

**Qualitative methodology and the new materialisms: ‘a little of Dionysus’s
blood’?**

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Abstract

The article explores the potency of new materialist thought and its implications for qualitative, or 'post-qualitative' methodology, but also wonders how far methodology has really put itself at risk. Taking its cue from a remark by Deleuze, it asks: in trying to free thought from the hierarchies of representation, and restore ontologies of difference, are we merely trying to revivify conventional method with a safe dose of impure Dionysian blood? Are we just acting the drunkard and whistling a Dionysian tune?

Qualitative methodology and the new materialisms: ‘a little of Dionysus’s blood’?

Introduction

I want to work through some issues that have been exercising me recently, around the turn, or return, to materiality in qualitative methodology. The new materialisms challenge the prerogative of the supposedly self-contained, coherent human subject, equipped to subdue the world with an armory of discursive and intellectual weapons – rationality, consciousness, creativity, intentionality, and language. A new materialist orientation would not suggest that these are fictions and should be abandoned, but rather, that they have traditionally been elevated to a status that occludes other capacities and connections, and diminishes the significance of matter and our human entanglements with it. New materialist thought challenges the notion of the world as the stage or background for the Big Human Adventure, and traces the many dire consequences of our chronic disregard for the agential and affective potential of matter. Not least of these consequences is the threat of human extinction. I will argue that the turn to materiality has powerful, but also powerfully dangerous, implications for qualitative research. And that these implications are not always fully recognised by those of us who have embraced, and been embraced by, the new materialisms.

What does method want?

It wants what Western philosophy, according to Deleuze has always wanted: in short, to subdue difference. To confine its antics within the iron ‘fetters’ of *representation* (1994: 174), where identity and sameness regulate affairs, and difference emerges chastened and stripped of potential, as mere contradiction or opposition. That desire

to control difference is easily seen in conventional qualitative method, with all its devices for reducing uncertainty and mining meaning from the ongoing flow of events. You can see it for instance in the sorting and subordinating practices of coding; or in strategies for controlling bias in interviews. You can see it in anxiety about data that block the route to propositional meaning: for example when jokes, reticence or inconsistency surface in interview transcripts. Above all you can see it in the deep methodic aversion to materiality and the body when these irrupt into the linguistic economy of research: to tears and sneers and shifting in one's seat; to the currents of affect that might become fear, or disgust, or spite, or secret satisfaction, and disturb the equanimity of meaning.

However Deleuze also argues that representation senses the presence of something else, something that it will always have failed to capture. Representation has a presentiment of the 'chaos of potentials', as Deleuze calls it, on which its ordered hierarchies stand (Stivale, 2008: 20). This is the swarming groundlessness of difference-in-itself, which always escapes the iron fetters of reason, precisely by being beyond thought. Yet representation sometimes wants to incorporate or consume *that* too. It wants to seize the powers of 'giddiness, intoxication and cruelty' (Deleuze, 262) that belong to difference, and render them fit for thought and reason.

But when representation becomes 'orgiastic' as Deleuze calls it – when it tries to *devour* the excesses of difference rather than merely control them – it nevertheless wants to do that without getting its fingers burnt, or its self-assurance shredded. It's a question 'of causing a little of Dionysus's blood to flow in the organic veins of Apollo' (262). Taking his lead from Nietzsche, Deleuze often associates difference

with Dionysus, god of excess, intoxication, giddiness and cruelty; of madness, masks and theatricality, and contrasts him to Apollo, god of light, clarity and good sense. But Deleuze notes that, so long as the iron rule of representation still covertly governs these adventures, we will continue to inhabit a world in which ‘one is only *apparently* intoxicated, in which reason acts the drunkard and sings a Dionysian tune while nonetheless remaining “pure’ reason”’ (1994: 264; emphasis added).

Is *this* what qualitative method after the material turn wants? In trying to free thought from the hierarchies of representation, and restore ontologies of difference, are we trying to get a little of that murky, impure Dionysian blood into the ‘clear and distinct’ veins of Apollonian representation? And if so, is this a matter of improper appropriation of materialist notions for old-school qualitative method – just acting the drunkard and whistling a Dionysian tune? Or should we think perhaps about judicious *dosage* – just enough Dionysian anomie to infuse life into a method that is increasingly exhausted, without killing the endeavour outright? I will not have a definitive answer to these questions. But I hope to be able to formulate some useful questions.

What, then is new materialism, and what is it doing to qualitative research? New materialism is not necessarily the best term, though it is one of the most frequently used. I could refer instead to the new empiricisms. Or I could talk about turns: the material turn. The ontological turn. The posthuman turn. The speculative turn. The

affective turn. It would be absurd to say that we are talking about a unified philosophical or methodological field here.¹

It should also be noted that new materialism has come in for critique from scholars who object to the colonial arrogance of announcing oneself as ‘new’ without due respect to other traditions, such as feminist theorisations of the body, and indigenous ontologies. As Alison Jones and Te Kawehau Hoskins (2016: 79) have recently remarked, ‘Indigenous ontologies never *had* a nature-culture dualism, never truly differentiated nature and culture’. These are important issues and they deserve further attention, though I touch on them only in passing here.

For the moment, it may be useful to think of the term ‘new materialisms’ as a ‘*catachresis*’ – a perpetually mis-used term, or a term without a stable referent. But nevertheless, a signal of *something* afoot: something that is zigzagging across these diverse fields or planes, pulling them together and apart in interesting ways. Let me brutally summarise some characteristics of new materialist work that I hope are relatively uncontroversial, before going on to consider the implications specifically for qualitative inquiry.

The material turn involves much more than a return to mundane empiricism. In the new materialisms, matter is agential, affective and self-differing. As Barad (2012: 59)

¹ A range of new materialist work can be found in edited collection including Dolphijn and Van der Tuin (2012), Alaimo and Hekman (2008), Gregg and Seigworth (2010), Barrett and Bolt (2012), and Coole and Frost (2010).

famously wrote, ‘Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers’.

Agency and consciousness are not the prerogative of human subjects, and the bounded organism is not the unit of study. We are all produced from intensities and flows that far exceed and fall short of the contours of our bodies. Discourse does not discipline matter but tangles with it in shifting assemblages. Science and the social do not stand separate and opposed, and methodological virtue does not reside uncomplicatedly with one ‘side’ or the other. Lastly, experimentation is privileged over critique, at least where critique is construed as the exposure of error, the revelation of hidden circuits of power/knowledge, or the unmasking of ideology [recent edited collection](#). Taken together, these characteristics raise an urgent question: does qualitative inquiry, as the transformative work of interpretive, intentional, critical human agents, still have a place in our theories and research practices? And if not, what shall we do?

Some possible answers: we would need to stop thinking of data as raw material for our own intellection. We would need to rethink our practices of interpretation and explanation, if these involve identifying ‘what is really going on’, what something ‘really means’, or uncovering something more significant (for example, more abstract; more general, more meaningful) beneath or above the surface messiness of talk or action. These customary understandings all assume a masterful human subject separate from the objects of her inquiry, which await her interventions in order to attain meaning. Analysis would become ‘diffractive’ – no longer a matter of magisterial interrogation by a human agent of her data, but an entanglement. We would need to develop forms of immanent critique – a matter of sensing and tweaking events as they unfold. We would need to think of thought as not intrinsically ‘ours’,

but as an impersonal force that exceeds us and catches us up. We would need to think of emotions, in a similar way, not as welling up from inside us, but as *affect* - pre-individual intensities that connect and disconnect bodies (see further, MacLure, 2015).

It is clear therefore that we are not talking about merely tinkering with the customary arrangements of qualitative inquiry. We are obliged to rethink the whole ontological and epistemological edifice, and this means thinking outside of the remit of thought itself. More than 20 years ago, Deborah Britzman (1995) spoke of the need for educational research to become *unintelligible* to itself, in order to free itself of its bad faith and its bad habits. This remains to be done. I want to explore further the question of how new materialist thought challenges qualitative inquiry, by considering two particular areas: firstly, the status of data in qualitative research; and secondly, the status of language.

Data

Taking data first: the status of qualitative data within the new materialisms has already received critical attention, including a recent special issue of *Cultural Studies* <=> *Critical Methodologies* (2013; eds Koro-Ljungberg & MacLure), and a new chapter on data in the forthcoming 5th edition of the Sage *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Koro-Ljungberg, MacLure & Ulmer, forthcoming).

In conventional qualitative method, data are typically assumed to be mute until awakened to meaning by the interpretive prowess of the researcher and her specialist analytic tools. Their role is basically to nod in agreement with researchers' interpretations and thereafter to disappear – lifted up or subsumed under concepts or

categories. But as St. Pierre (1997) reminded us years ago, data always has the potential to transgress the boundaries of coding and representation, and disrupt the whole research enterprise. Indeed, that is what qualitative method is *for*: to control those unruly potentials. New materialist research instead dwells with data's bad behaviour – the ways in which it thwarts method's desire to tame it or make it disappear; its capacity to force thought; its queer agency.

This involves a loss of ontological security for the analyst, who can no longer exercise dominion over the data from the place of safety reserved for the intact, centred, humanist subject. Instead, researchers, participants, data, theory, things and values are mutually constituted in each 'agential cut' into, and out of the indeterminacy of matter, to use Barad's (2007: 178) terminology.

The task, then, is to be attentive to data's invitation; and alert to its capacity to force thought. The unruly potentials in data can be sensed, for instance, on occasions when something seems to reach out from the inert corpus of the data to grasp us – this could be a comment in an interview, a fragment from a fieldnote, an anecdote, an object, a strange facial expression, or a feeling of *deja vu*. Moments like these confound the industrious search for meaning, and instead exert a kind of fascination. I have called this intensity that emanates from data a 'glow' (MacLure, 2013a).

It can be a long-lasting glow: Rachel Holmes (2016) describes how she has endlessly returned to a piece of video data that has continually clawed at her, and called her back to new thought. It is a short clip of a playground game of 'kiss chase', in which two boys seize a young girl, who struggles to free herself. Such data, as Rachel points

out, are easily available, in conventional critical terms, for multiple ‘interpretations’, within discursive frames such as gender, play, creativity or desire. But the data always exceed these frames, without dismissing them or rendering them irrelevant. Homes (2016) writes: ‘This film continues to de-compose my past, present and future encounters with this playground event. It attempts to multiply worlds, imbricating language, the human and the material on the surface, interfering with my educational gaze’.

This is characteristic of data in the material turn – its capacity to reach and lead beyond itself, to a multiplicity of things and ideas not-yet-named; but without losing the *singularity* of the data itself. Holmes calls this relation to data ‘curiosity’. I have called it, elsewhere, *wonder* (MacLure, 2013a) which was a synonym for curiosity for many centuries. We might think of wonder as an alternate concept in place of analysis in new materialist research. We would need to be wary however of its long, disreputable association with colonialism and orientalism.

At any rate, we are now seeing many creative interventions around data in qualitative research. We see data liberated from the page and the screen, taking strange forms and entering into unexpected assemblages with humans, who no longer merely read it or analyse it, but wear it, eat it, sculpt it, stitch it, walk it, breathe it, dance it. It is here indeed that the Dionysian spirit is perhaps most evident in post-qualitative research - in the displacements and metamorphoses of data.

It will be important, though, to keep asking the question, in each and every specific case, of whether we are caught up in a dance of difference, or just acting the drunkard

and whistling the Dionysian tune. As long as we remain intelligible to ourselves as the orchestrators of data's adventures, it will be difficult to escape the fetters of representation, humanism and anthropocentrism.

Language

We also need to talk about language. It is axiomatic in new materialist work that language has been given too much privilege in the dominant paradigms of 20th century thought. It has rendered material realities subordinate to the discursive systems that supposedly mediate them, and stolen the agency of things. In new materialist ontologies therefore, language is typically displaced and demoted. Rather than sitting at the top of the tree of reason, dispensing categories and distinctions, it is forced to take its place as one element of assemblages that are always both material *and* discursive (eg Barad, 2007).

The demotion of language and discourse has been hugely productive, I would argue, in bringing about modes of critique that dissolve and remake the boundaries between matter and culture, science and the social. Nevertheless, I wonder if the displacement of language has actually gone far enough. In many accounts of material-discursive entanglement, the status and the mode of being of language is not *itself* interrogated (MacLure, 2013b). We are often left unclear about just how language tangles with matter; how words, bodies, signs, minds and discourses intra-act and entangle. And the materiality of language itself is often not addressed - the fact that speech is formed from noises, breath, grimaces and silences, and shot through with pre-linguistic pulses of affect, while still being animated by something immaterial that somehow transforms it into a passage for meaning and ideas.

Deleuze, in his own work, and in his collaborations with Guattari, forms one notable exception to this lack of attention to language. In *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze identifies a ‘mad element’ in language: something that exceeds propositional meaning – a Dionysian spirit in language. He called it *sense*. Sense works as a ‘mobius strip’ – a double-sided surface between language and the world: it ‘happens to bodies and ... insists in propositions’ (2004: 23, 142) allowing them to resonate and relate, and at the same time preventing language both from sinking back into the abject depths of the body or floating off as impotent ‘lofty ideas’ (150).

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) looked to figures that are able to *unhinge* conventional language from the bonds of representation - the child, the madman, the poet. These figures are able to make language *stutter* - to throw a spanner into its works by detaching words from their syntactic bonds and their freight of conventional meaning in order to play with them, and release the non-representing energies of sense. But as Deleuze and Guattari note, it’s all too possible to get it wrong. We may think that we are assembling the forces and intensities needed ‘to make thought travel, make it mobile, make it a force of the Cosmos’ – but end up ‘reproducing nothing but a scribble effacing all lines, a scramble effacing all sounds’ (1988: 344). One may, in other words, just be acting the Dionysian drunkard again.

This is a cautionary message for those of us who are trying to respond to the Deleuzian call to make language stutter – to release its immanent powers of variation through experiments with form and meaning. We may fail to distinguish generative experimentation from the kind of linguistic play that was typical of some of our less

successful experiments with ‘postmodern’ textual practices in qualitative research. I would definitely include here my own past efforts. Not stuttering but scribbling. Many of these postmodern textual experiments failed, I would argue, to effect any real change in the relations of power and authority that compose and are reflected in research texts (c.f. MacLure, 2011), and ultimately they left the authorial self intact. At best (or worst) they ended up reinforcing the identity of the postmodern author as jester or melancholic guide to the groundless abyss beneath language and discourse. But Deleuzian groundlessness is not the ‘indifferent black nothingness’ envisaged by representation when it senses the abyss. Rather than comprising a total lack of differences, ‘it swarms with them’ (Deleuze, 1994: 276, 277). What would be needed therefore are (anti-) linguistic gambits that are genuinely capable of ‘unhinging’ language and apprehending the fracture that runs through the self. ‘What, after all, are Ideas’, Deleuze asks, rhetorically, ‘...if not these ants which enter and leave through the fracture in the I? (277)’

It is rare however, outside of the Deleuze-Guattarian enclave, to find new materialist theory that strenuously engages with the problematics of language. It is certainly the case that many of the leading scholars wrestle with language in the attempt to express new forms of relationality among human and nonhuman entities. Take for instance this well-known quotation from Karen Barad, which I briefly alluded to at the outset. But read it this time with *the language* specifically in mind.

I have been particularly interested in how matter comes to matter. How matter makes itself felt... feeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular

characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers (Barad, 2012: 59).

This is an exhilarating statement. But it is important not to be too seduced by its poetics. At the least, we need to be mindful that the materialist turn *over*-turns customary relations between words and things, propositions and bodies, with disconcerting implications for our understanding of how meaning consorts with the world. It is difficult, I suggest, to read language like this *outside* of the conventions of a romanticised humanism that bestows upon matter the capacities that we so pride ourselves on having. Notions such as conversing, suffering and yearning would need to take on an altered status, or sense, in new materialist ontologies, to disable the implication of bequest - perhaps to a point where such words came to hover or flicker on the edge of intelligibility.

I think the kind of language that Barad uses here reflects a certain stylistic tendency that is emerging within some versions of new materialist writing. Consider Jane Bennett's (2010: 112) description of matter as 'vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent and effluents'. For me, the language of these passages works, again, against the attempt to displace the centred, humanist self so that matter may speak. There is an expansive generosity in the language of quivering, yearning and suffering that conjures the anthropocentric, empathetic human subject behind its own back.

Clare Colebrook detects an *ultra*-humanism in theories such as these, which redistribute to all of nature, or life in general, the capacities for unmediated touch and

connection that were once the prerogative of human subjects. She argues that this amounts to a new image of thought, which she calls ‘hypo-hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism’. She argues that this is in fact:

not a mode of thinking precisely because it operates less by way of statements, assumptions and values, and instead comes to a halt before a complex of mesmerizing images and barely thought-out figures. This orientation of pseudo-“thinking” is one in which a certain notion of the intellect as detached calculation is resented or accused in the name of a supposedly more primordial and proximate living oneness (2013: 1-2; original emphasis).

This new haptic image of thought therefore sets itself *against* thinking, at least according to Colebrook’s definition of thought as ‘a comportment to the world that is without home, solace, identity or body (2013: 1)’

Although Colebrook does not specifically pursue the issue of language, she envisages, in a footnote that is currently haunting me, ‘a form of *affectless* philosophical critique, at least in theory’, and continues: ‘In addition to the world’s “murmurings” and “patterings” [referring to a passage by Barad] I suggest that there is another world that is stony, white and silent’ (2013: 10). This would indeed be a world in which methodology has become unintelligible to itself. At the least, it reminds me that, as Lyotard (1984: 81) urged many years ago, we may need to deny ourselves ‘the solace of good forms’.

Conclusion

I started out by wondering whether new materialist methodology is genuinely engaging the Dionysian powers of difference, or just acting the drunkard. This is a complicated question, because Deleuze, in his own writing and in his collaborations with Guattari, has always been clear about the dangers involved in trying to harness the differential forces of the Cosmos. Taking his lesson from Artaud, he was aware of the risks of courting the mad element in language that might drag us back from the surface where sense plays, to the excremental depths of the schizophrenic body and its disarticulated language of cries and fragmented phonemes. Deleuze and Guattari (1998: 350) write of the risk of going too far in ‘opening the assemblage onto a cosmic force’, warning that we may inadvertently collapse into ‘black holes and closures... cosmic force gone bad’. They commend ‘an art of dosages’ or ‘injections of caution’ (160).

It would be interesting to explore further how those dosages might be mixed, tested and administered. But for the moment, I think the danger is more one of failing to go far enough. It is difficult to think outside of the Enlightenment structures of the Cartesian self, and the stories it tells itself about progress, reason and the advancement of knowledge. So although we have come a long way in formulating cartographies for new materialist research, we are necessarily some way from the anticipated ontological transformations to our field. And this is not just because of institutional inertia or conservative methodology curricula in the neoliberal university. It is also because old epistemological habits tend to reinsert themselves behind our own backs. We may want to make language stutter and bring representation to its knees; we may believe that we are intra-acting, forming rhizomes, diffracting,

mapping flat ontologies and so on. And important studies are in fact emerging which do this – often by graduate students and early career scholars, precisely because they are intricately entangled with the materiality and the virtuality of the worlds they are researching. But I think we continue to underestimate the sheer difficulty of shedding the anthropocentrism that is built into our world-views and our language habits. We find it hard to *practise* critique and analysis on terms other than mastery. I know I do.

Overall then, I suspect that much new materialist research is still haunted by representation. But this time it's representation gone *orgiastic*. Or at least I would pose this possibility as a question – foremost of all for myself. I wonder if I am acting the Dionysian drunkard – mobilising all the uncanny machinery of new materialism, but still harnessing it to older narratives of empowerment, social justice, progressivism or ideology critique. To make an example of myself: I have found the new materialisms, and Deleuze in particular, enormously productive in helping me to think differently about young children and pedagogy. I have been able to see how bodies, matter and affect get tangled up with institutional discourses, history, policy and memory; and I have experienced obscure glimpses of how things could be otherwise. But I fear that the ontological excitement of these new concepts is contained - book-ended - by deeply ingrained, oppositional stances towards developmental psychology and certain notions of pedagogy.

But, if our new materialist work is framed and legitimated by familiar narratives of empowerment, emancipation or social justice, how much of a problem is this? There may be very good reasons for continuing to use these investments as engines and purposes for our research. But we need to acknowledge that this is likely also to

reinstall humanist notions of the self, and to invoke the superiority of the critic who undertakes to undo error and justice on behalf of subjects, and objects, that do not know what is good for them. Recalling that Dionysus is the god of wine, we need to ask: is this new wine in old bottles? Or perhaps it's old wine in new bottles? It's hard to tell. It is not that questions of emancipation and social justice are irrelevant: how frivolous would it be to say that? But perhaps it is a matter of learning to ask better questions: learning how to tap into the problematic structure of events, so that we can learn to be less guided by what we already think we know is important. Once we get better at doing that, we will be in a better position to experiment with dosages...

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