CARPE Conference 2013:
The (im)possible death of affective data?

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Abstract

this paper will engage with ‘data’, or ‘empirical materials’, to disrupt the humanist supposition that data, as a non-human object, dispassionately waits for the ‘breath of life’ that is the autonomous, cognitively intentional, human acts of analysis and interpretation – in short, qualitative research. As Jane Bennett notes, “process itself is an actant” (2010, 33) and as such it is necessary to consider the process of working with empirical materials differently, and away from good and common sense. By taking up provocations from the ‘Museum of Qualitative Data’, a current blog hosted by the Education and Social Research Unit (ESRI) at Manchester Metropolitan University what will be considered is the ways in which empirical materials are eaten and how these same empirical materials bite back. In this sense qualitative research can no longer consider ‘empirical materials’ as passive, or even impassive; devoid of and having no affects; instead it must think of them as what Jane Bennett refers to as ‘Vibrant Matter’ which has a “a not-quite-human capaciousness”(2010, 3).

Introduction

(SLIDE 2)

The ‘Museum of Qualitative Data’ is hosted by the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University. It is an on-line space which has been created for an international community of qualitative scholars in the social sciences, arts and humanities, to consider questions such as what counts as data, how data might be encountered differently, and]”what constitutes a research text” (Mazzai and McCoy, 2010).

One of the first ‘artifacts’ to appear in this repository space, as you will see from the slide, is credited to Norman Denzin, founder of the Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (QI) and its associated conference, the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI)

I’m taken with the new materialism on the one side and the new developments (post-butler) within performance studies; post-empirical, post-humanistic, materialist pedagogies engage transformational politics engage theatres of the oppressed engage new communities of practice engage a new new from a new beginning ……This radical strand cuts through and into our old fashioned modes of ‘inquiry’ calling for new ways of making the world visible—the mundane, from interviews, focused groups, ethnography, arts-based inquiry, discourse, narrative, par, borderlands case studies, video, dance, performance, writing as inquiry, to, in the end, the death of data.(Denzin, 2012)
In this extract three things in particular draw my attention: firstly the idea of **new ways of making the world visible**; secondly ‘**the death of data**’ and how both of these might inform a ‘**new new from a new beginning**’. It is my feeling that all three issues speak to one another and the concerns of the symposium.

**CHANGE SLIDE – SLIDE 3**

As you may have noticed from the title slide, I have posited the death of data’ as both a question, and bracketed off part of impossibility to provoke some thoughts and possible discussion. Here, it is my understanding that the death of data, as Denzin evokes it, does not suggest that we do away with ‘data’ in our research, although he has, as have I, moved to the term ‘empirical materials’. Instead, I understand this ‘death’ to be in keeping with the other figurative deaths which have been posited in philosophy over the years - God, Man, and the Subject – hence the bracketing of the ‘Im’. These conceptual fatalities, which have received sustained interest from many post structural scholars over preceding decades, disrupt the taken-for-granted practices associated with evoking entities. Put differently, Qualitative Research is becoming increasingly pre occupied with the ways in which raising such entities at the surface of language has material implications.

“If you say [data],’ [data] passes through your lips, and it is neither better nor more convenient if this is the Idea of [data]” (Deleuze, 2004, 153)

The third and final point, the notion of the new new from a new beginning, is worked with in terms of ideas I have been engaging with through theories of new materialism, Deleuze and interdisciplinary scholars such as Jane Bennett (philosopher-political theorist) and Karen Barad (Physicist-philosopher). Here, I want to draw attention to what Massumi refers to as ‘middling activity’, an idea connected to Deleuze’s own thinking around revolution. This middling activity can be seen as an alternative to illusory beginnings, which are in practice always already implicated in other practices, words, things and politics. Here I will use Barad’s notion of cutting together/ cutting apart to consider agency and empirical materials away from the epistemic conjecture of starts and ends.

**CHANGE SLIDE – SLIDE 4**

**My work**

My area of study is what is often referred to as ‘disordered eating’, and over the course of my mobile, or connective, ethnography (Hine, 2000) I have engaged with both on-line (B-eat Ambassador network, pro anorexia sites, you-tube, facebook) and off-line spaces (an eating disorder prevention project, an intergenerational feminist project, face to face meetings with a member of the pro anorexia community and members of the CAHMS service). Within the literature, expert psychiatric and medical discourses powerfully position anorexia as an illness with classifiable symptoms, something amenable to identification, categorisation and normalisation. However, pro anorexia forums are strewn with a desire to be anorexic, and maintain anorexia as ‘a lifestyle choice’ rather than simply ‘suffering from an affliction’. Here, in these ideas of ‘being’ and ‘choosing’ we can see at work particular investments in ontological fixity; individualism, autonomy and free will, ideas which the interdisciplinary research of post-humanism and new materialism productively questions.

In my work I have felt that there is a need to trouble these conceptions which discursively and materially produce ‘Anorexia’ through either- or forms, as a fixed ontological position, a
proper identity, a real mental illness, or a free choice. This troubling of the \textit{either-or} form is necessary as it disrupts onto-pistem-ologies pertaining to real and unreal, true and false, proper and improper which are not entirely helpful in terms of engaging differently with what I conceptualise in my own work as ‘a difficult relationship to feeding the body’.

Although a difficult relationship to feeding the body is a mouthful, it highlights embodied struggle, materiality, movement – activity and process. It foregrounds the relational aspect of doers with the deed without individualising the subject on its ascription or presuming what or who is the object. It holds open to questions pertaining to how, why and who is implicated in that relationship, which includes the human and non-human, the affective and interpellative. Here I would like to make a link between my ideas and those put forward by Bennett who notes that “there is not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed (the blackout) as a doing and an effecting by a human non human assemblage” (2010, 28).

In my work, ‘data’ that seems to be a performance of resistance, is in the next movement is in the process of becoming conservative. As I have engaged with empirical materials gathered on and offline, disrupting the notion of linear causality through Barad and others, it is not that an activity starts and remains conservative, or always begins as resistance and ends as such, it is rather that as an embodied-material-affective activity, as it comes into contact with other humans and non-humans: ideas, people, places, practices, affects, processes; it shifts, and transmutes in the intra-action (Brad, 2007), in its \textit{becoming eaten}. Not one thing or the other, this or that, but \textit{both-and; in the process of becoming unpredictable}.

Now, having given an overview of my research, I would like to return to the points I set out at the beginning of the paper, those triggered by Norman Denzins comments.

\textbf{CHANGE SLIDE – SLIDE 5}

\textbf{New ways of making the world visible}

“A Philosopher’s ontology is the set of entities he or she assumes to exist in reality, the type of entities he or she is committed to assert actually exist” (DeLanda, 2002, 4).

This new way of making things visible in the world is implicated in the task of not seeing \textit{with} vision, but \textit{in} vision (Massumi, 2011). It is implicated in the move away from conservative empiricism and ‘representation’ in the social sciences, which can be conceptualized as that which is accidental to the Deleuzian event. Unlike most post-structural philosophers, who posit the notion that ‘reality’ has no existence independent of the human mind perceiving or constructing it, Deleuze’s ontology is realist, but not at all naïve. His interest in the incorporeal, or the virtual, as that which is always already in relation to the actual (Williams, 2008), implies that both ‘words and things’ produce the social world; that they are in the process that Barad and Massumi refer to as ‘worlding’. Those entities which Deleuze assumes to exist in ‘reality’ cannot \textit{only} be pointed to with pens or fingers and they cannot be seen \textit{only} with eyes.

What can be seen in human-vision; that which is manifest in what Deleuze refers to as ‘the state of affairs’ may allow boxes to be ticked, and ‘empirical evidence’ to be easily represented; but focussing on this alone misses the point, or the sense of the event. It keeps research stratified by representation rather than opening spaces of de and
reterritorialisation. Spaces where we might see Denzin’s hoped for ‘new new from a new beginning’

For my work the manifestation of an appearance and an adherence to the demands of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM, APA, 2000) obfuscates the complex human-non human assemblage that cannot be limited to the confines of the present. The representational capacity of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual is, for me, part of the old humanist ways of making the world visible which I feel post humanism and interdisciplinary work of Barad helps us with.

“We can no longer see our way through the game of smoke and mirrors that representationalism has become. Like a good magician, representationalism would have us focus on what seems to be evidently given, hiding the very practices that produce the illusion of givenness” (Barad, 2007, 360).

So returning to the idea of the empirical, often conceived as that which is observed or observable, the known of the knower, we see in the following quote from Deleuze that “[t]he logic of sense is inspired in its entirety by empiricism. Only empiricism knows how to transcend the experiential dimensions of the visible without falling into Ideas, and how to track down, invoke, and perhaps produce a phantom at the limit of a lengthened or unfolded experience” (2004, 23, emphasis added). This returns me to the ontological point DeLanda introduced us to earlier, the question of what entities we take to exist in the world.

What I infer from this is that ‘to transcend the experiential dimensions of the visible’ is not to separate out words and things, making the former immaterial and the latter matter, or, conversely allowing language to esoterically transcend the dumb matter of bodies; it is instead to explore and consider the materialising effects of each intra-action. This practice, of exploring the human nonhuman assemblage, cannot then become reduced to the agency, or responsibility, of a human individual. Instead we have to acknowledge the materiality of words, their affects, the way they fail to stop moving at the surface of the skin, the way they permeate the porosity of what is presumed concrete and matter.

The abstract yet embodied assignment for research, in the task of finding new ways of making the world visible, becomes to feel, think and move, with that which is not “in vision [but] as with vision or through vision: as a vision effect” (Massumi, 2011, 17). “In other words the dynamic form of the event is perceptually felt” (Massumi, 2011, 17)
We do not just see ‘data that matters’, it is my contention that we perceptually feel it, perhaps as Massumi suggests, as a vision effect, as an entity which leaps from the page or field site making us tongue tied and eaten up by the possibilities in its capaciousness.

CHANGE SLIDE – SLIDE 6

Secondly ‘the death of data’.

In this section I will put to work some empirical materials to flesh out the ideas I have started to develop. Initially I will give a more traditional ‘reading’ of some data before putting it to work with post human ideas.
“[p]eople tend to use stereotypes when they are talking about eating disorders and it really frustrates me because I don’t fit into any of those stereotypes which therefore means that I don’t have an eating disorder which really really frustrates me” (Joanne)

The stereotypes that Joanne speaks of here pertain to both the demands that the categories of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual make, and also the way in which this powerful and dogmatic discourse finds its way into good and common sense notions of what anorexia is and what it looks like. Here both work together in this term ‘stereotype’ to produce Joanne as excessive. Because she does not meet the categories demands, or, rather as she puts it – the stereotypes – she doesn’t matter, her difficult relationship to feeding the body is not legible.

Here, in this cursory analysis, although I attribute this quote to a Joanne, a significant human in my research, the post human and Deleuzian theories I work with do not allow me to assert this empirical material as the property of any one individual, or as representing the voice of a volitional speaker. Instead I am forced to think beyond who and what is represented, the accident of the event, to think of what is inside that which occurs. Which humans and non humans are implicated in this intra-action (Barad, 2007)? What does ‘Joanne’ cut together and cut apart in this assertion? What am I cutting together and cutting apart as I present it as ‘data’ and how am I, in this process, which Bennett (2010) suggests has agency, being cut?

Joanne cuts together her difficult relationship to feeding the body, ‘other peoples’ perceptions, the good sense of representation, and sensory affects fixed and represented through the readily available linguistic option of ‘frustration’. She cuts apart her claim to a particular identity, that of f-actual anorexic, using a generalized ‘other peoples’ talk’ to substantiate, or make matter, her liminality. Here, as ‘stereotypes’ are evoked, indeed denoted and made manifest, they become consumables (Deleuze, 2004a). The simultaneously vague and pernicious reputation of this word, stereotype, as it is eaten, has an affect. As it passes through the mouth of the speaker it leaves the bitter aftertaste of the proud verb – the imperatives to be, and to be dismissed, here as improper or not real. In the perceived, imagined, experienced dismissal is the reduction of vital human matter, the becoming cold and brittle of representationalism which lacks movement and difference. What becomes increasingly important to acknowledge within this intra-action, is the potential agency of the apparatuses of good sense, such as the DSM, which then afford common sense distributions of bodies accordingly, always already producing bodies that do not matter.

My agential cuts are made as I cut together post human materials with the empirical materials of my field. Here I ‘choose’ to plug into (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) this literature-machine, rather than the humanist literature machine which has informed so much diverse scholarship into ‘eating disorders’. I select this extract as data, as I scan transcripts and word documents and select ‘this’, rather than ‘that’ to represent, as an empirical example, the points I am attempting to make. I denote and make manifest ‘data’ and in doing so, make it as edible as I make it sayable – it becomes consumable, raising forth the ethical question Deleuze posits “What is more serious: to speak of food or to eat words?” (2004a, 29) I cannot, of course, convey the sense of what I am trying to ‘say’, nor can ‘Joanne’, in what we are saying. Sense is not reducible to language or things. As such, I engage in the work of anticipation that writing is always already becoming, and in engaging with this affective practice materialize a hopefulness that something of the mixture of words and things which become actualized through my writing can leap forwards, as with the event, rather than falling back into ideas as Deleuze warns us against.
If, as I have suggested, we work with the idea that the division between words and things is not as straightforward as we might have liked to have thought, and work with the notion that data is vibrant and that bodies, or matter, having an incorporeal dimension, can be affected; the possibility of the death of data is not a literal or even figurative death - but a process, a dying; a weakening of the hubris its perhaps once straightforward assertion engendered. To paraphrase Deleuze and Barad; when ‘data’ passes through our lips we now have to take a breath and chew over the entangled practices we are cutting together and apart.

‘A new new from a new beginning’

I would like to suggest in conclusion that in the context of post human, new materialist and Deleuzian thinking, the ‘new new’, that gives forth a ‘new beginning’ does not start from the position of the human knower of the non human known; nor does it take for granted the eminence of the ‘thinker’. Instead, in its disruption of the image of thought which grounds the ‘I think’, and its disregard for neat tautologies drawn with compasses (Deleuze, 2004b); the old old starting and stopping points, which incessantly creep from Cartesian, Platonic and Kantian mechanistic philosophies, cease to circumvent curiosity and wonder. What becomes possible is the creation of circles that may be torturous enough to go beyond the empiricism of “everybody knows, no one can deny” common sense representations (Deleuze, 2004b, 165).

The new new cannot start, just as the old old cannot finish – both are entangled in past future relations which can’t be thought rationally from a logical beginning. The necessary deterritorialisations of humanism and the humanities cannot be once and for all; the new new will always necessarily be at a remove from the manifestations, denotations and significations which furnish the present and the state of affairs. Put differently the new new is always already in a process of becoming, and passing out. Importantly, the agential cuts we make into it are not just the choices of intentional human agents, researchers, but are instead at what I will call the intra-face of theories, practices and those empirical materials which eat at us, even when we wish they wouldn’t.

References


