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Essaying as method: Risky accounts and composing collectives

Abstract
This essay moves between the performative, the discursive and the ethnographic to compose an argument about how essaying as method, and then collective essaying *as method, might contribute to new approaches to world-making. It begins with an essay-within-an-essay that takes as its object of pressure the contemporary context of biophysical crisis that has been called the Anthropocene, which soon becomes entangled with another pair of objects: the image on the front of a vintage jigsaw set and the essayist's affective response to that image. Thereafter it brings in Latour's concept of the 'risky account' to argue for essaying as a reflexively* constructed *mode of making accounts of the world. The experimental nature of essaying is extrapolated into a collective context, with a report on a transcultural creative writing workshop conducted as part of a residency program in the Philippines. The essay proposes and teases out the concept of 'collective essaying'. It circles back to look at world making with Haraway's invocation of sympoesis as a method for 'worlding-with, in company' (Haraway 2015), and asks how collective essaying might be considered in this light.*
Keywords: Essay, nonfiction, collective practice

Prelude

> I believe in making a difference by thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely. (Halberstam 2011)

This is an essay about how worlds are made. It is about the making of nonfictional accounts, about essays and essaying: it considers the essay as a critical/compositional technology for world-making. It adopts *essaying* in the verb form to draw attention to methods and process – the *event* of essaying – alongside the textual outcomes produced.

Also – to cut to the chase – this essay is somewhat chaotic. Although it has been carefully peer reviewed by disciplinary experts, it nevertheless can only present itself here as a work in progress. Warning: it might be lumpish. It attempts too much and not enough; it is produced in haste but far too slowly. In being so, it clings to J. Halberstam's dismantled logic of success and failure:

> Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (Halberstam 2011)

It aims to contribute to the movement towards modes and practices of 'undisciplined knowledge' that Halberstam calls for in *The Queer Art of Failure*, following their dual injunctions to 'resist mastery' and to 'privilege the naïve or nonsensical (stupidity)' (2011). It has this aim partly because it finds itself with no alternative, with mastery remaining a mystery, and partly because of an intuition that Halberstam is onto something. Mastery is a masque in which only a privileged few get to play the role of master; the rest are servants, stage managers or other poorly paid support roles.

This essay presents and considers two scenes that it constitutes as minor scenes of essaying. One is a classic staging of the (anti-) heroic individual essayist at work at their writing desk. Herein, the essayist reflects on what is at stake in how worlds are made (by whom and under what circumstances), by putting some of the essayist's embodied thoughts and feelings in conversation with various 'correspondents', including a jigsaw box. As an essayist would do. Ta-dah! Then, by way of seemingly incongruous contrast, the essay moves to the scene of an intercultural workshop where an experiment in *collective essaying* unfolds. This collective essaying experiment took place within the institutional context of one of the most prestigious sites of knowledge practices in the Philippines, at the University of the Philippines in Quezon City (Metro Manila). In response to an open-ended invitation, it staged an improvised and provisional enquiry, both serious and playful, into the object of the Filipino capital, Manila. The workshop participants included Filipinos and foreign visitors, students and professors. Many of the participants were strangers to each other; some knew each other through specific power relations such as student/teacher or employee/boss. The experiment aimed to gently intervene within the conventional hierarchies and relational flows of the situation, and, through the proposition of *collective essaying*, open up a tentative new space of possibility for world-making.

In short, this essay asks its reader to consider these questions: what *is* essaying, what might it be, and how might it be useful as a radical technique for (re)composing this world we share unevenly with others (human and nonhuman)?

Thus, without further ado –

Scene one: *The colour of steam*

(in which the essayist plunges in, as follows:)

We are in a crisis. Do I have to tell you that? The crisis is biophysical. We are tipping the world down a plughole. An engine of growth called capitalism produces marvel after marvel but manages to export the excess cost of that production outside the walls of what the system considers 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004). Outside the walled village, the invisibly walled suburbs, the gated community, lie waste products as well as the resources at hand to be exploited: across the 700 years or so of European global expansion these have included: slaves (originally Slavs from Eastern Europe [hence the name] but thereafter, overwhelmingly, African), mountains, rivers, Indigenous people, people considered 'non-white' in general, rainforest flowers, barks and saps, seeds and nuts, fish of any shape and colour, uranium dust. The list could go on and on because as every 'new' species or band of autonomously existing objects – a bunch of frogs in outback Queensland, say – is taxonomised and drawn into the ledgers of scientific understanding, it is almost inevitably subject to assessment as to what surplus value those inside the walls could

extract from it for their own benefit. Can we eat it? Grind it up into a powder? Extract its DNA? Put it/him/her to work for us? Melt it down, distil it, perform some evidence-based alchemy that will turn a buck or cure cancer, for those who can afford the cure? To say this as a 'Westerner' is not to demonstrate self-loathing; only to report on what takes place.

The world's sixth great extinction event (Kolbert 2014).

Pollution in major cities of India (as in China) regularly 15 times higher than safe levels (Alavi & Pillai 2016).

More than two thirds of the Great Barrier Reef bleached, and either temporarily or permanently dead (Lewis & Mallela 2017).

Crises of water shortages and food production leading to political unrest, civil wars and regional violence, leading in turn to desperate waves of human migration: millions of people seeking refuge, remedy, justice or a chance to join the world of privileges that everyone can now see exists just by looking at a smart phone, whether one held in your own hand or by looking over someone else's shoulder, and no matter where on the planet that you are.

With this spreading density of contradictions, this amassing of unthinkable scenarios – oceans rising ten metres in a century, as some climate models predict – comes the question: how does one *think* that, as in really think it? There is nothing that can prepare us as humans, let alone prepare the coral and the sharks and the Karri trees, for this task of responding. A lot of dystopian and collected literature, films and art are being created to help imagine the horrors we might be facing. Most likely will be facing. And yet – there is still the little matter of the 'we' that I've been blithely using. As Indigenous people will tell you, for them the apocalypse has already happened. In Australia it started 250 years ago when an Englishman, James Cook, performed an action of white fantasy clothed in Enlightenment reason at the edge of an ancient world whose ways and histories he knew nothing about. This action was called a *discovery*, and in Australia you can still attract threats of death, rape or other violence if you question the validity of such a word. To choose the word 'discover' rather than, say, 'encounter', is to discount any prospect of a tangle of reciprocity.

The British floating in their ships alongside this world unknown to them were trained to think of it as a wild place waiting to be tamed (as if it wasn't already being cared for), a blank place waiting to be named (as if none of it had intelligible names that mattered). The perspectives and experiences of the Aboriginal people that were seen as being, as if randomly, to be in some strange form of residence, remained unimagined, or at most imagined too quickly: slipped into the forms of caricatures grabbed from images back home.

Out of this flowed the presumption that the land was there for the taking, and that the people encountered were inferior. The British, white people, believing themselves superior, did not feel an obligation to negotiate as equals.

What I'm interested in, in writing this, is observing the movement that takes place in me. On the one hand it might seem blindingly obvious that Captain Arthur Philip's mob didn't see Bennelong's mob as equals, and that conquering powers have always used force in subtle or unsubtle ways to subdue those who they wanted to conquer. And yet of course this is not the narrative of (white, or even 'multicultural') Australia: it is not accepted that this is a conquered land. The preferred myth was terra nullius. The indigenous people did not even quite exist. No conquest or wars took place in the white Australian mythic version of the country's history. There was only 'settlement', accompanied by

'unavoidable tragedy' (disease and so on, Indigenous people somehow being 'unable to catch up' or 'unable to fit in' to the modern world, as if participation had been freely offered them but owing to their defects of inferiority they had not proved capable of accepting the offer). All of which is to come back to the spiky valence of the pronoun 'we'.

On my desk at home sit various ornaments. One of them is an old jigsaw box dating roughly from the early 1960s. I found the box in a second hand shop some years ago and bought it largely because of the picture on the top, which faces me as I sit here, the box standing on its side. Why do I like the picture on the box? What is it there that lures me? The attraction is, on one level, ironic. It's a Victory Geographical Puzzle, the box announces itself. In case you need more volume for this refrain, there is a V for VICTORY logo in the bottom right-hand corner, balanced against a faux-modest Made In England marked in red, bottom left. A little boy, just like me, white and middle-class, deep in concentrated thought, gazes intently at the scramble of wooden jigsaw pieces arranged for him on a curved table that might just be the world (its globe-like form echoed by a miniature table-top globe sitting in the background). Some of the pieces the boy is looking at have already been connected together to form the beginning of a legible landform, which in the case of this particular box, the label on the site promises will be 'Australia'. The other pieces float loose like an unstable archipelago, but given their teal blue colour they also look like icebergs drifting away from a collapsing continent – or else fragments of glass, as if an original unitary form had dropped out of the sky onto the surface in front of the boy, and shattered. The boy gazes down, his little elbows leaning on the surface, his hands stuck together across his chin so that he can feel the comforting slightly salty sensation of his knuckles against his lips, the unguarded orality of childish pleasure.

The object of the jigsaw box on my desktop does its ironic work for me, since the image, 50 or 60 years old, is redolent now with an imperialism that would have gone unremarked upon at the time. The gap between the dreamy innocence of the boy and the buried violence of the assumptions into which he was being acculturated seem stark and a little ridiculous from this distance. But that doesn't explain why this is one of the few objects I choose to keep in front of me on my desk. I love maps. I love puzzles. I feel myself in this little boy, in his stillness and his gaze, and those hands curved against his mouth. He comforts me. It could be me. Somehow, uncannily, it is me. The gaze. The hands. The mouth hidden in them. Pieces of a world sit before him, some presenting themselves as organised, others confused. Waiting for him to act upon them. Lying inert and gleaming. It is for him to act, and in deciding what he might do he is deep in thought, in a space all by himself in which there is nothing that might interrupt. The background of the picture is hazy, the colour of steam, as if he is alone in the peaceful solitude of a cloud.

The boy is blissfully ignorant of the cloud of privilege that protects him and leaves him free to enjoy his puzzle. He is learning the pleasurable sensation of mastery. He doesn't have to be distracted by the effort of considering his gender. He doesn't need to notice the pinkness of his skin. He has a world to make.

Discursus: Essaying as method

It is at least plausible to suggest that the modern essay was a product of 16th century Renaissance humanism. Its first experimenters who named what they were doing as essaying were the Frenchman Michel de Montaigne and the

younger Englishman whose work Montaigne influenced, Francis Bacon. Both published books simply entitled *Essays.* In fact, Montaigne's entire literary output was contained in this one elastic volume (Montaigne 1993), the elements of which he constantly tinkered with, revising and complicating his previous opinions. As Stephen Toulmin has said, Montaigne was concerned with 'the kaleidoscopic diversity and contextual dependence of human affairs' (Toulmin 1990: 26-27). Instead of building systems of certainty, as later did Descartes, Locke and Newton, building the categorical divides between subject and object, nature and culture (and, for that matter, white and black), Montaigne was more interested in elaborating doubts and uncertainties. Instead of trying to pin and classify things, the better to fix and 'know' them so as to assert and justify control, Montaigne embraces techniques of digression and promiscuous association, bringing his earthy, bodily experience and observations to bear, entangled with his reading of the ancient scholars and philosophical reflections.

Bruno Latour, whose thinking is very helpful in attempting to trace the uncertainties around the production of facts and the making of nonfictional accounts, discusses in his book *Reassembling the social* (2005) the insights to be gained by studying the production of knowledge in the natural sciences. Because there you see what Latour describes as 'the most extreme cases of complete a*rtificiality* and complete *objectivity* running in parallel' (Latour 2005: 89). There is nothing less natural or more completely artificial (constructed) then a synchrotron, an MRI machine or a weather satellite and yet the data they produce is as objective and verifiable as seems possible. 'This is why', Latour says, 'it was with great enthusiasm that we began using the expression "construction of facts" to describe the striking phenomenon of artificiality and reality marching in step' (90). He takes this further to argue that what became clear from close study of scientific practice was that 'facts were facts – meaning exact – *because* they were fabricated – meaning that they emerged out of artificial situations' (90). This evidence flies in the face of the commonly promulgated doctrine – promoted by positivists on the one side and relativists on the other – whereby, as Latour puts it: 'either something [is] real and not constructed, *or* it [is] constructed and artificial, contrived and invented, made up and false' (90).

Latour calls for 'risky accounts' to be written in the social sciences and humanities. He defines a risky account through its qualities whereby it 'can easily fail – it does fail most of the time – since it *can put aside neither the complete artificiality of the enterprise nor its claim to accuracy and truthfulness*' (2005: 133). Where the essay comes in handy as a technology for writing 'risky accounts' is that it is not shy to admit itself a failure – in fact it is the triumphantly shambolic share-house where crowd all those who cannot or will not don the masque of mastery.

What is risked in the account above? The essayist remains comfortably at his desk, even more comfortably on his university's payroll, licensed to idle his time in this way. The only risk, if there is one in the sense Latour is interested in, is that he tries to examine his own implication in what he posits as the matters of concern, through admitting to the presence of the jigsaw box and describing what is happening in between the two of them, he and the box, accurately, truthfully *and* conscious of the artifice. It is tiny, it is minor. Nevertheless it seems to be the best he can do at that time.

And it crossed my mind: am I embarrassing myself? Is this something shameful, this admission of the jigsaw box? And/or: am I showing off? Am I asking to be loved? To also account for these uncertainties is a perhaps hysterical rendering of Latour's injunction to trace the connections among

actors (human and nonhuman) all the way down. In place of mastery, vulnerability is performed (Dillon 2017). Although, bear this idea in mind: interiority, the bread and butter of the essayist who clings proudly to the 'I' even as they acknowledge its delirious multiplicity, is an effect achieved through what Latour calls *plug ins*. He illustrates what he means by 'plug ins' here:

> Some plug-ins are fairly easy to trace. For instance, there are all of those official and legal papers which designate 'you' as being someone. If you doubt the ability of those humble paper techniques to generate *quasi-subjects*, try living in a large European city as an 'undocumented alien' or extricating yourself out of the FBI's grip because of a misspelling of your name. Other vehicles leave such a thin trace as if they were really immaterial. But if we maintain our outlook, we can follow them as well: How many circulating clichés do we have to absorb before being having the competence to utter an opinion about a film, a companion, a situation, a political stance? If you began to probe the origin of each of your idiosyncracies, would you not be able to deploy, here again, the same star-like shape that would force you to visit many places, people, times, events that you had largely forgotten? This tone of voice, this unusual expression, this gesture of the hand, this gait, this posture, aren't they traceable as well? And then is the question of your inner feelings. Have they not been given to you? Doesn't reading novels help you know how to love? How would you know which group you pertain to without ceaselessly downloading some of the cultural clichés that all the others are bombarding you with? (Latour 2005: 209)

And so, the essayist responds, yes, plug-ins, we can work with that. So many rabbits to chase, so many rabbit-holes. So many connections to be traced among things seemingly interior and exterior, within and without: felt and encountered. The essay, as Adorno wrote, 'does justice to the consciousness of *non-identity*, without needing to say so, radically non-radical in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total' (Adorno 1984: 157, emphasis added). This joyously contingent art of the partial is essaying as method.

Scene two: *Essaying Manila*

In January 2017, the WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange) collaborative residency program, which I co-direct with Francesca Rendle-Short and Penny Johnson, invited ten diverse Asian and Australian writers – poets, novelists and essayists from many places and cultures across the region – to the Philippines. The WrICE writers and facilitators took turns to give workshops at the University of the Philippines, having been invited there by the distinguished academics Lily Rose Tope and José Dalisay. This is an account of just one of those workshops, which was tasked to focus on *nonfiction.* Three hours in length, this workshop was entitled *Essaying Manila*. As well as being part of WrICE, the *Essaying Manila* workshop formed part of an ongoing series of experiments in collective essaying methods. These have been conducted since 2014 with writers, creative artists, designers, ethnographers and social scientists connected with RMIT's non/fictionLab (see Carlin et al 2015; Carlin, Akama, Pink & Sumartomo 2018; Veijola et al 2018).

Before getting to the broader question of what 'collective essaying methods' might consist of, let's flesh out a description of this one experiment, which like its cousins was prepared in anticipation of a particular collection of actors, and unfolded with them. (Note, once again: actors, here, in the Latourian sense, include not only the array of human participants but the various human and nonhuman elements of geography, history, atmosphere, time, technology and so on that also form part of any gathered ensemble.)

Australian filmmaker and essayist John Hughes and myself facilitated the 2017 *Essaying Manila* workshop. As alluded to earlier, it was a mixed group of academics, students and writers, mostly Filipino but including some of their Australian guests. The topic of inquiry posed was, as the title suggests, 'Manila'. The task: to 'essay Manila'. We asked, in effect: what kinds of textual accounts, brief and provisional, might be produced, in the highly constrained time and space available, not to *represent* Manila but to help *reassemble* it, as it were (borrowing Latour's [2015] language)? How might we, *together*, start to trace the associations that compose Manila as a city?

If we had the luxury of more time for the workshop we might have brought in other methods to collect our threads of evidence and hearsay. For instance, we might have investigated the archives, conducted field trips across the city, talked to its inhabitants or experts, conducted surveys and gathered statistics. What could we do in three hours in a small room on a university campus? We could only improvise, speculate and play.

Since Manila was given as our topic, and we were expected to compose essays 'on Manila', then we had to ask ourselves, what did we have to say about Manila? What did we know about Manila? This takes us back to Montaigne's self-reflexive first principle: 'What do I know?' Following Cartesian reason, you start from a point of solidity and certainty and work out carefully from there. In the spirit of Montaigne, by contrast, you leap blithely into the stream and see what's happening.

Because, in such a short workshop, you don't have time to sit around philosophising or wondering about things, we propelled ourselves into a kind of urgent game, sometimes known as a 'spectrum exercise'. Everybody had to get up from his or her seat, mill around in a group, and arrange themselves speedily in a single line, with the person who 'knew most' about Manila at one end and the person who 'knew least' about Manila at the other end. How did you decide if you knew more or less about Manila than anyone else? It was like a jury: you just had to work it out; there was no given formula for an epistemological hierarchy. Had you only arrived here in Manila for the first time yesterday? In which case, had you been on an all-day sightseeing tour or stayed in your room and watched Manila television? Had you studied Manila's politics or its history – at school or at doctoral level? Had you been born in the city – but moved away as a child? Hurry up! There is no time to waste, we must create an order! And no, you can't know equally as much as anybody else, that is strictly not allowed!

Once we were all in order we sat down again at the table, but, importantly, in our new order, no longer next to our friends but part of a nascent, contingent collective. Once seated we invited the person who knew *least* about Manila to begin by telling us, briefly, something of what she knew. Because she knew the least she would be unlikely to go on at great and perhaps unfair length. Next it was the turn of the person who knew second-least to add in one or two things he knew about Manila. We went all the way around the table like that, finishing with the person who had been deemed, or adjudged herself, to know the most about Manila. Unsurprisingly, within the context of a Filipino academic setting,

this was Lily Rose Tope, the esteemed Head of Department and highest status Filipino, male or female, in the room. She spoke last and only for as long as everyone else. And when she spoke she didn't give us the sweeping socio-political overview she no doubt could have; instead she talked about details such as what she had seen from her Manila balcony as a child. People were invited to take notes if they wanted to, although the purpose for the notes was not made clear. It is useful in such essaying processes to stay clear of panoramic overviews of the process – it works much better if people proceed myopically – in other words, only being able to see what is directly in front of them. To borrow from Latour: 'we have to be very practical again and as myopic as possible' (2005: 105). End-gaming normally provokes anxiety and distracts from the task at hand.

So this was our essayistic data collection phase, if you like. My own jumble of notes began like this: *traffic, exercise book of women writers, North East West and South avenues, lush jungle, not wanting to visit it, Manila in theory, side streets, jeepney routes, the underground community back then they lived in the tunnels, city of opposites, city of enclaves, city of ironies, rich Manila and poor Manila, when you are here you think it is uninhabitable but when you are away you miss it, similar to Indonesia* – and so on.

The next game, or task, was to look back over your notes, or over whatever you remembered from what everyone had said, and write down the images, words, ideas that had struck you most strongly. The aim: to allow the things with the strongest valency, those that adhered and insisted, to make themselves into a list. This exercise combines an attunement to noticing and atmosphere (Stewart 2011) with an insistence on the heterogeneity of the list as non-narrative device (Bogost 2012). The list, as Brian Dillon has noted, is one of the recurrent techniques attached to the essay as form (Dillon 2017). Here, the more seemingly random and disconnected the list the better. Don't judge the items or arrange them into categories. Don't filter them through frameworks. And hurry up, you only have five minutes or so! You haven't got time to argue with yourself or second-guess things.

Then we asked people to look back at their heterogeneous list of things adhering to Manila. Look at their list as if collected by an alien (Bogost again). Try to guess at what might be a common theme that connects them, or a concept that somehow appears to thread across them. Now, write a flash-essay on Manila. You have only 25 minutes. It is an experiment. All you can do is make a start. Once again, there is no time to deliberate on frameworks or structures. You just have to begin somewhere and follow your nose myopically through the trail of associations as they present themselves to you from the material you have assembled. Your essay is "on Manila" but it is also, somehow, on the organising theme or concept you have seen emerge from the compost heap (Haraway 2016) of the collective process. The person who declared she knew least about Manila in this workshop, the young Australian writer Else Fitzgerald, wrote this:

> This is not Manila in theory: the traffic, mythic in its magnitude, has a taste. But the main arteries – Taft, Aurora – form a stable connection to the city, structures that won't change anytime soon. Libraries, fireworks, side streets, jeepney routes. She was very young and so brave, taking unknown routes and discovering a whole community living underground. Police precincts, rotundas, eskinitas, outskirts, big shots, grandmothers on Sundays, churches, dungeons, catacombs. A mixture of languages, faiths, cultures. In Chinatown, a crucifix is adorned with Joss sticks, hybrid iconography.

> This is a city of opposites that create ironies, a place that feels unlivable until you leave and then want to return. Like your friend's boyfriend: knowing too much will make you crazy. This is a city where history is contested, doesn't get talked about. We became a nation with an execution.
>
> She was raised in the middle of old Manila. There were two windows where they could sit and dangle their legs in the afternoon, watching the gang wars in the streets below. Once saw a man stabbed in the stomach, saw his innards spill out – this was the scenery of childhood.
>
> My Manila is not your Manila. Rich Manila and poor Manila. A place for migrants, Manila is where everybody goes. Some statistics: there are 12 million people here in during the day, 10 million at night. There are 13 cities within Metro Manila. Shaped by the people who fill it and the people who leave it, a pastiche, a collage. A city of movement, it does not tolerate stillness. A city that shape shifts but doesn't spill anything out.
>
> This is a place for survival. So be friendly to security guards and waiters – trust me, this will go a long way. (Fitzgerald 2017)

Even for an observer who isn't familiar with the city, it is clear that so much about Manila is condensed in this essay. In its impressionistic but pithy style, it mixes human and nonhuman, politics, geography, sociology, philosophy, memoir, observation, metaphor, even advice for tourists! Moreover, it is a work of collage, just as it characterises the city in that way. It is a magpie work, attuned to pressures, scenes and atmospheres within the shared oral storytelling it has grown from, and collecting them together in a patterned fabric. It lays down markers for potential further conversation and enquiry. Although 'only' a quick sketch, its quickness and sketchiness come both from a kind of slowing-down of assumptions and a willingness to listen for what one doesn't know.

The collective essaying method produced a number of consequences. Importantly, we shared the essays with each other, reading them aloud, offering them back to the collective, as it were. Almost always, like Else Fitzgerald, people had incorporated each other's stories, images, memories and facts into their essays. For instance, the quip, 'Like your friend's boyfriend: knowing too much will make you crazy', and the observation, 'My Manila is not your Manila', are both formulations Fitzgerald has collected from the group, not out of her own prior experience. These various artifacts of narrative – ranging from a childhood memory to an official statistic – are flattened out, not in an affective sense but in so far as, although each maintains its specific provenance and evidentiary basis, it also each becomes available for anyone in the group to take up in a given textual account. The ethical issues around this are out in the open for ongoing negotiation. We not only learnt about Manila from each other's impromptu accounts; we also learnt *how* Manila is talked about, what turns of phrase, associations, jokes and aphorisms Manila prompts. Because all of this linguistic specificity, too, is part of the material atmosphere of the city, as noticed and composed in *this* limited time by *this* small non-representative sample of people. A group that, through its shared activity, becomes itself composed, however briefly, as a collective.

Labwork: Collective essaying as method for world-making

I am proposing that an appropriate technology for producing risky accounts, one familiar in the domain of creative writing, is what can be called *essaying*. And furthermore that essaying as the composing of risky accounts – which has typically been observed as an individual writerly practice – can also contribute towards collective practices. What can be composed, unfurled and extended through the *laboratory of a collective* that uses essaying as method? What might we identify as some provisional affordances of such essaying labwork?

Techniques of collective essaying deploy elements of the essay itself, including uncertainty, vulnerability, diverging, lists and sustained attention or curiosity (Dillon 2017).

In their book *Uncertainty and Possibility* (2018), Akama, Pink and Sumartomo articulate the value of uncertainty as a technology for world-making, through discussion of a series of collaborative workshops deploying uncertainty in different contexts (Akama, Pink & Sumartomo 2018). One of these was the *Essaying the Fabpod* workshop, which I led with Yoko Akama and Sarah Pink (Carlin et al 2015). A transdisciplinary group of writers and researchers generated a collective 'risky account' examining the lingering effects of the placement of a hyperboloid architectural prototype 'meeting room' (the 'Fabpod') into an open plan workspace at our university. This account grew out of a day spent trialing versions of some of the techniques used in the *Essaying* Manila workshop: the spectrum of knowing and unknowing, the parallel listing and collecting of heterogeneous objects of attention, the polyphonic translation of images, stories and affects from one member of the collective to another. The account produced, as I have argued elsewhere, 'is risky, in Latour's terms, because it embraces completely artificial (or, as we might say in creative arts and design: *makerly*) methods of irony, speculation, metaphor and fabulation, among others, while at the same time asserting that these methods can produce something true and accurate about the object under investigation' (Carlin et al 2018: 106).

Uncertainty and vulnerability might be said to go hand in hand in the *Essaying Manila* workshop described above. The thrown-together collective of essayists agrees to suspend what it knows (or thinks it knows) so as to discover what it doesn't know and what it can make from the mesh of partial perspectives and accounts that it comes to share in common. Those who enter the collective from a position of high status find themselves, according to the rules of the game, flattened into consonant positions with those carrying lower prestige. Everyone risks making a fool of their self by having to compose an account on the spot, without preparation, trusting that they have a 'safe' space with these colleagues and strangers.

As to diverging, Dillon notes both 'a kind of *aggregate* feeling' and 'particulate nature' in the essay (2017). This can be seen in the Fitzgerald essay. It reads as a lyric assemblage aggregated from divergent particles that have struck the essayist out of the sequence of collective oral storytelling, note-taking and list-making. The structure of the labwork in the workshop alternates movements of converging and diverging as the essayists switch between throwing objects of attention into the group and then each separately making accounts from the collected objects.

On attention, Dillon writes:

> I think that the essays I most admire are those that pay the minutest or most sustained attention to one thing, one time or place, one strain or strand of existence. An essay that performs its mode of attention – even better. (Dillon 2017)

In this case it is not so much 'Manila' that is being paid attention to by those making the *Essaying Manila* experiment, as it is *the mode of attention to* Manila. In collective essaying such as this, attention is directed to how each other in the assembled group pays attention and to what. If it can be said that the essayist as an individual writer attempts to be a kind of self-reflexive engine of attention, then the collective essayist hooks up to a dynamically interacting network of such machines. They listen for each other's observations and accounts, noticing the objects relayed, the matters of concern invoked and the specific materiality of the words and affects that accompany them.

Finally, to return to the concept of world-making and the stakes involved. What kind of world-making might collective essaying contribute to? Donna Haraway suggests that in this time of Anthropocenic horror stories – reports whose horror lies in their precise grounding both in local observation and scientific modeling – it is necessary to 'stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking' (Haraway 2016). As she writes:

> The Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and *to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge*. (Haraway 2016, emphasis added)

In cultivating such imaginings of necessary refuge, Haraway argues that critique is no longer enough, in its negative capacity to unpack, dissect and deconstruct the surfaces of things and their relations. What is needed is vigorous practice in new compositional approaches in all sorts of material forms, including writing. These will be practices of what Haraway calls 'sympoiesis'. Sympoiesis is distinct from autopoiesis which is, in biology, a term for self-creating systems. Sympoiesis 'means "making with" (Haraway 2016). It implies collectively-creating systems. 'It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoesis and generatively unfurls and extends it' (Haraway 2016).

Inspired by spiders, science fiction and feminism, Haraway calls for 'tentacular thinking', invoking the need for 'myriad tentacles' and 'string figures':

> The tentacular ones make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots, they make a difference, they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms; they are both open and knotted in some ways and not others. (Haraway 2016)

How could the *Essaying Manila* workshop possibly be considered 'tentacular' or 'sympoetic'? The first way it would fail to be classified as such would be in its centring of the human over the nonhuman: Haraway has in mind more radical and plural ensembles of 'critters', as she calls them/us. And it is not as if it were explicitly addressing such concepts as 'the Anthropocene' or 'world-making' – only 'Manila', because that is something tangible the group had in common for its three hours. However, in its small gestures it produced elements of an improvised 'collectively-creating system'. Through the silly physical milling around and the play with hierarchy of the spectrum exercise, the simple reconfiguration of the circle of participants now constituted as a system for 'worlding-with', the collective listening exercise at which each one takes their turn, the time when all sit in silence together composing their essayistic accounts out of the shared material they have gathered, the time when the circle of accounts in turn is shared – these are practices that make for

at least temporary and provisional 'attachments and detachments'. The workshop had to stand in isolation with no capacity for collective preparation or follow-up. No research has been done on what might have come from it for those involved, and its effects, if any, would have been small. But I suggest that something valuable was produced and its consequences may have lingered. And that there is more to be experimented with in such labwork methods of collective essaying.

Worlds are made through the accounts that conjure them, accounts entangled with histories and evolutions, bodies, atmospheres, happenstances. Given the biophysical crisis capitalist worlding has engendered, other world-making technologies and compositional strategies are urgently required. Essaying offers a way of creatively broadening our critical purview to include the affective, the embodied, the ephemeral, the uncertain, the speculative, the *cuts and knots* within our accounts, in composing the stories we tell and the arguments we stage. Collective essaying offers a site for gathering and rehearsing new approaches to world-making, and generating new forms and occasions of risky account.

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