

**The 'new materialisms': a thorn in the flesh of critical qualitative inquiry?**

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## **The ‘new materialisms’: a thorn in the flesh of critical qualitative inquiry?**

I am not interested in critique. In my opinion, critique is over-rated, over-emphasized, and over-utilized.... (Barad, 2012a: 49)

### **Introduction and summary**

This chapter considers the implications for critical qualitative inquiry of the recent (re)turn to materiality in philosophy and theory. It focuses in particular on the contested status of *critique* within these ‘new materialisms’, and the challenge that these pose for conventional notions of qualitative inquiry. In the new materialisms, agency and consciousness are not the prerogative of human subjects. 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, and crucially, creative experimentation is privileged over critique, at least where the latter is construed as the exposure of error, the revelation of hidden circuits of power/knowledge, or the unmasking of ideology. This raises an urgent question for research orientations that announce themselves as critical: does criticality, as the transformative work of interpretive, intentional human agents, still have a place in our theories and research practices? And if not, what shall we do?

I do not suggest that we should abandon commitments to interrogating power and inequity, or give up collective action for social change. But I will argue that these commitments need to be rethought, and the nature of critique reconceptualised. New materialist practice would demand an *immanent* critique that never jumps clear of its entanglement in the structures and

processes that are also its targets, but nevertheless has the potential to open up possibilities for movement and change.

Critique is difficult to define. As Foucault noted, critique only comes into being in relation to whatever is its focus or object. Existing only in relation to ‘something other than itself’, it ‘oversees a domain it would want to police and is unable to regulate’ (Foucault, 1997: 42).<sup>1</sup> I will not attempt to define critique therefore, or trace different meanings and lineages. As a rough approximation however, I have in mind a loose family of practices that are dedicated to exposing or unmasking the malign effects of power, discourse or ideology. In the new materialist literature, this has come to be called – perhaps unfairly - *debunking* (Latour, 2004; Massumi, 2002). I begin below with a brief sketch of some key features of new materialist theories, before exploring further the problematic of critique. Finally I consider some of the implications for critical qualitative inquiry.

### **The material turn**

Materially-informed work is going on under a variety of names: material feminism, new materialism, new empiricism, posthuman studies, actor network theory, affect theory, process philosophy, the ontological turn. It has been mobilised by theorists such as Karen Barad (2007), Gilles Deleuze (2004), Patricia Clough (2009), Donna Haraway (2007), Myra Hird (2009), Brian Massumi (2002), Rosi Braidotti (2013), Vicki Kirby (2011), Bruno Latour (2004), Jane Bennett (2010) and Isabelle Stengers (2011).<sup>2</sup> All of these scholars, in their different ways, insist on the significance of matter in social and cultural practices. There are also connections with indigenous philosophies, which are vitally attuned to matter. In such philosophies, ways of knowing and being rest on a fundamental acknowledgement of the

agency of place and land, and relationality across human and non-human entities (Jones & Hoskins, 2013; Turk, 2014)<sup>3</sup>.

Feminist thought is central for many contemporary materialist scholars, as reflected in the naming of such work as ‘material feminism’ (cf Alaimo and Hekman, 2008).<sup>4</sup> This work aligns with feminism in its attention to the demands of bodies, matter and desire. The debt to feminist thought is also reflected in the importance granted to place and relationality, and the conceptualisation of time as non-linear and emergent in the unfolding activity of the world. Above all perhaps, feminisms are significant for many materialist scholars because of the priority given to difference, entanglement and undecidability. Material feminisms, in common with other contemporary materialisms, prioritise difference over sameness, and challenge the distance, separation and categorical assurance that shores up the self-mastery of the oedipal (male) subject of humanism.<sup>5</sup>

As the diversity of terms indicates, contemporary materialisms draw on and revitalise a wide range of theories and ideas. Brian Massumi (2002: 4), noting the multiplicity of intellectual currents that flow through the work, takes issue with its characterisation as ‘new’, suggesting that we think instead in terms of ‘conceptual infusions’ into an emerging programme of materially-informed thought and practice. I do not propose to dwell further on the differences that distinguish these materially-oriented bodies of work, even though it is something of an act of violence to force them together.<sup>6</sup> Instead I want to focus briefly on some key ideas that run through much of this work, as these are germane to the question of what might constitute *materially-informed* critique in the social sciences. I will continue to use the somewhat problematic term ‘new materialisms’ for this disparate, yet disparately-connected body of work, except where it is important to distinguish particular theoretical positions.

Firstly, the new materialisms are united, of course, in their attention to materiality in social and cultural practices. For many theorists, the return to materiality is accompanied by an aggressive rejection of poststructuralist and social constructivist theories, on the grounds that these have privileged discourse, mind and culture, over matter, body and nature. All of the new materialisms, in their diverse ways, contest the notion of nature as merely the backdrop for the humanist adventures of culture, or of matter as ‘dumb’ and passive, until awakened to meaning by human interest and interpretation. Equally however, the new materialisms do not reify or fetishize matter. They have no interest in a ‘naïve realism’ (Massumi, 2002: 1) that posits matter as the solid bedrock that supports the flighty vicissitudes of culture.<sup>7</sup> Neither backdrop nor bedrock then, matter neither anchors nor submits to discourse: instead, matter and discourse are co-implicated in complex and shifting arrangements from which the world emerges. Deleuze called such transversal arrangements *assemblages*, in which ‘you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs’ (2007: 177). In Lecerle’s (2002: 54) succinct paraphrase, this is a ‘logic of unholy mixtures’.

Other theorists use different terms for similar ideas: material-discursive assemblage (Barad, 2007); mangle (Pickering, 1995); manifold (de Landa, 2002). In all cases, these are ‘flat’ ontologies of shifting (and ‘unholy’) relations among entities that are conventionally assumed to belong to different ‘levels’ or domains (cf de Landa, 2002; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). They are not organized according to what Derrida called the ‘violent hierarchy’ of binary opposition: nature/culture, discourse/matter, human/nonhuman, representation/reality, original/copy, abstract/concrete. Such binary logic, and the pairs of terms that it structures, have no place in new materialist ontologies, at least as ‘primitive’ or foundational entities.

The new materialisms fundamentally oppose this ‘bifurcation of nature’, in Alfred North Whitehead’s phrase (see Stengers, 2011): that is, the constitutional division of the world into mutually exclusive categories that fight a sterile battle for sovereignty – general over particular, mind over matter, science over philosophy etc. Or the reverse in each case. The bifurcation of nature overlooks and arrests the differential movements of forces and intensities out of which stable entities and categories form.

Already we can begin to see some problems for conventional notions of critique in qualitative inquiry. To the extent that being ‘critical’ is construed as a practice of unmasking, demystifying, exposing error or dispelling illusion, it presupposes a corrective technique authorized by the bifurcation of nature. That is, it assumes that the world is demarcated or divided into asymmetrically-valued categories: authentic and inauthentic, true and false, good and bad, and aspires to negate one side in the interests of a greater moral authority, or a smarter take on what’s really going on. In the new materialisms, as I explore further below, critique cannot be conceived as a matter of pulling the rug out from under common sense or false consciousness, or lifting the veil of ideology, neoliberal discourse or media spin.<sup>8</sup> We always start in the middle of things, where there is no transitivity: that is, no discrete actions which will separate and simultaneously lock together subjects and ‘their’ objects.

This means that, in the new materialisms, ‘we’ who might pull the rug or lift the veil do not pre-exist the entangled movements out of which subject and objects, agents and patients, emerge. Barad (2007: 33) calls this ‘intra-action’. Agency and consciousness are not human prerogatives in the intra-actions out of which they are produced. And matter is itself agentic and infused with intensity:

Materiality itself is always already a desiring dynamism, a reiterative reconfiguring, energized and energizing, enlivened and enlivening... feeling, desiring and experiencing are not singular characteristics or capacities of human consciousness. Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers (Barad, 2012a: 59).

The new materialisms do not appear to offer a place for critique therefore, to the extent that this assumes the exercise of decisive judgment and interpretive capability by exclusively human subjects. In order to pursue this question further, I now turn to some specific criticisms that have been made of the status of critique, from a broadly new materialist orientation.

### **The new materialist critique of critique**

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles  
(Latour, 2004: 246)

It is important to note that concerns over the status and practice of critique are not new, and have been expressed from theoretical positions other than those of the new materialisms. Judith Butler, in an essay on critique that draws on another by Foucault (1997), points out that Adorno himself, leading member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, expressed fears about *judgement* as the key critical act. She writes that, for Adorno, ‘the very operation of judgement serves to separate the critic from the social world at hand, a move which deratifies the results of its own operation, constituting a “withdrawal from praxis”’ (Butler, 2001). Rancière, writing specifically of critical art, was scathing about the critical project of demystification, with its aim to ‘build awareness of the mechanisms of domination’, noting

caustically that ‘the exploited rarely require an explanation of the laws of exploitation (2009: 45). Judgement and demystification assert the critic’s sovereignty over the dispossessed, and therefore reinstate the asymmetries of power-knowledge that they aim to overturn. Moreover, since judgement always calibrates its objects according to a pre-existing set of values or categories, it inevitably works to close down possibilities for change, since it brings that which is different back into the ambit of the same. For these commentators and others, what is needed is a form of criticism that suspends judgement, acknowledges that it is impossible or unethical to seek critical ‘distance’, and has no interest in ‘assigning points of error and illusion’ (Foucault, 1997: 60).

Such challenges to conventional notions of critique – coming from neo-marxist and poststructuralist perspectives - have points of convergence with the arguments of the new materialists. For instance there is a shared rejection of critical ‘distance’ in favour of some form of immanent critique, and a view of judgement as an enemy of change. However in contrast to the new materialists, the terms of the debate continue to be primarily epistemological rather than (also) ontological. The concern is still mainly with the conditions that determine what it is possible to know, and the implications for power and the constitution of subjectivity, rather than on the materiality of being and becoming in a more-than-human world.

Turning now more specifically to the materialist critique of critique (with due attention to the paradox involved in this phrase): one of the best-known attacks on conventional critique is that of Bruno Latour in his 2004 article ‘Why has critique run out of steam?’ Arguing from the perspective of actor network theory, Latour notes the repeated failure of critique in the ‘wars’ on big science and military aggression. In a swaggering polemic against the hubris of

academic critics, he compares them to ‘those mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything else has changed around them’ (2004: 225). He notes the impotence of rational argument and social constructivism to halt manifestly disastrous events and policies, or even to distinguish their own moral authority from that of cranks and conspiracy theorists. Latour mounts a particularly savage attack on the futile bravado of *explanation* as an attempt to produce change by telling others what is really going on. Latour’s censure of argument and explanation is significant, as these are of course key items in the methodological toolbox of critical qualitative research, and I will return to the implications of this below.

Conventional critical theory, according to Latour, ‘transforms the whole rest of the world into naïve believers, into fetishists, into hapless victims of domination’ (2004:243). It accomplishes this by alternating, sneakily, between accusing others of fetishism in their belief that things or symbols hold sway over them, and holding to a bedrock of certainty about the objective status and causal effectivity of their own cherished ‘objects’ – discourse, race, class, gender etc. Conventional critique, Latour argues, fails to understand that scientific objects can never be fully accounted for by social explanations, and is incapable of engaging with the complexity of things as ‘matters of concern’ rather than as crude matters of fact. Latour argues that things are ‘gatherings’ of multifarious human and non-human entities that come together as matters of concern. Latour’s ‘gathering’ is yet another figure for the ‘flattened’, relational, material-discursive organisation of the assemblage, mangle etc, discussed above. Taking off from this notion of the gathering, Latour proposes that critique should be productive, collaborative and careful:

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means that it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. (2004: 246)

It is perhaps unfortunate that Latour seems himself to be unable to evade the ‘debunking’ rhetorical gesture that he condemns. He attempts to ward off such a criticism, claiming that his detractors ignore the respect that he has always tried to engender for the objects of science, religion, art, etc, and are capable of hearing only destructive ‘snapping of the (critical) wolf’s teeth’ (232). However it has to be acknowledged that, in deploying irony as his counter-critical weapon of choice, he opts for a device that pre-eminently establishes a gap – in other words, a bifurcation - between things as they appear and things as they putatively are. Irony creates a cognoscenti of discerning readers who are elevated by the pleasure of knowing more about what is going on than the ‘characters’ in the action – here, the preponderance of naïvely believing conventional critics.<sup>9</sup>

For Deleuze, irony is the ‘technique of the ascent’ (2004: 154), of rising above the movements and differences of the world in order to establish a stable, higher ground of meaning and authority. Always associated with the ‘eminence’ of the ‘voice from high above’ (ie self, God etc) (284), irony tends toward closure, rather than opening onto the new. Clare Colebrook summarises the problem:

Irony, according to Deleuze, is a tendency in thinking, a tendency to not rest with this world in all its flux of differences. A tendency to posit some ultimate point of view beyond difference. The problem with irony, from Deleuze's point of view, is its inability to admit what is beyond its point of view (2004: 135)

Irony, as a creator of hierarchies and bifurcations (between what is said and what is meant; naïve and smart believers etc) is not attuned to the mobile, flat ontologies of materialism. Deleuze prefers humor, whose antic non-sense drags the pretensions of meaning back toward its lodging in the profane noises and rumblings of the body. The Deleuzian critique of irony reminds us that, for materialist thought, language is itself a problem. Always moving up and away from matter towards ideas, concepts, propositions and categories, and forgetful of its own materiality, language enacts the static hierarchical logic of representation, with implications for qualitative research practices such as interpretation and analysis (cf MacLure, 2013). I return to these below.

For many of the new materialisms, as already noted, one of the main problems with critique is that it *arrests* things – stitches them up, pins them down or closes them down, in the rage to expose error and the rush to pronounce judgement. Brian Massumi, making this point, describes critique as '*almost a sadistic enterprise*' (nd; my emphasis) in the way in which it divides, categorises, objectifies and judges. He identifies a perpetual 'moralising undertone to critique' that disconnects it from other aspects of experience. It is this magisterial stance, above and outside the events on which it pronounces, that ensures that critique is always 'at a remove' from the flux of affairs, where something 'barely perceptible' might be happening. 'Judgemental reasoning', says Massumi (nd), is 'an extremely weak form of thought, precisely because it is so sure of itself'.

Deleuze called this the dogmatic image of thought, which works for closure of difference through the exercise of common sense and good sense, rendering everything categorisable and recognisable. And of course available for judgement. Goodchild, writing of the dogmatic image of thought in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, notes, further, that this image is one of thought as *representation*:

the theorist speaks on behalf of a common sense, a generalisation of the perspective of a specific epoch, culture or minority. It relies on a model of thought as recognition, or the good sense whereby thought naturally approaches the true when a perspective identifies its objects, senses and values (2004: 171).

For Deleuze representational thought is static or ‘sedentary’. It is the enemy of difference, movement, change and the emergence of the new. Pure difference, ‘difference in itself’ in Deleuze’s words, is ‘crucified’ by representation – trussed up and pinned in place by its ‘quadripartite fetters, under which only that which is identical, similar, analogous, or opposed can be considered difference’ (1994: 174).

The problem of critique which claims to represent truth or morality by negating what has gone before is, as Goodchild points out, that it ‘*adds nothing*’ (172, my emphasis). It does not create. Deleuze and Guattari, in *What is Philosophy* are scathing about such critique: ‘those who criticise without creating are the plague of philosophy... inspired by resentment’ (28-9).

The crux of the materialist critique of critique is, then, in the words of Karen Barad, that it ‘closes down rather than opens up what is to come’ (2012b: 15). Or, in the words of Isabelle Stengers (2011: 19), nothing ‘*important*’ happens. Stengers is here taking the concept of ‘importance’ from Alfred North Whitehead, an early refuser of critique. So long as critique is founded on a ‘war of disqualification’, says Massumi referencing Stengers, the result will be a non-event: at best “a reversal of fortunes within a pre-given positional structure” (2010: 339).

Critique as conventionally conceived, then, is often a matter of looking backwards in order to move forwards; of stopping things with the hope of somehow starting something else up. But this is a move that can never really happen, since the movements of difference have already been stopped in their tracks. This does not mean however that debunking and demystification have no place within a new materialist approach. Brian Massumi writes, ‘It is not that critique is wrong... rather it is a question of *dosage*. It is simply that when you are busy critiquing you are less busy augmenting’. In what could be called a motto for new empiricist or new materialist critique, Massumi puts it thus: ‘Foster or Debunk. It’s a strategic question’ (2002: 12,14).

### **Implications for qualitative inquiry**

The materialist critique of critique cautions us to examine the practices that continue to underpin qualitative inquiry. It would no longer allow us to work under the auspices of common sense wielded responsibly by autonomous human subjects – in other words, by well-trained qualitative researchers. We would no longer be able to appeal to a fundamentally good sense guiding wise judgement in the arbitration of categories and hierarchies, and the detection of error. Such wise judgements rely on the logic of representation, described above,

in which difference is apprehended in terms simple relations of identity, similarity, analogy and opposition, even though this might not be obvious at first glance. These judgements underpin the analytic enterprise as conceived in many methods textbooks, as well as our everyday habits as researchers.

Consider how many times we think and act according to the logic of representation in relation to data (whether this consists of interview transcripts, field observations, documents or other stuff):

this is like that (so we will call it a theme)

this is not like that

that is an example of this

this belongs under that code

this is a metaphor for that

this is a sub-category

this interviewee is not saying what she really thinks

this really means that

When we do this – and we, I, do it all the time - we are binding difference into Deleuze's four 'fetters' of representation on which the judgemental reason of critique relies.

As already discussed, and as this list implies we would also need to rethink our practices of *interpretation* and *explanation*, where these involve identifying 'what is really going on', what something 'really means', or uncovering something more significant (eg more abstract; more general) beneath or above the surface messiness of talk or action. Roland Barthes

asserted that Western textual practice is an authoritarian project that ‘moistens everything with meaning’ (1977: 10; cf MacLure, 2013). As well as creating ‘naïve believers’, critical explanation glues difference, chance and alterity in place, and unavoidably misses that which exceeds our capacities to represent. Yet, as Massumi (nd) says, that is where the “seeds of change’ lie.

The new materialist critique of critique also urges new relations with qualitative inquiry’s old antagonist – that is, science. As Alaimo and Heckman (2008) note, the focus on discourse within the linguistic turn, which asserted that bodies are discursively produced, and the emphasis on the social rather than the biological, made it difficult for feminisms to engage productively with science and medicine in innovative ways. The only path available, they write, was ‘the well-worn path of critique’. The work of scholars such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Myra Hird, Ann-Marie Mol, Vicki Kirby and Elizabeth Wilson, have pushed material feminist work beyond the strictures of conventional critique to address the complex entanglements of science and the social – as for instance in Barad’s (2007) essay on the relationship of materiality and discourse in ultrasound technology. In the wake of the materialist turn, the boundaries between science and the social are drastically altered, if not erased, and there seems little point in prolonging the agonistic, diversionary and sterile critiques of science that have exhausted qualitative methodology for over a decade. Indeed the (re)turn to materiality ultimately demands the erosion of all disciplinary and paradigmatic boundaries, in favour of a posthuman ‘transversality’ that attends to “the multiplicity of modes that travel natureculture as the perpetual flow it always already has been” (Van der Tuin & Dolphijn, 2010: 169; cf also Braidotti, 2013). Though this is not a question to pursue here, the new materialisms would ultimately challenge the very status and autonomy of

‘qualitative’ research, as a set of practices that stand in opposition to others categorised as quantitative’.<sup>10</sup>

### **An ‘event-ful, affirmative critique’**

What kind of critique, then, do we need? No longer entitled to stand outside, and over, its objects, critique must be *immanent* – caught up with the movements and process in which it is entangled. It must be transversal: able to follow, or sense, the multifarious connections and intensities that coalesce in events, rather than sniping from its particular dugout at other disciplines and paradigms. It must be oriented towards eventualities that cannot be foreseen, and where the usual privileges of human agency, and the linearity of cause and effect are not in play.

Barad proposes the practice of ‘diffraction’ in place of critique, invoking the interference patterns of quantum field theory. Diffraction involves looking for ‘patterns of differences that make a difference’ by ‘reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details’. Barad describes diffractive readings as ‘inventive provocations [that] are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements’ (2012a: 49-50). Though we might think of ‘reading’ in conventional terms as a matter of deciphering something that is already ‘there’, Barad emphasises that diffractive reading is ‘suggestive, creative and visionary’ (50). In other words, it envisages the production of something new in the world.

Massumi, after Deleuze, writes that critique must be *event-ful*. Deleuze, as Massumi notes, thought of critique as ‘clinical practice’ – a ‘diagnostic art’ of ‘modulating’ from within the

situation, sensing and following the multiple unfolding of events (Massumi, 2010: 338). This is what Massumi has in mind by ‘modulation’, and it is worth quoting at length:

The modulation can be augmenting (taking a certain tendency to the limit), diverting (deflecting it into a different tendency), transmutational (interacting with other tendencies in a way that invents a whole new direction as a kind of surplus-value of interaction) – or, it can lead to a clash that stops the process. And furtherance, convergence, becoming or blockage that happens, actually happens: *it's an event*. This kind of event-ful, affirmative critique is very different from criticism, or ... negative critique (338).

Event-ful, affirmative critique would first involve becoming aware of the judgemental reason that often resides in our theories and mundane research practices. For instance, to take an example from my own research field of early childhood education, this would involve becoming aware of, in order to mitigate, the negative critique that has animated much discursively-driven critical inquiry – my own being no exception. This has been a research programme that has repeatedly found teachers and children to be cultural dopes and dupes (ie naïve believers) of the big Discourses – of psychology, education, neoliberalism etc. While it can scarcely be denied that these discourses are implicated in shaping children’s identities and mis-shaping their potential, analyses that attend only to the discursive, without considering the ways in which discourse mingles with matter, affect and virtuality, can never really grasp how discourse ‘forms’ subjects. How then does one critique ‘from the middle’, acknowledging the force of discourse, but attempting, in affirmative mode, to foster as well as debunk?

These questions are increasingly being asked, and tentatively answered, in empirical research studies. Rather than posing big critical questions about how, for instance, discursive regimes or political formations lead schools to fail children and pervert their own good intentions, such research starts from the question of how one might, to use Massumi's term, *augment* schools' capacity to care for and educate children. For many researchers this involves throwing themselves creatively and experimentally into material and pedagogical practices alongside children and adults. Or else trying to unhook themselves from the 'fetters' of representation in order to glimpse other realities and futures.<sup>11</sup>

At the risk of romanticising research, materialist critique can be thought of as an 'adventure' that demands both care and recklessness. It involves, on the one hand, dogged and respectful attention to the 'object' of analysis; and on the other, a loss of ontological security as a result of refusing to allow oneself to be carried to a place of safety by dogmatic thinking or the comforts of methodology. The 'middle' can be a depthless and directionless (non)place where subjects and objects no longer behave themselves or take up the places allotted to them by the rules of theory, methodology, or institutional discourses. Where the words in the lexicon of qualitative research – data, interpretation, explanation, analysis, 'writing up', and of course *critique* – detach themselves from common sense and convention and start to mean something else; or even nothing. It is not surprising that Deleuze, in *Logic of Sense* (2004) turned to Lewis Carroll and Alice's Adventures for resources to think with.

One example of the risks and rewards of embarking on such an adventure can be found in Rachel Holmes' (2014) return to a small piece of video 'data' that has haunted her, where a group of small boys chase a girl in the playground game of 'Catch a girl, kiss a girl'.

Attempting to counter the judgemental reason and the anthropocentrism of research, Holmes

embarks on a sustained attempt to think this event, which she calls ‘Dogfight’, outside of the humanist conventions of the knowledgeable researcher, compliant ‘data’, theoretical authority, and the discourses of gender and developmental psychology. Mobilising the powers of horror, Holmes strings ‘the data’, and herself out in nonlinear time and uncanny spaces, where language, art, theory, discourse, flesh, fibre and affect lick, touch, consume and recoil, reaching towards a synesthetic, pre-conscious, posthuman relationality that Holmes calls an ‘interspecies kiss’. There is an ethics in this ‘adventure’ that exceeds capture by representation, while calling attention to the monstrous entities that writhe inside the placating or judgemental stories of children that researchers, teachers and other adults tell themselves. Holmes’ work constitutes, I suggest, an instance of ‘clinical practice’.

Critique as clinical practice, in aiming to ‘modulate’ the flows of affect and discourse to produce new events, offers insights into how to handle the ontological anxiety of research in the posthuman melée, as Holmes calls it, without lapsing back into masterful notions of the intentional human agent who will turn the whole tanker round. It will be a matter of ‘tweaking’, experimenting with ‘doses’, and cautiously seeing where we arrive next. Critics, attempting to produce event-ful critique, cannot know in advance where they are going.

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## 1 Notes

Foucault does in fact attempt a working definition of critique in terms of governmentality, viz. ‘the art of not being governed *quite so much*’ (1997: 45, italics added). The final clause, italicised here, is important, as it frees the definition from being a universalising statement.

2 This is a small selection from a list that could be much longer. I have focused on theorists whose work has to date had a particular resonance for social science research.

3 As Tuck (2014) asserts however, indigenous scholarship is seldom acknowledged in new materialist writing. Indigenous work would therefore contest the legitimacy of claims to be ‘new’.

4 For example, the work of Barad, Hird, Braidotti, Kirby and Haraway: see references.

5 It is important to note however that the relation of feminist thought to new materialism continues to be a site of contestation: see Ahmed (2008), and a response by Van der Tuin (2008).

6 Key collections which give a flavor of the range of approaches include: Dolphijn & Van der Tuin (2008); Alaimo and Hekman (2008); Gregg & Seigworth (2010); Barrett & Bolt (2012); Coole & Frost (2010).

7 Sara Ahmed (2008) however argues that there are covert tendencies towards reifying or fetishizing matter in the new materialisms. See also Hal Foster’s (2012) acerbic dismissal of new materialist and other ‘post-critical’ challenges to the notion of critique.

8 My reference to rugs here echoes Latour: ‘The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather’ (2004: 246). I return to Latour’s position below.

9 In the interests of full disclosure, I should record that I have been a promiscuous practitioner of irony myself. This was perhaps given its most free rein in a critique of ‘systematic review’ in educational research, whose title set the tone for the rest of the article: “‘Clarity bordering on stupidity’: where’s the quality in systematic review?” (MacLure, 2005).

10 ‘Mixed methods’ might seem to offer a positive alternative. However much of this work assumes the prior existence, prior to rapprochement, of separate paradigms or approaches (cf Torrance, 2012).

11 These would include, restricting ourselves to a selection of studies in early childhood: Olsson (2010); Renold (2013); Lenz Taguchi (2010); Jones (2013); Taylor et al (2012).