

‘The past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold’:¹ A posthumanist performative approach to qualitative longitudinal research

Abstract

In this article I argue that in their current genealogical and philosophical configuration, QLR practices—and a wider regime of knowledge, ethical, moral, legal, political and economic practices with which they are entangled—embed and enact representational assumptions in which the realities being investigated—time, change and continuity; the past, present and future—are taken as ontologically given and independent of these QLR (and wider) practices. My approach is to conceptualize QLR practices along nonrepresentational lines, through a philosophical framework that is able to materialize the constitutive effects of QLR (and wider) practices on the objects of study and knowledges produced. For this, I turn to Karen Barad’s (2007) posthumanist performative metaphysics—‘agential realism’—a framework that embodies and enacts a non-classical ontology in which entities are seen as constituted through material-discursive practices. On this account, QLR (and their related wider) practices are understood as an eliminable and constitutive part of the realities they help bring into being.

Keywords

Ontology, representationalism, Barad, posthumanism, performativity, agential realism, diffraction, QLR practices, revisiting practices.

1. Representational configurations of QLR practices

The ‘New frontiers for qualitative longitudinal research (QLR)’ seminar series that informs this special issue engaged with ‘the temporal perspectives and norms of different academic and practice traditions’ (Thomson et al. 2014, p. 1). It included speakers from a range of disciplines and showcased a diversity of practices encompassed by the term ‘QLR’ such as: Weis revisiting her own ethnographic study of a white working class community in North America after the passage of 20 years; Crow undertaking a partial restudy of Ray Pahl’s research of the Isle of Sheppey, UK, in the 1970s; Anderson engaged in career-long ethnographic work in a shanty town in Lima, Peru; Macmillan and Arvidson exploring organizational change in the UK through successive waves of interviews, observations and documentary analysis over a three-year period; Morrow’s involvement in an international study of childhood poverty over 15 years; and Stanley examining letters and epistolary exchanges in South Africa written during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

What these approaches share—and why they and others were brought together in a seminar series on QLR—is a concern with time. As Thomson et al. (2003, p. 185) point out, ‘What distinguishes longitudinal qualitative research is the deliberate way in which temporality is designed into the research process making change a central focus of analytic attention.’ QLR practices are therefore understood as providing distinctive knowledge about processes of change over time. This in turn is seen as yielding insights into the relationship between agency and structure, such as how the subject (their identities, beliefs, perspectives, behaviours, practices, narratives) is shaped by social and historical processes (including the research process) (McLeod

and Thomson, 2009; McLeod, 2003; Plumridge and Thomson, 2003; Thomson and Holland, 2003). As Neale and Flowerdew (2003, p. 190) explain:

It is through time that we can begin to grasp the nature of social change, the mechanisms and strategies used by individuals to generate and manage change in their personal lives, and the ways in which structural change impacts on the lives of individuals. It is only through time that we can gain a better appreciation of how the personal and the social, agency and structure, the micro and macro are interconnected and how they come to be transformed. It was this need to take account of the dynamic nature of people's lives that led to the development of longitudinal research methodologies for, by their very nature, these designs embody the notion of time.

On these accounts, QLR takes as its object of study relationships between time, change, agency and structure. In grappling with these issues QLR studies deploy different theoretical formulations of these concepts. For example, Thomson and Holland (2003) distinguish between research time, biographical time, and historical time. Neale and Flowerdew (2003, p. 193) problematize the notion of linear time and highlight historical, personal, cyclical, situational and spatial time. They suggest that 'a multiplicity of times exist in any one social situation and that time itself, the very rhythm of our lives, is a cultural construct'. Ontologically, however, QLR practices enact time as given and 'simply there' in the form of a past, present, and future that research participants are negotiating or narrating, and that researchers are studying and writing about. Similarly, while different concepts of change, agency and structure may be used, the ontological assumption that there are already such things as change,

agency and structure is unquestioned. In this historically- and culturally-specific genealogical and philosophical configuration, QLR practices enact an ontology of given entities.

It is these kinds of ontological assumptions that provoked and have sustained my engagement with philosophical discussions about sociological QLR practices. I became involved in these debates in the late 1990s in response to the implicit philosophical figuration of QLR practices embedded in the UK's Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) data archiving and reuse policy introduced in 1996; and in Qualidata, a UK data archive established in 1994 dedicated to the preservation and storage of social science qualitative datasets and studies (Mauthner, Parry & Backett-Milburn, 1998; Parry & Mauthner, 2004).² The ESRC was one of the first UK research councils to implement a formal data sharing policy, requiring that grant applicants demonstrate that data similar to those they were proposing to generate did not already exist; and that grant holders offer their research data and associated materials for archiving within three months of the end of their project.³ Qualidata, which was funded by the ESRC, has helped implement the policy and provided methodological and ethical guidance. Data management and sharing policies have since proliferated across research funding agencies and scientific journals within the UK and beyond; as has the creation of social science qualitative data archives. In the UK, data management policies have been adopted by Universities as part of their research and ethics governance frameworks; and the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 has ensured that these policies can be legally enforced (Mauthner, forthcoming a; Mauthner & Parry, 2013).

On my reading, this assemblage of mutually constitutive knowledge, ethical, moral, legal, political and economic practices has taken on a specific philosophical

configuration in which data are understood as representations of realities that are independent of the practices through which they are collected, recorded, archived, shared and (re)analyzed:

‘a particular, namely ‘realist’, ontological and epistemological position is implicit but unacknowledged within discussions of archiving qualitative data. Such a position, however, represents only one of many epistemological and ontological approaches to qualitative research’. (Mauthner et al., 1998, p. 736)

The assumption embedded and enacted in this ‘regime of practices’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 75), that data can be treated independently of their ontological contexts of production, has been seen as particularly problematic for qualitative researchers working within interpretive and social constructivist traditions for whom data are understood as reflexively constituted through historically- and culturally-specific practices (Hammersley, 1997, 2010; Mauthner et al., 1998; Parry & Mauthner 2004; Savage, 2005).

These philosophical concerns have been tackled through practices seeking to ensure that contextual information is archived alongside the data. This has been understood as rendering data (and resultant knowledge) more meaningful by enabling researchers to better understand the conditions through which data are generated (Corti, 2011). The effect of these practices is to make possible the creation of a new object of study: data and the contexts that constitute them (rather than data alone). Savage (2005, 2010), for example, takes as his object of investigation the historical constitution of classic British sociological studies, including their research practices and instruments, and the role these played in producing their objects and knowledges.

Others, however, have suggested that restoring the context in which data are generated is not necessary because data are autonomous from these contexts and can be reconstituted through archival and secondary analysis contexts (Andrews, 2008; Bornat, 2003; Moore, 2006, 2007). Moore (2006, p. 28), for instance, suggests that ‘data can be interpreted in endless contexts, thus opening up the possibilities for meaning making’. For these scholars, the object of study is data and the contexts and practices through which they are *reconstituted*. Thomson (2014) sees no need to jettison the past in favour of the present suggesting instead that the contexts in which data are generated—the research encounter, the theoretical frameworks, the methods, the technologies used, the biography of the researchers—are ‘encoded’ in the data and can be restaged and renewed upon further analysis. These various approaches to (re)contextualizing data take as their object of study data *and* context, or data-encoded-with-context. However, they enact data and context as already formed entities that shape one another; rather than as entities that are mutually constituted through one another. It is in this sense that I have argued that, in their current configuration, QLR practices enact an ontological gap between context and data:

‘Whether we contextualise data within the original contexts of ‘data production’, the archival contexts of ‘data preservation’, and/or the contemporary contexts of ‘data reuse’, ‘data’ are still conceptualised in implicit foundational terms in which ‘context’ remains ontologically separate from, rather than constitutive of, ‘data’. Both ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodern’ arguments, we suggest, are still working with foundational ontological conceptions of ‘data’.’ (Mauthner & Parry, 2009, p. 299)

Adding context (of any type) to data is understood to help QLR practices give us better knowledge of reality, where reality is taken to be independent of these practices. It is a past that has already happened or a present that is already made. Some authors, such as Savage (2010) and Thomson (2014), suggest that data carry traces of their contexts of production and the QLR practices through which they are constituted. However, the mechanisms through which context is encoded in data is not provided; and no account is given of how QLR practices constitute the past or the present. Recognizing the constitutive effects of context, or QLR practices, is not enough if these effects—how they make a difference to the object of study and knowledge produced—are not accounted for.

On this approach, QLR practices enact an ontology of given realities by overlooking the constitutive nature of practices (or ‘context’). Law (2004) argues that this enactment of method relies on largely hidden and commonsense representational assumptions about the nature of reality in which the world is understood as given, and the practices of knowing are bracketed out and treated as technique. Barad (2007, p. 53) similarly explains that representationalism ‘marks a failure to take account of the practices through which representations are produced’ (Barad, 2007, p. 53). A representational conceptualization of knowledge-making practices (methods), she suggests, ‘takes the notion of separation as foundational. It separates the world into the ontologically disjunct domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage such that knowledge is possible’ (Barad, 2007, p. 137). Drawing on Rouse (1996), Barad further argues that representationalism underpins both empirical realism and postmodern philosophical approaches that turn to language and discourse, as both share the representational belief that knowledge mediates access to the material world (reality). Where they differ is on what they take to be

their referent: whereas realist claims are understood to represent things in the world as they really are (i.e. nature), social constructivist ones are seen to represent objects that are the product of social activities (i.e. culture). Moreover, attempts to acknowledge the knower through reflexive approaches are also founded on representationalism in that they take for granted the notion that representations reflect (social or natural) reality. Reflexivity, Barad suggests, still holds the world at a distance: it ‘is based on the belief that practices of representing have no effect on the objects of investigation and that we have a kind of access to representations that we don’t have to the objects themselves’ (Barad, 2007, p. 87).

On my account, in their current genealogical and philosophical configuration, QLR practices, and the wider assemblage of practices they are part of, are being enacted on implicit representational terms. My approach in this article is to conceptualize QLR practices along nonrepresentational lines, through a philosophical framework that is able to materialize the constitutive effects of QLR (and wider) practices on their objects and knowledges of study. For this, I turn to Karen Barad’s posthumanist performative metaphysics—‘agential realism’—a framework that embodies and enacts a non-classical ontology in which entities are not taken as given but as constituted through material-discursive practices. On this account, QLR (and wider) practices—through their specific metaphysical, or material-discursive, configuration—are an eliminable and constitutive part of the realities (including time, change, agency, structure) they help bring into being. I engage with Barad’s work here as part of my broader interest in conceptualizing and enacting nonrepresentational knowledge-making practices (Mauthner, forthcoming b). On my reading, her scholarship provides a distinctive metaphysical framework that can materialize, and help reconfigure, the representational ontological assumptions that

are embedded and enacted in QLR practices and the wider regime of practices of which they are part (see also Mauthner, 2012a, 2012b).⁴

2. Barad's posthumanist performative framework: Agential realism

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), North American feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad develops a posthumanist, performative conceptualization of knowledge practices as an alternative to representational formulations. While representationalism ignores practices of representation, Barad takes the materiality of these practices seriously, and suggests that they are constitutive of the objects and knowledges of our investigations. Barad is not alone in putting forward a performative understanding of the nature of knowledge (and other) practices (e.g. Butler, 1990; Callon, 1998; Hacking, 2002; Haraway, 1997; Latour, 1999; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Pickering, 1995; Rheinberger, 1997, Rouse, 1996; Somers, 2008), including the performativity of social science methods (e.g. Law, 2004, 2009; Law, Ruppert & Savage, 2011; Law and Urry, 2004; Lury & Wakeford, 2012; Ruppert, 2009; Ruppert, Law & Savage, 2013). Her scholarship resonates with a wider cross-disciplinary turn to ontology (e.g. Ingold, 2010; Mol, 2002; Orlikowski, 2010; Woolgar and Lezaun, 2013) and is part of a longer genealogy of debates across disciplines such as philosophy, history, and anthropology in which questions have been raised about the nature of representational practices (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995; Munslow, 1997; White, 1973).

Barad's approach, however, is distinctive in its posthumanist orientation and its attention to the materiality of practices. As such, her scholarship is part of recent

‘new materialist’ approaches in social and feminist theory, and their critical renewed orientation towards materiality and processes of materialization in the wake of poststructuralism, and its attempt to reject the modernist idea of materiality as ‘brute thereness’ (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 7; see also Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). New materialist interventions provide a way of understanding the relationship between the discursive and the material that does not privilege the former to the exclusion of the latter. They build on insights gleaned from the linguistic turn and seek to give “matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming” (Barad, 2003, p. 803), in contrast to approaches that ignore matter, render it passive, or reduce it to social or discursive processes. They enact a post-Cartesian ontological reorientation that is posthumanist in that it conceives of matter itself as agentive and dynamic. Barad’s work, however, further departs from some new materialist attempts to recognize material as well as discursive factors in that, as I discuss below, she does not take the material and the discursive as given but as ontologically mutually constitutive.

Barad’s specific conceptualization of the relationship between the material and the discursive—and her notion of knowledge practices as inseparably material-discursive—is inspired by Niels Bohr’s philosophy-physics.⁵ Barad explains that through his own scientific work Bohr developed an understanding of quantum physics that led him to reject the metaphysical presuppositions of classical Newtonian physics including the central belief that the world is composed of already constituted entities and boundaries (nature/culture; matter/meaning; object/subject; knower/known; human/nonhuman); and that by implication, we, as knowers, and our scientific practices, are separate from the entities that await our discovery. Whereas Newtonian physics views the role of measurement as inconsequential, Bohr argued that ‘quantum physics requires a new logical framework that understands the constitutive role of

measurement processes in the construction of knowledge' (2007, p. 67). Bohr proposed that the world is inherently ontologically indeterminate in the absence of specific scientific or measurement practices:

'there is something fundamental about the nature of measurement interactions such that, given a particular measuring apparatus, certain properties *become determinate*, while others are explicitly excluded. Which properties become determinate is not governed by the desires or will of the experimenter but rather by the specificity of the experimental apparatus' (Barad, 2007, p. 19).

Bohr understood apparatuses, or measurement processes, as physical-conceptual devices that embody, materialize, and give meaning to specific concepts to the exclusion of others. Critically, Bohr understood concepts as *specific material arrangements* of experimental apparatuses—and not as abstract ideations or inherent attributes of independently existing objects. For Bohr, a concept only has meaning when a specific physical apparatus is used to measure it: 'concepts are meaningful, that is, semantically determinate, not in the abstract but by virtue of their embodiment in the physical arrangement of the apparatus' (Barad, 2007, p. 117). Bohr argued that our ability to understand the world was dependent on taking into account the fact that our knowledge-making practices are 'social-material enactments that contribute to, and are part of, the phenomena we describe' (2007, p. 26). This profound insight led Bohr to the view that '*we are part of that nature that we seek to understand*' (2007, p. 67).

Barad (2007) builds on Bohr's 'proto-performative' formulation of the apparatus, and particularly his critical insight about the materiality of concepts, and

brings his ideas into conversation with those from science studies, the philosophy of science, poststructuralism, and feminist and queer theory; including the work of Haraway (Barad, 1996), Butler and Foucault (Barad, 1998), and Derrida (Barad, 2010). She proposes a posthumanist account of performativity that challenges the positioning of materiality as either a given or the result of human, social or discursive processes. On her account, discursive practices are not human-based activities—linguistic or signifying systems, speech acts, conversations, statements, or utterances of an intentional and unified subject. They are ‘*specific material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted*’ (2007, p. 148). Just as discursive practices are always already material (they are an ongoing materialization of the world), so too materiality is discursive: material phenomena come into being through, and are inseparable from, discursive practices. As Barad (2014, p. 175) explains: ‘Meaning is not an ideality; meaning is material. And matter isn’t what exists separately from meaning. Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn’t’. In Barad’s metaphysics, materiality is dynamic and agentic, refigured as materialization. It has ‘ongoing historicity’ (Barad, 2003, p. 821) and is an active factor in processes of materialization. Materiality is a doing rather than a thing: ‘*Matter refers to the materiality and materialization of phenomena, not to an assumed, inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects*’ (2007, p. 210).

Barad’s work departs from many existing attempts to move beyond representationalism and Cartesianism in that she does not merely suggest that there are important material factors to consider in addition to discursive ones in the production of knowledge. Nor does she explore the relationship between the human/semiotic and nonhuman/material through the concept of *inter-action*, which

presupposes that these terms are separate to begin with. Rather, Barad starts from a relational ontology in which the material and the semiotic, the nonhuman and the human, are always already ontologically entangled and inseparable. She proposes the neologism, ‘intra-action’, to rethink the relationship between the material and the semiotic and to rework the traditional concept of causality and notion of inter-action. Intra-actions are performative causal enactments that materialise entities and boundaries out of ontologically inseparable relations. According to Barad, it is only through specific ‘agential intra-actions’ that ‘entities’ (bodies, meanings) and boundaries are produced, and become determinate and meaningful. Practices enact what Barad terms ‘agential cuts, which do not produce absolute separations, but rather cut together-apart (one move)’ (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Barad’s approach makes it possible to step out of a representational framework by foregrounding, rather than bracketing, the knowledge-making practices through which material-discursive realities are (intra-actively) performed into being.

In seeking to develop a methodological practice for enacting a posthumanist performative metaphysics, Barad draws on the physical phenomenon of diffraction. Building on Haraway’s (1992, 1997) suggestion of embracing a different optics in science studies—diffraction rather than reflection—and on a longer genealogy of the concept of diffraction threaded through quantum physics and feminist theory (Barad, 2014)—Barad proposes that we think of knowledge practices in terms of ‘diffraction apparatuses of bodily production’ (see also Mauthner, forthcoming b). Diffraction, she suggests, does not fix what is the object and what is the subject in advance. On this account, ‘knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from *a direct material engagement with the world*’ (Barad, 2007, p. 49). Knowledge practices are non-innocent, performative practices that are a constitutive

and ineliminable part of what is being described/produced, and therefore need to be accounted for. Working in a diffractive way requires specifying the metaphysical conditions and constraints through which we engage/with/as-part-of the world.

3. Diffracting sociological QLR practices through agential realism

I now re-turn to QLR practices, and the ontological issues they raise, by diffracting these practices through agential realism. The concept of ‘QLR’ encompasses a multitude of practices—including data generating, recording, archiving, searching, analyzing and revisiting—each of which is entangled with wider knowledge, ethical, moral, legal, political, and economic practices. Each one of these, and other related, practices could be diffracted through agential realism to examine their representational assumptions. Due to space constraints, however, I focus my discussion specifically on revisiting practices as enacted in the work of two British sociologists—Mike Savage and Liz Stanley—both of whom have produced significant bodies of work through practices of revisiting ‘the past’; and both of whom, on my reading, seek to grapple with the philosophical issues raised by QLR, including revisiting, practices. My diffractive reading of their work entails taking agential realism as my agency of observation and their revisiting practices as my object of study in order to investigate the metaphysical assumptions enacted in their practices. The question I bring to their work is: How is the ontological nature of revisiting practices, and the relationship of these practices to both the object of study and the knowledge that is produced, conceptualized and enacted? Specifying the metaphysical framework that underpins my question, and through which I examine their practices, is an enactment of a diffractive practice. It details the metaphysical—

material-semiotic—specificity of the reading practices through which I approach Savage’s and Stanley’s revisiting practices. It provides the material conditions and constraints necessary to materialize a determinate and meaningful agentially enacted boundary between agential realist and representational conceptualizations and enactments of revisiting practices. In this sense, the practices through which I engage with the work of Savage and Stanley illustrate the argument I make in this article: ‘my’ diffractive practices enact an agential realist conceptualization of knowledge-making by taking ‘my’ agential realist practices as an ineliminable and constitutive part of the representational practices ‘my’ practices help bring into being.

Mike Savage (2005, 2010) addresses the philosophical issues raised by QLR practices by turning to history and investigating the historical processes, research practices and material devices through which a number of ‘classic’ British sociological studies—undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s—were shaped by the social world in which they were located, and in turn helped to shape social realities. For example, in his book, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (2010), Savage explains that his initial intention was to use archived data from these classic post-war sociological studies to investigate social change in Britain after the Second World War. However, he realized that the social science methods that were used to generate these data were contributing to the remaking of national identities, his object of study: ‘The processes by which knowledge—in the form of assumptions, tools, data, methods, and accounts—is generated is itself of great interest in understanding the nature of popular identities themselves’ (2010, p. xii). His book turned into a historical sociology of the social sciences in Britain, as his object of study shifted from popular identities to the ‘social science apparatus’ that produced, and came into being at the same time as, these identities.

While Savage suggests that turning to historical practices overcomes realist assumptions embedded within QLR practices, his historical practices enact the very same assumptions that are the object of his critique. One example of this is his argument that a historical approach reveals how research was ‘really’ conducted:

‘We need to use archival sources to reconstruct, as best we can, the research process itself so that we can get inside the research ‘boiler room’ to see how distinctive kinds of social objects and relationships are generated’. (Savage, 2010, p. 16)

‘Archived qualitative data can be used to reconstruct how “classic” research studies were actually conducted so that we are better able to understand how research actually advances.’ (Savage, 2005, [3])

Close scrutiny of fieldnotes, Savage suggests, can reveal ‘what really pre-occupied’ researchers (Savage, 2005, [15]). Taken alongside the published outputs from a study, fieldnotes can also make apparent how lines of investigation made particular objects and knowledges present, to the exclusion of others. Savage calls this reading history ‘against the grain’ and he sees this as a key potential of qualitative data archives. Archives, he argues, expose how the making of knowledge is not a neutral process: ‘we can understand the visibilities and invisibilities—and therefore the implicit politics of social research which often gains its power and pertinence through keeping its own processes invisible’ (Savage, 2005, [6]).

Savage takes as his object of study the performativity of knowledge practices and the social science apparatus (see also Savage, 2013; Law, Ruppert & Savage,

2011). Paradoxically, however, he treats this object in a representational way by failing to specify the practices through which he revisits the past, and their performative role in constituting his own object. His practices therefore enact this object as ontologically given: a past that is already formed and that actually happened. While he makes a strong argument for treating the research practices he studies as an ineliminable part of the objects and knowledge that are produced, he does not extend this to his own practices. This is despite his critique of dominant instrumentalist approaches to methods in the social sciences (Savage, 2013) for the way they ‘hide their own traces’ (Savage, 2010, p. 8) and enact an implicit politics in doing so—a metaphysics and politics his revisiting practices implicitly enact. Similarly, Savage (2009) argues that concepts of change are historically and culturally-contingent, produced in part by the social science apparatus. However, he does not account for how the concept of change enacted in his own practices—his rejection of a teleological approach—is constituted by the social science apparatus and in turn helps constitute his object of study—e.g. the emergence and rise of the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century (Savage, 2010). His own revisiting practices therefore enact the nature of change as given.

My second example is Liz Stanley’s extensive programme of collaborative longitudinal qualitative research exploring the question of how a minority of whites imposed itself on a black majority in South Africa through the institutionalization of a race-based system of power and exploitation. Her key object of study are the epistolary practices of individuals and networks of different ethnic, political, economic and religious standing across two centuries (1770s—1970s): letter-writing networks spread through time and space. Stanley’s practices are informed by the feminist theory of knowledge and grounded research practice she developed called

'Feminist Fractured Foundationalism' (FFF) (Stanley & Wise, 1993). FFF was a response to feminist research of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the UK, which Stanley and Wise saw as reproducing positivist methodological approaches in which women were taken as object of study and the power-laden 'act of knowing' was concealed. This, they argued, created an untenable division between the knower ('academic women') and the known ('ordinary women'). FFF seeks to move beyond the binaries (cultural/material, realism/idealism, theory/practice) inherent in these practices. It recognizes the materiality of the social world that is real in its consequences (foundationalism) and its socially interpreted and culturally constructed aspects (fractured) (Stanley & Wise, 1993, 2006). On this account, there is 'a real social reality ... to be arrived at' (Stanley & Wise, 2006) and knowledge practices are understood as providing partial understandings of this reality rather than representations of reality as it really is. This philosophical approach to revisiting the past, and its relationship to the object of study, is enacted in Stanley and Wise's (2006) discussion of the death of a young girl in one of the concentration camps of the South African War (1899-1902). Letters, official records and other documents, they argue, suggest that the circumstances surrounding her death were the object of dispute at the time and that:

'One of the features of historical research is that in a sense such disputes are "over" now, and so the temptation to take sides is less than in present-time research. That is, there is no possibility here of the researcher 'intervening' other than by suggesting interpretational possibilities.' (Stanley & Wise, 2006, 2.19).

On this approach, the dispute and the past are already gone and have already happened—they are ontologically given—and all the researcher can do is provide a perspective on these events. Whereas agential realism takes the past as open to nonarbitrary remaking, FFF treats the past as already made.

The epistolary practices that are the object of study are conceptualized in similar epistemological and ontological terms. Stanley refers to the performative feature of letters (Stanley, 2013, Stanley, Salter & Dampier's 2013, p. 299) and notes that 'what happened' (reality, history, time) is neither given nor absolute. Stanley seems to suggest that the ontological nature of letters, and the historical events they describe, is made rather than found. However, on my reading, Stanley is making an epistemological rather than an ontological point. She suggests that the meaning of a letter or a historical event is open to different interpretations. As she says, there is no single version of events, and letters provide perspectival representations of these events, shaped by historical happenings and personal circumstances. Through their seriality and succession, letters do not open up "the past" itself, long dead and gone, but ... changing views and representations of what was the unfolding present for the people who wrote them' (Stanley, 2013). Stanley draws on Norbert Elias's notion of 'sociogenesis' and suggests that QLR allows us to grasp reality as a complex and continuous process of social becoming by giving us access to representations of reality across space and time (in the form of letter-writing networks). This provides insights into how reality's becoming is shaped by local and interpersonal, micro-level and the macro-level processes. However, the notion that the ontological nature of reality is characterized by sociogenesis is taken as given. Similarly, Stanley's practices enact letters and historical events as having an ontological existence that is independent of the multiple practices through which these letters and events are

constituted.

Reading Stanley's work through agential realism materializes patterns of resonance and dissonance. Like Barad (2007), Stanley and Wise argue that the act of knowing is not neutral and needs to be accounted for. Feminist social scientists, they suggest, 'must acknowledge the ethical and political issues involved in what we do, how we do it and the claims we make for it' (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 7). However, while Stanley and Wise suggest that researchers take responsibility for the *knowledge* they produce Barad argues that we are accountable and responsible for the *realities* our practices help bring into being (see below). Furthermore, reading Stanley's work through agential realism materializes the representational assumptions embedded and enacted in her revisiting practices and their exclusion of the constitutive nature of practices of representation—both the epistolary practices that are her object of study and her own revisiting practices. That is, Stanley does not account for how letters or historical events are ontologically constituted by micro-level and macro-level processes (Stanley, 2013), including the revisiting practices through which they are performed into being. Reading Savage's and Stanley's work through an agential realist framework helps materialize their revisiting practices as representational enactments that exclude the constitutive nature of practices—both their own practices and the practices they study.

4. Towards an agential realist configuration of QLR practices

Following Barad, addressing the philosophical issues raised by QLR practices in a determinate and meaningful way requires specifying our metaphysical commitments. In this paper I have addressed these issues on agential realist terms through

metaphysical practices that enact a boundary between agential realism and its constitutive other: representationalism. On an agential realist approach, this practice of accounting for our metaphysical commitments is what secures (an agential realist redefinition of) ‘objectivity’, where ‘objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part’ (Barad, 2007, p. 91). The cut between agential realism and representationalism is not understood as innocent or given. It is performative: it enacts culturally- and historically-specific material-discursive phenomena (objects, meanings, boundaries) and is a material-discursive effect of the culturally- and historically-specific metaphysical framework of agential realism. As Barad (1996, p. 187) explains, in shifting and destabilizing representational and Cartesian subject-object / culture-nature boundaries, our ‘goal should not be to find less false boundaries for all spacetime, but reliable, accountable, located temporary boundaries’, that will serve for some of our purposes for a while but ‘which we should anticipate will quickly close in against us. Agential realism will inevitably be a casualty of its own design’.

Putting metaphysics to one side, failing to specify our philosophical commitments, and avoiding the enactment of boundaries are not neutral practices. They implicitly enact representational commitments by failing to account for themselves. On an agential realist approach, QLR practices are metaphysical practices that *necessarily* enact *specific* metaphysical commitments to the exclusion of others. There is no outside of metaphysics, and the point is, following Barad, to specify our metaphysics, account for and take responsibility for the cuts it enacts, and include this metaphysics as ontologically inherent to, and productive of, the objects and knowledges constituted through QLR practices. On this account, QLR practices in their current configuration raise philosophical questions not simply because of their

enactment of a representational metaphysics but because of their failure to make this metaphysics explicit. As Somers (2008, p. 172-3) argues, many of the problems we face in sociology stem from the fact that we have taken the concepts that inform our work as given and presuppositional. These concepts implicitly frame our research problematics, and shape and delimit our knowledge practices, such as how we think, what we do, and the questions we ask. Making apparent ‘those self-evidences on which our knowledges, acquiescences and practices rest’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 76) materialises them as ‘contingent historical outcomes [that] simply take on the appearance of being the only possible reality’ (Somers, 2008, p. 10).

On my reading, Barad’s distinctive insistence on accounting and taking responsibility for the metaphysical specificity of our knowledge practices—and their performative effects—provides a potentially fruitful way forward for how we debate, conceptualize and enact QLR practices. This is particularly the case in light of commentators who suggest that the philosophical questions seen to arise from QLR practices are unwarranted because these practices are neither new nor specific to the discipline of sociology (Geiger et al., 2010; Moore, 2007). As already suggested, there are well-established traditions in which sociologists undertake secondary analysis, archival work, intergenerational research and revisits of classic studies; anthropologists return to their ethnographic fieldsites and fieldnotes over time; oral historians create archival documents; and historians use archives as source materials (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006; Thomson et al., 2014). The point being made by highlighting the links between the latter traditions and QLR practices is an epistemological one: it suggests that ways of knowing the world that are ‘attentive to temporal processes and durational phenomena’ (Thomson et al., 2014, p. 2) have long, cross-disciplinary, genealogies.

The argument I make, however, is an ontological one that applies equally to these other disciplines and traditions, and their genealogy of representational ontological practices (see also Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995; Ingold, 2010). Furthermore, my argument is also political in that it is concerned with the ways in which a wider regime of practices enacts, institutionalizes, and takes as given a culturally- and historically-specific ontological configuration of QLR practices (Mauthner, 2012a, 2012b, 2014); and derives power from its ability to materialize this specific configuration as a now principal component of the nature of social scientific practice, thus coming to seem ‘an altogether natural, self-evident and indispensable part of it’ (Foucault, 1991). Following Foucault and Barad, it is possible to contest and shake ‘this false self-evidence’, demonstrate its precariousness, make ‘visible not its arbitrariness, but its complex interconnection with a multiplicity of historical processes’ (Foucault, 1991, p. 75). On this approach, the specific representational configuration of current QLR (and related) practices is not given. It is the effect of processes of formation that can be non-innocently traced, contested, and remade. This means that QLR practices are open to being reconfigured along nonrepresentational, posthumanist performative lines in which QLR is reframed as an ontological—or, to be more precise, ‘ethico-onto-epistemological’ (Barad, 2007, p. 185)—rather than an epistemological project: a project that is no longer concerned with how QLR practices help us *know* or *understand* time, change, and continuity where these are taken as given; but rather investigates, accounts, and takes responsibility for how QLR practices, in intra-action with a wider assemblage of practices, help *make* time, change, and continuity and with what specific performative (material-discursive) effects.

Notes

1. Barad (2010, p. 260).
2. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns.
3. For the current ESRC Research Data Policy see:
http://www.esrc.ac.uk/images/Research_Data_Policy_2010_tcm8-4595.pdf.
4. There are different readings and enactments of Barad's work. My own account is informed by my readings of her scholarship and my interest in developing nonrepresentational conceptualizations and enactments of methods and knowledge practices.
5. Barad's interpretation of quantum physics, and of Bohr's work, is but one of many readings. As Barad (2014, p. 186) notes: 'My account of Bohr's philosophy-physics ... is not faithful to Bohr (as if it could be), but rather is always already diffracted through my agential realist understanding of Bohr's insights'.

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