance-to-camera so that my image disappears using green screen technology (see Figure 2.), a un-impressive lip-synching to audio from Donna Haraway in *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival* (rendering her digital output the star of that act),⁶³ and an amateurish dance performance. In the process of making, I was aware of the contradiction that I was following my own desire while attempting to dethrone myself; in other words, I had authority over acts that undermined my authority. Across the composition, my experience and my nature-culture were centred. This made the dethroning attempts less successful when thinking about inter-species hierarchies.

61 Arlander, 2020.

62 Singh 2018, 1–2.

63 Terranova 2019.



Figure 2. Artwork by Rosa Postlethwaite, Videography by Marley Starskey Butler / Screenshot from “Solos” with Sourdough / Description: Sourdough (in bread dough form) is being stretched. A jar of sourdough starter is next to it on a table. Using green screen technology, the table, the person stretching the dough, and the backdrop is black and grainy. This makes the greyish-beige sourdough stand out. The dough is stretched from the table upwards beyond the top of the image. Copyright: Rosa Postlethwaite 2022.

The dramaturgy practice in this impulsive composition stage moved from a process of attempting to focus on the relationship between sourdough and myself as individuals to a very wide, unruly, undefinable and unknowable “ecology of relations.”⁶⁴ When the film was shared with audience members, it also trapped them in the dramaturgy web with its response-abilities.⁶⁵ In this first project, I moved from methods that developed a sense of a relationship between two individuals in conversation towards an unmanageable dramaturgy web that still placed my desires at the centre.

In this section on “*Solos*,” I explained the process of formulating ethical questions when doing dramaturgy with an other-than-human species. I observed that a comparison game separated and solidified positions leading to the question: How to explore an ecology of relations through difference and unknowability rather than comparison? I recognised that my acts of dethroning in “*Solos*” were authorised by me, in other words, I recognised that I was motivated to compose by my own desire while entangled in this ecology of relations. This led to my second ethical question; by including other-than-human species in dramaturgy, am I promoting Western Art practices for myself and Western communities rather than for other-than-human species? Or more concisely; should this dramaturgy practice be relinquished?

Drying, Cracking

The second project *Drying, Cracking* (henceforth, *Cracking*) started in March 2023. It began with the aim of working speculatively by asking questions with the sourdough. I rented a studio space in the John Marley Centre, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK where I had a permanent

64 Bleeker 2020, 7.

65 Haraway 2016.

private area. Not sharing the space reduced the risks of harm to other humans (caused by slippery surfaces, or growing mould). This enabled me to work more with sourdough outside of a container.

One exercise was to write associatively with the sourdough in the form of a list of questions. I would then improvise responses to these questions. I worked on impulse, developing responsivity to the question and the sourdough. Three weeks into the project, I recorded an improvisation in response to the question: “How to be interested in the in-between, I-We? What is I-We’s potential?” In response to this, I poured the sourdough starter on my arm and experienced my skin and the sourdough drying together. I decided to repeat this action, but with far more sourdough starter, growing the sourdough starter to fill four large bowls. I set up a camera and poured them over my body (see Figure 3 and 4). I worked in my parents’ kitchen, because I had planned to bake the sourdough after drying it on my body. Although in the end I was so exhausted I could not. I also wanted the kitchen to position “I” – British, middle-class, with personal artefacts in the background, in an attempt at non-neutrality. I-We improvised movements: humming, feeling the slippery floor, lifting my head to the sunlight coming down from the skylight. This improvisation lasted for roughly fifty minutes, although only twenty minutes was filmed due to the camera turning off. (I do not know why).



Figure 3. Artwork by Rosa Postlethwaite, Videography by Rosa Postlethwaite / First Screenshot from Drying, Cracking / Description: A white person stands by a kitchen table pouring sourdough down their back. They are not wearing clothes apart from white shorts. There is sourdough covering the front of their legs and arms, sticking to their skin. A blob of sourdough is beginning to fall down their back, straight over their spine. They stand in front of a large wooden kitchen table. On the table are four cooking bowls containing sourdough or remnants of sourdough, a dishcloth, two large drink glasses, and a bag of flour. The walls of the kitchen are cream. There is a painting and a photograph hanging on the walls. Copyright: Rosa Postlethwaite 2023.



Figure 4. Artwork by Rosa Postlethwaite, Videography by Rosa Postlethwaite / Second Screenshot from Drying, Cracking / Description: The same person is kneeling on the floor in the same kitchen as in the image above. They are in front of the kitchen table facing the camera as sourdough falls over their face. The consistency of the cream-coloured sourdough is thin over their arms and torso but thick and irregular over their hair and face. The person is only visible from the waist up and not wearing clothes. Sourdough is covering almost all of their skin. They are smoothing the sourdough onto the sides of their head with their hands. Behind them on the kitchen table there are now only two bowls visible. Rosa Postlethwaite 2023.

During the improvisation I was very aware of the camera, and conscious that I was speculating about what we (the sourdough and myself) looked like, felt like, sounded like, how we could be understood by an unknown human. This way of doing dramaturgy emphasised that we were making-with together, doing “sympoiesis”.⁶⁶ I thought of us as “I-We”, rather than a fully separated “I – You.” In this improvisation the “human” body and experience were dethroned as it became impossible to perceive as separate from the body and experience of the other-than-human.

An extract from my reflective writing immediately after the improvisation:

*Feeling invigorated by the cold
Glad that some of it was on film
The vibration and the frequency match hum
The squelching
The clean up
The hair clumps
So afraid of bacteria
In the inorganic
The cleaning – killing bacteria
Living on the floor – and touching the floor with food
The between being un-claustrophobic
The rain
Drips
Like cold water swimming
...The performance ended when my lips began to painfully crack in a way I didn't expect*

⁶⁶ Haraway 2016, 50.

My breath passed in and out through my nose and dried the sourdough on and around my mouth quickly. This caused a hardness on my skin which cracked as I began to move my mouth. These effects emphasised Woynarski's term, the "bioperformativity". The human-sourdough assemblage was performative in that we caused effects. When I noticed the painful cracking, I ran to the shower to remove the sourdough from my face. The cracking skin wielded the duration of the performance.

From the initial practical explorations in "*Solos*" to those in *Cracking* my practice was diffracted through post-humanist theories on dramaturgy. My practice in the first project reenforced a sense of separation, then, through reading and conceptualising differently, the second project focused on lack of separation, while holding onto difference and unknowability. In the first project, the task of the I – You game and letter writing was to acknowledge our individuality, and the sourdough's capacity (or lack) of sensual conversation. I was less conscious of how these tasks and the composition might be understood by an audience. In *Cracking*, which was an open space for improvisation, I was extremely aware of the proximity of sourdough on my body and how this might be understood. The sourdough was more obviously (to me, in the moment) doing dramaturgy with me, as they wielded duration, movement limitations as well as thoughts, talks, images, and sensualities. The collapsed relationship between human and other-than-human was illustrated in the visual language of my skin microbiome commingling with sourdough. I was keenly aware of my dramaturgical agency being only through intra-action with others.

Speculating with sourdough while co-mingling our microbiomes, made unknowability very profound. I asked: what would happen later? Was this dangerous? Who is harming who? What do we look like when we do this? I could not catch up with conceptualising what we were doing, as our actions unfolded. While in "*Solos*", this was also the case, I was less overwhelmed by the intimate sensations and so felt more in control and composed. The difference between one moment and the next was, of course, felt in each exercise but differently. In "*Solos*", I investigated the sourdough as a mirror to me, I explored in which ways we were comparable and different. I felt as though I was looking from "the outside" to see what I knew. In *Cracking*, I felt we were part of the same body, but this body was different, becoming, from one moment to the next. Conceptually I still made cuts between "my skin" and "sourdough", however the co-mingling of skins could be more easily understood through the metaphor of a diffraction process than a mirroring one.

What was perhaps lost through the development of my practice was an analysis of the act of restoring dramaturgy practice. In the I – You game I could verbally acknowledge the situation, for example in one game I said: "I am here in a university which is a complicated space, which is about the production of knowledges, which is patriarchal, which is white supremacist, which is queerphobic, which is profit-driven, which is climate destroying. You are in a room which is in a university, which is where you produce knowledge, which is patriarchal, which is white supremacist, which is queerphobic, which is disability phobic, which is parent phobic, which is witches phobic, yeah it's a complex place." In *Cracking*, I placed myself in my parents' kitchen but did not make an account of the site and their relations or account for the nature-cultures of dramaturg or academic research. The work lost its sense of self-critique, restoring post-humanist dramaturgy practice without acknowledging that post-humanism calls into being humanist thinking also.

Both projects offered different ways of attending to an ecology of relations: "*Solos*" encouraged an institutional critique through writing, while *Cracking* prompted a sensorial experience of the self and sourdough changing over time, and self-sourdough consciousness to the camera. In the performance-to-camera composition, "*Solos*", I worked impulsively. I built a series of actions that aimed to represent my learning and dehumanist desire. *Cracking* as a single improvisation, though by no means less of an ecology of relationships, focused more on learning as it took place rather than a representation. In this way, it is perhaps less explicit to an audience but more personally useful as a record of experience for research.

In this section on *Cracking*, the improvisation with sourdough to camera, returned focus to

a potential audience, our “response-ability”⁶⁷ to this audience and the response-ability of this potential audience. Beyond the effects of the relationships within the studio, I also need to consider the potential effects of this work on others. This led to my final ethical question for my practice: How will this work impact an audience? What is our response-ability?

Conclusion

I am left now with three ethical questions to guide future work: How to explore an ecology of relations, of which I am part, through difference and unknowability rather than comparison? Is this practice one that should be relinquished? How will this work impact an audience, what is our response-ability?⁶⁸ Questioning has become both a method for doing dramaturgy as in *Cracking* and a way of articulating ethics for practice research with other-than-human species.

This practice research created an account and analysis of two dramaturgy processes. In the first project, I explored creating an I – You relationship with sourdough. I perceived the sourdough and myself as individuals. When impulsively composing with sourdough, I was then more aware of our part of a complex ecology of relations, the dramaturgy web was expanded, beyond the edges of my comprehension. The sourdough’s images and sensualities formed the start of a conversation to which I was responsive. The performance-to-camera composition “*Solos*” presented acts of dethroning the human, rather than presenting mastery in the sourdough’s ways of existing. In the second project, *Cracking*, I focused on the sensation of intimate proximity with sourdough, as well as what we were doing, and how we might be understood by an audience. By focusing on our images and sensual communication the making-with, sympoiesis, was acutely understood. As a composition it was limited in presenting difference and unknowability in our relationship to an audience. This could be emphasised by doing a spoken stream of consciousness describing, and necessarily, failing, to articulate my total understanding of the moment.

Dramaturgy as a web of human and other-than-human agents was experienced, and represented in writing. However, to what end? Engulfed by the logic of extractive capitalism, my post-humanist dramaturgy practice is contradictory, which seems to be stuck within the problems of “post-.” By this I mean that it is still, solidifying, bringing forward, throning, and universalising the human experience through its attempts to do otherwise. The dramaturgy practices I have explored reveal complexities in post-humanist theories as well as revealing questions for future work.

AUTHOR

Rosa Postlethwaite (she/they) works as a performance artist, dramaturg and facilitator across theatre, live art, dance and socially engaged art. They work collaboratively to make site-responsive performance, club nights, workshops, and shows.

Through performance Rosa tries to deconstruct, slow-down, reimagine and remake forms of sociality in order to shake up the taken-for-grantedness of the way things are.

They are currently a PhD researcher at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, and Aarhus University 2022 – 2025. Rosa’s research is focused on multispecies dramaturgy practice.

67 Haraway 2016, 28.

68 Haraway 2016, 28.

References

- Arlander, Anette. 2020. "Writing with a Pine (with text). (Artwork). *Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, Research Catalogue*. <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/761326/1036306> (26.12.2023).
- Arlander, Anette. 2021a. "Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees." *Meeting With Trees* webpage. <https://meetingswithtrees.com/> (16.7.2021).
- Anette Arlander. 2021b. "Anette Arlander: Meetings with Remarkable and Unremarkable Trees, 30.3.21". International Center for Knowledge in the Arts at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen. <https://vimeo.com/545590348> (16.7.2021).
- Åsberg, Cecilia and Rosi Braidotti. 2018. *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities*. Cham: Springer.
- Barad, Karen. 2003. "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801–31, 10.1086/345321.
- Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway. Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bleeker, Maaïke. 2020. "The Mise en Scène of Post-Human Thinking". *Parse Journal, Human* (12).
- Cheng, Meiling. 2007. "Animalworks in China". *TDR : Drama Review*, 51(1), 63–91. 10.1162/dram.2007.51.1.63.
- Cull Ó Maoilearca, Laura. 2022. "How Do Nonhuman Animals Make Art? Art as a Practice of Interspecies Questioning." *Annals of Cultural Studies: What is Art? Horizons of Creator and Recipient*, Vol 13 No 4, 59–64.
- de Freitas, Elizabeth. 2017. "Karen Barad's Quantum Ontology and Posthuman Ethics: Rethinking the Concept of Relationality." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(9), 741–48. 10.1177/1077800417725359.
- Fleishman, Mark. 2012. "The Difference of Performance as Research." *Theatre Research International*, 37(1), 28–37. 10.1017/S0307883311000745.
- Fitzgerald-Allsopp, Florence. 2020. "Becoming-with-Animal: An Ecofeminist Performance Practice", *Performance, Religion and Spirituality*, 2:2, 99–119. <https://press.utoledo.edu/index.php/prs/article/view/365/222> (14.10.2020).
- Geerts, Evelien and Iris van der Tuin. 2021. "Diffraction & Reading Diffractively." *Matter Journal of New Materialist Research* 2:1, 173–77.

“Solos” with Sourdough and Drying, Cracking

Harman, Graham. 2016. “Agential and Speculative Realism: Remarks on Barad’s Ontology”. *Rhizomes*, No. 30. <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/030.e10>.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the trouble : making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2021. *The Democracy of Species*. London: Penguin.

Postlethwaite, Rosa and sourdough. 2022. “Solos” with sourdough. (Unpublished performance-to-camera). Coventry University and Aarhus University.

Postlethwaite, Rosa and sourdough. 2023. *Drying, Cracking*. (Unpublished performance-to-camera). Coventry University and Aarhus University.

Robbrecht, Joachim. 2017. “Contagious Conversations.” In Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou (eds.). *The practice of dramaturgy: working on actions in performance*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 137–46.

Singh, Julietta. 2018. *Unthinking mastery: dehumanism and decolonial entanglements*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival. Director: Fabrizio Terranova. Spectre Productions, Atelier Graphoui. 2019. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/donnaharaway> (17.1.2019).

Wojnarski, Lisa. 2020. *Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance and Climate Change*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Žeželj, Tery. 2022. “Dramaturgy as a more-than-human practice.” *Maska*, 37(3), 64–77. [10.1386/masks_00130_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/masks_00130_1).