Becoming Instrument

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Joshua D. Evans

Dear Michael,

Before, during, and after reading your thoughtful and articulate text, I have been reflecting on the right form for offering you a response. The vulnerability and sense of care that suffuse your story, and how you connect them all to a worldliness, have led me to settle on a letter. We haven't met, but, through reading your text, I feel that, at least in some way, we now have. So I hope you'll permit me, or at least entertain, a letter's intimacy.

I'd like to share with you one of the many things I learned while reading your chapter, that I am grateful for and feel invited to think more about: that becoming articulate, learning to affect and be affected, is not always a positive experience. I was keen to read your chapter in part because I have also found this 2004 paper by Latour, 'How to Talk About the Body?', of use in my own work. It has helped me theorize and engage taste and smell as forms of expertise in culinary practice, and specifically in fermentation. Like Latour's argument, my findings in this research emphasize the pleasant, 'positive' side of these things, in which becoming more articulate draws us closer to the richness of the world as it unfolds. For my participants, this is a delicious, enticing richness, a sensory diversity that invites multispecies relationality. So I have found helpful your reminder that, while these aspects also exist, they are not the only effects of becoming articulate, of learning to be affected and to affect.

One conviction in your chapter I believe we might share was about the promise of more collaborative positions we as Science and Technology Studies (STS) researchers can take towards our scientist participants and colleagues. You so well articulate the kind of implicit, well, shall we say arrogance that can easily creep into critical STS if we assume we are more aware of the issues than our scientist participants. Sometimes this can be the case; but I have found, like you, that often it is not, and that scientists

themselves can also be acutely aware of the complexities they, often for various structural reasons, are forced to gloss over in their science. They talk about them at lunch though, or after work at the bar. What might happen, I wonder, how might science itself be transformed, if we STS researchers focus our efforts on working with our scientist colleagues to change those structural conditions, or at least explore ways to negotiate and maybe subvert them, such that complexity can come back in? To me this feels of course by no means easy but ultimately a much more respectful, productive and appealing way to do STS, and indeed science. Reading your chapter, in a different empirical area from mine but with a similar theoretical and methodological orientation, I feel only more empowered and equipped to pursue this approach.

In this vein, there was a moment in this part of your discussion I had an idea about, and thought to maybe offer back to you. You describe what I sensed you might have experienced as a tension, suggested by a 'but', between being unsure you had/have the authority to speak to the researchers about their own work, and one of your gatekeepers assuring you that they need 'people like you'. I can share, for whatever it might be worth, that I have received your story as a beautiful illustration of how, with the right approach, it can become possible to speak to our scientist colleagues about their work and be received. Your central gatekeeper, along with other of your participants, insisted your presence in their world was valuable. You yourself discovered, as you describe, how maybe it was less about whether you speak with them about their work or not, and more about how. Together, these experiences of yours suggested to me a larger learning for all of us working in STS, and indeed, I might even propose, in any kind of research across disciplines and epistemic cultures: that perhaps this kind of esteem, this way of being welcomed and accepted into worlds not our own, can be enabled through a humble presence, a presence of solidarity, less being a witness than cultivating a 'withness'.[1]

These are just some of the many thoughts reading your chapter sparked for me. In the spirit of reflexivity and autoethnography that you invite us to embody and recognize in every research project, I wondered what might happen if I understood my own experience of reading your chapter in the same way. The result was feeling permitted, indeed encouraged, to notice how reading your story wove my own 'personal experiences, theoretical insights, and affects' together in new ways. I want to thank you for sharing how your own work has moved you, for in doing so it has also moved me.

[1] S. Atkinson, C. Brives, S. Biederman, J. Cañada, D. Chartier, A.C. Davidson et al, 'Introducing "With Microbes": From Witnessing to Withnessing', in *With Microbes*, edited by C. Brives, M. Rest and S. Sariola (Manchester: Mattering Press, 2021), 17–40, https://doi.org/10.28938/9781912729180.

And as a researcher-instrument, becoming ever more attuned to my own 'instrumentality' can only, I think, help me become attuned to everything else, for worse and for better, while learning the practices of care necessary to keep the instrument in shape, and the dance developing.

Warmly,
Josh

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