

Researching through porosity: an animist research methodology

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There is much to be gained if animists, those who regularly experience insight as communications from other-than-human persons, and academics come into conversation with one another (cf. G. Harvey 2006b). Such communications can help disrupt the human-nature binary that is consistently identified as a key root cause of many current environmental problems. It can also enable access to much wisdom and innovative insights, if humans are willing and able to listen. Yet structures and rules defined by a culture that generally does not support animism can make it particularly challenging to research *through* animism as both epistemology and ontology, particularly in most academic contexts. Given that particular ways of knowing and being have higher status than others (Bowers 1997), there are plenty of manuscripts that talk about animism, but few explicitly identify animism as the epistemological and ontological framework through which they are researched and "written".

Drawing on my doctoral dissertation which examines ways in which an over-reliance on Western forms of rationality limit our ability to effectively conduct research which honours and engages with the more-than-human natural world, I briefly outline a research methodology and methods that move beyond the Newtonian view of matter and supports engagement with a universe of "knowers", many of whom are not human (Stuckey 2010). I also highlight the role of discourse in maintaining animist research as an (im)possibility, and identify ways in which hypertextual representation of research can support openings to animist sensibilities.

I write this chapter as an academic, animist and trained practitioner in a variety of energy-healing modalities. My research and its (performative) representation was prompted by increasing calls for epistemological and ontological diversity in research approaches, as well as the need for different ways of thinking and forms of consciousness to address pressing ecological concerns. Animism, together with a variety of intuitive energy-shifting processes such as Yuen Method Chinese Energetic Medicine, support an opening to such difference, which I refer to as porosity. Porosity reflects the

episto-ontological position from which I write. It refers to an openness to and engagement with animate Earth, particularly in the process of knowledge acquisition and meaning-making. It also refers to the ontological possibility of shifting discourse through focused intent. The notion of porosity is premised on understandings that thought and matter are, to a great extent, manifestations of energy¹ (Hawking 1988; Stapp 1993; Tiller 2004) and as such, face-to-face and non-local communication with the more-than-human is both an epistemological and ontological possibility. The word *porosity* underscores the porousness, or lack of boundaries, between human beings and that which exists well beyond the physicality of human thought and body. It is related to, and extends beyond animism. Depending on one's starting point, opening to porosity may require shifting understandings of the very nature of the reality in which we live.

My research develops a dialogic² method(ology)³ and form of representation that supports researching beyond socially constructed human-nature-spirit boundaries. I use a variety of intuitive knowledge-making practices, energy work, and a multi-media hypertextual form to de-centre the privileged position of the human intellect, and *research and write through* (rather than just about) animist ways of knowing, and being. In doing so, I simultaneously invite the reader to engage the "text" beyond normative Western epistemological and ontological frames and develop my primary argument: more space needs to be provided for inclusion, and acknowledgement, of contributions of animate Earth (plants, animals and spirit) to research and its representation.

To engage a dialogic method(ology) entails moving beyond the limits of Western epistemologies and ontologies; it also supports a decolonizing of the self, and as such, more decolonized relations with those who are not human. The study is both deconstructive and reconstructive, and addresses three research questions: (a) How might a researcher intentionally and respectfully engage with and acknowledge animate Earth and spirit as key sources of knowledge in the process of academic inquiry? (b) In the field of education, what are some of the discourses which have made the twinned acts of research/representation in ongoing dialogue with animate Earth and spirit difficult to engage and acknowledge? (c) Recognizing that all forms of representation have limitations, what kinds of representation might be congruent with the epistemological and ontological premises of animism?

To complete the study required drawing on scholarship from a number of theoretical perspectives and disciplines, including feminist, queer, post-structural and anti-racist theory, as well as literature from anthropology, research methodology, religious studies, energy-healing practices and, more peripherally, trans-personal psychology and quantum theory. Coming to a dialogic method(ology) required identifying and moving beyond conventional and well-inscribed Western ways of (academic) knowing, and coming to terms with the fact that these ways of knowing are accessible to all peoples. As I wrote in 2009 (see www.porosity.ca),

my "choice"
to write, create this way

took
release.
escape from

tentacles of
old etchings.

Dissolving sedimented

human
nature line

Methodology and methods, as well as the hypertextual representation of the research "text" underpin the intentional disruption of rational linear thought while simultaneously supporting shifts in consciousness that are often required to engage animist sensibilities in knowledge production.

THE METHODOLOGY

Key steps of a dialogic method(ology) are identified below. Coming to the research methodologies and methods used in this dissertation required listening for new (old) processes of knowing to emerge. While listed separately and in linear order, most of the steps intersect and overlap with one another.

1. Quieting the mind;
2. Being open and attuned to porosity;
3. Finding methods and practising;
4. Finding ways to simultaneously engage in and re-present this process so that both researcher and reader can make meaning *through* rather than just *about* animism and porosity;
5. Maintaining a deep sense of respect for the wisdom of the more-than-human world.

Specific methods include (but are far from limited to) various forms of meditation (e.g. Bai 2001), dowsing (e.g. Hansen 1982), dreaming (e.g. Castellano 2002; Bernard 2007) and non-local communication (e.g. Sheldrake 2003). They also include artistic practice (e.g. Lipsett 2002, 2005) and simple, quiet attention. Messages received can be perceived as visual images, dreams, a felt sense, or a feeling. They may be experienced as a gut feeling, serendipity, a sense of being drawn to pick up a particular book, go a particular place, or as words that pop into one's head. Some messages are metaphoric and require significant interpretation,⁴ while others appear to be more literal (G. Harvey 2006a). Insights arrived at through porosity can often (but not always) be distinguished from everyday thought in that they are frequently ideas one has never thought before, proposals that are clearly from outside of one's normal frame of reference, or even beyond one's wildest imagination (such as the idea that I should represent my dissertation in hypertext using short bits, rather than a more linear prose comprising chapters). Most methods require that the constantly thinking conceptual mind "gets out of the way" to enable access to wisdom and insight through a different form of consciousness. These forms of consciousness may not be far removed from a normal working/waking state, but are often not accessed nor acknowledged given the cognitive and methodological imperialism demanded in academic

discourse (L. Smith 1999; Battiste & Henderson 2000). Such "imperialist" discourses make it difficult to engage that which "has been muted or repressed and gone unheard in representations of our practice" (Lotz-Sisitka 2002: 118). To engage such epistemologies often requires leaving behind academic structures and thought systems.

Since the processes of knowledge production and acquisition that support porosity exist beyond the intellect and are often not explainable within conventional Western frameworks of knowing (see Bai 2003, 2009; Stuckey 2010), they are frequently marginalized and seldom explicitly taught or acknowledged in most academic contexts (for some exceptions, see Braud & Anderson 1998; Dillard 2006a,b). This "shadow knowledge" (Abram in Abram & Jardine 2000: 176) is sometimes assumed to be spiritual in origin (Castellano 2002; Aboriginal Elder-in-Residence, personal communication, July 2007) and referred to as "derived knowledge" (D. M. Smith 1998), or "revealed knowledge" (Castellano 2002: 24). For many who have been raised in colonial contexts and work in the academy, to actively engage these ways of knowing requires particular resilience in the face of many powerful discourses which daily reinscribe the methods as not legitimate forms of knowledge production.

IDENTIFYING DISCOURSES

Discourse analysis is particularly helpful in identifying sets of meanings that are in the way of researching and writing through an animist ontology, and porosity. Post-structural theory, which guided the analysis of discourses in this study, can be used to highlight ways in which certain meanings can be made in certain contexts, among specific communities of people, and using particular social and textual processes (J. Scott 1988). It can also make visible how particular "regimes of truth", created through discourse, work to maintain assumptions about what it means to be academic and perform academic in appropriate ways, for example: writing in traditional forms; using readily recognizable and peer-reviewed references; and using accepted and normalized (within particular academic contexts) research methods and episto-ontological frames (Dillard 2006b; Lather 2006). In other words, post-structural analysis helps make visible ways in which power and discourse work together to place boundaries around who one can be and what kinds of research methods "count". It can also make visible ways in which particular discourses are daily reinscribed by speech, action and physical spaces, determining the subjectivities one is able to perform (Butler 1995). Often, simply naming a discourse has potential to decrease its power (Davies 2000); on other occasions, the naming reinscribes its power to constrain.

In the context of this research project, each of the discourses named below had varying degrees of power to affect ways in which I was able to engage porosity in the completion of the study:⁵

- socially constituted epistemologies and ontologies that assume that the more-than-human world (Abram 1997) does not have consciousness nor interact with humans in a dialogic relationship;
- consistent privileging of the conceptual over the perceptual (M. J. Barrett 2007; Bai 2009);

- norms about how knowledge should be represented (Richardson 2002; Dillard 2006a,b);
- norms about what constitutes legitimate research (Robottom & Hart 1993; St Pierre & Roulston 2006);
- accusations of appropriation of indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing (L. Smith 1999; Battiste & Henderson 2000; G. Harvey 2003; O'Riley 2003);
- a culture of busy-ness that makes it difficult to slow down enough to hear the earth's many voices (Bai 2009);
- Western school science curricula that define rocks and similar beings as inanimate (Aikenhead & Michell 2011);
- claims that expressions of awe, love, and so on vis-à-vis nature (e.g. Bowerbank 1998; Sandilands 2002) are simply instances of socially constructed romanticism;
- "methodological atheism" (Ezzy 2004: 118), and avoidance of the "S" word (spirit) in discussions of research methodology (see Shahjahan 2005; Dillard 2006a,b);
- many Christian discourses which are often very human-centred and wary of earth-based spiritual practices (Berry & Tucker 2006; Taylor 2009);
- a range of suspicion, fear (Ezzy 2004) and delegitimization (Dillard 2003) of ways of knowing and knowledge that do not have rational explanations (Radin 1997; Findlay 2000; Hufford 2003; Jonas & Crawford 2004);
- continual reinscription of conceptual reasoned thought as the primary and privileged way of knowing in most academic pursuits;
- shamanophobia (including my own) (R. J. Wallis 1999b; Walter & Fridman 2004);
- reinscription of humans (and perhaps other animals, particularly mammals) as the sole holder(s) of consciousness and intentionality and the unmarked norm against which all others are measured (Bell & Russell 2000; Plumwood 2002);
- ontologies that support the above and deny (or ignore) the energetic connections among all things as articulated by quantum theory (Hawking 1988; B. Greene 1999) and indigenous science scholars (e.g. Cajete 2000).

These discourses are layered onto the perceived (and sometimes experienced) risks of inappropriately performing as a human and an academic as they are currently conceived. Some of these include:

- the risk of not being part of the academic club (see Boler 1999), and thus being excluded from publishing and presentation opportunities if I use languages, research methodologies and forms of representation not readily acknowledged in academic research;
- the risk (and reality) of being told "your hands can't know" (comment from a senior faculty member in response to me describing aspects of my research methods);
- the risk (and tension) of living contradictory subjectivities/identities simultaneously in both my personal and professional lives – one which I could reveal, and the other which often (though less frequently now) remains hidden;
- the risk of inappropriately performing as a human, or an academic, as they are currently conceived, in Western and academic contexts (and the associated risk of being told I am crazy) (see Plumwood 2002; Jensen 2004; G. Williams 2005);
- the risk of being accused of appropriation of indigenous knowledge and ways of

- knowing (L. Smith 1999; Battiste & Henderson 2000; G. Harvey 2003; O'Riley 2003) or being labelled an Indian wannabe (O'Riley 2003);
- the risk of being explicit about using a dowsing as an important research tool (I was told by a committee member to go ahead and use it, but not mention it in my dissertation; another committee member encouraged me to talk about how hard it is to talk about);
- the risk of not getting a job (I was applying for a tenure track position during the time the study was being conducted);
- the risk of not conforming to the seven-page guidelines for formatting dissertations, published by the Faculty of Graduate Studies;
- the risk of not receiving appropriate approvals from my dissertation committee, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, the external examiner, or one of the many other gatekeepers of the academy.

This research was supported by a variety of academic trajectories, including a push towards epistemological and ontological diversity in research methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln 2005a), the self-reflexive turn in anthropology (see Marcus & Fischer 1986; Young & Goulet 1994), and increasing attention to the link between representation and ways of coming to know (e.g. Cole et al. 2004).

Being attentive to technologies of power (disciplining by others) and technologies of self (disciplining of the self) (Foucault 1980, [1976] 1988) was essential in challenging these discourses, not succumbing to the apparent risks of researching *through* animism as an epistemological and ontological stance, and finding a variety of openings to porosity and the wisdom it enables. Together, the hypertextual form and many cracks in hegemonic consent (marino 1997) enabled the completion of the research and its successful defence.⁶ In spite of initial resistance, and a ten-month delay in defence in order to enable a change in regulations for dissertation formats (Barrett in press), I was able to offer a porous hypertextual re-presentation of the research as a way to maintain congruency between ontology and form, as well as to support dissertation readers' take-up of porosity. The method(ology) and the reading form demand continual movement beyond normally sanctioned Western frameworks of knowing, and as such, offer ongoing practice in decolonizing the self and one's relations with those who are other-than-human. This research was supported by a variety of academic trajectories, including a push towards epistemological and ontological diversity in research methodologies (Denzin & Lincoln 2005b), the self-reflexive turn in anthropology (see Marcus & Fischer 1986; Young & Goulet 1994), and increasing attention to the link between representation and ways of coming to know highlighted in fields such as arts-based research (e.g. Cole et al. 2004) and other forms of academic inquiry (Dillard 2003).

CRACKS IN CONSENT⁷

The representation of the dissertation in hypertext is designed to offer multiple invitations to read through animist sensibilities. The layout, which includes multiple small "bits" of text, makes it difficult to travel through the dissertation using one's rational mind alone and is more effectively experienced than described (see www.porosity.ca). Because of its symbolic (and literal) porosity and somewhat forced intuitive choices, the

hypertextual representation constitutes one way to encourage readers to read through porosity. Rather than reinscribing "the tyranny of the languaged consciousness" (Bai 2003: 49) through a continuous essay form (as I am doing here), I use poetry, collage, music, prose, recorded human voice and photographic images together with multi-media hypertext to open spaces for one's non-discursive, psychically and animistically informed knowing to be foregrounded. In practical terms, this means that decisions about what to read and the order of reading are most easily made from beyond the limits of conventional intellectual knowing.

NOTES

1. I recognize that “energy” is a very overused and ill-defined word, yet it is the only word that, at this point in time, is sufficient to explain the ontological and epistemological “reality” of porosity.
2. I give credit to Val Plumwood (2002) for introducing me to the phrase “dialogical methodology” which I then adopted and wrote as “dialogic methodology”. Graham Harvey (2006a) also uses the term.
3. Method(ology) denotes the intimate intertwining of methodology and methods while at the same time acknowledging that they are not synonymous.
4. Similar to all research data, these are always interpreted within cultural frames.
5. These discourses and the following list of risks are adapted from the “Academic Openings” web page of Barrett (2009).
6. The dissertation was shortlisted for two nationally recognized dissertation awards: the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies Dissertation Award, and the American Educational Research Association Outstanding Dissertation Award (Research Methodology).
7. I thank dian marino (1997) for this phrase.

Consciousness, wights and ancestors

Jenny Blain

The "new animism" is influencing not only many directions within religious practice, notably Paganisms, but interpretations (of these and other practices) within religious studies and anthropology. This chapter has, therefore, a dual focus. Historically within social sciences, "animism" has been used to signal otherness, a "superstitious" belief or faith in directive or authoritarian non-human entities. If, rather, "animism" is interpreted to mean the possibility of relationships between human and other-than-human people, within a "living landscape", in which all players, be they stones, sparrows or social scientists, have their part, how does this influence both spiritual practices and the anthropological or sociological theories which attempt to account for those practices?

This chapter explores some dimensions of how relationships are constructed and reported in practitioner discourse, as engagements in altered consciousness states or “trance”, with examples from contemporary seidr as a “Western shamanism”. It interrogates meanings constructed within the seidr ritual and in discussions with practitioners and audience. It deals also with the interactions with landscape and with “wights” (beings, people) which are implicit within place and movement in the spaces in which today’s animic practitioners sojourn, and hence with importances of ancestors and landscape for identities for today. And it deals with how we, as reflexive practitioners of social research, can reflect, theorize and learn from these happenings.

POSITIONING THE AUTHOR WITHIN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

When I began this chapter I envisaged an academic discussion of some of the issues within anthropology and sociology of religion, and religious studies, today, concerning the past meanings attached to animism as (per Tylor 1871) superstition and fear, a “crude childlike natural philosophy”, contrasting these with the “new animism” developed by Graham Harvey (e.g. 2005a) following Bird-David and others. Indeed, I am still hoping to do some