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"Something comes through or it doesn't": intensive reading in post-qualitative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The article describes practices of "intensive reading" for post-qualitative inquiry, drawing on the work of Deleuze, with some examples from the author's own research. To read intensively is to experience the forward propulsion toward something not-yet-present. That forward momentum, and the fragmented path that it carves through the library, has the potential, in the words of Stengers, to summon something "that has no stable illustration in this world."

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> Where does my desire pass among these thousand cracks, these thousand bones?
>
> (Deleuze,1996)

Introduction: intensive reading

The library is lifeless until we begin to trace a path through it. As Aguirre (2002) points out, even a library of all possible books, such as Borges' Library of Babel, actually yields nothing until a selection is made, according to our interests. The path carved by reading establishes a territory. It animates thought through the connections that it affords: with other texts, with inchoate ideas, with matter, with memories. That is how reading has always seemed to work for me at any rate, in the research projects with which I have been involved. I give some examples below. I use "the library" throughout to refer to the uncharted totality of readable matter that is in principle available to a reader, albeit inertly until activated by interest and desire. This would include articles, reports and blogs as well as books, and indeed all manner of written genres and texts.

To read in this mode is to construct an assemblage. After Deleuze and Guattari (1987), I understand an assemblage as an arrangement (*agencement)* of heterogeneous elements formed by acting on material, semiotic and social flows. Assemblages flout the conventional "tripartite division" between reality, representation and subjectivity, making unlikely connections across these orders. In other words, assemblages bring disparate things into unpredictable relation—things that would have nothing to do with one another within the orderly hierarchies of representation, where things consort according to their similarities, rather than their differences. Assemblages are thus constructions (Buchanan, 2015), through which desire flows. Indeed that is what desire is, according to Deleuze: a matter of constructing an assemblage or a territory. He

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gives an example from an exchange between Jung and Freud, in which Jung related a dream of walking through an ossuary. While Freud insistently focuses on what a single bone would "mean" within the Oedipal logic of analysis, Jung insists on the significance of the ossuary as a multiplicity, through which desire flows. The real question, Deleuze asserts, is this: *"Where does my desire pass among these thousand cracks, these thousand bones?"* (Deleuze, 1996; emphasis added).

The path that is carved through the library in reading for research can be understood, I think, in similar terms: as a passage among a thousand possible cracks, a thousand books. Each person's passage, and the assemblage that is formed, will be distinct, since each embarks from the midst of some existing assemblage. Each path is a necessary path: only *this* route, and *these* connections will have transpired. But we cannot entirely predict or control the path, and we never simply choose it: as I discuss further below, the Deleuzian adventure of reading, like that of thinking, relies on the conjoint operation of necessity and *chance* if it is to produce something new.

Deleuze (1995) contrasts reading as, and from within, an assemblage with the more conventional mode of reading that treats the book as a box, to be mined for its contents or meaning. In this latter mode one reads, and *then* casts around for ways of connecting the fruits of this reading to a world that seems to lie outside. Deleuze proposes another mode of reading in which the book is a little cog or "non-signifying machine" in a much more intricate extra-textual machinery. Reading in this mode does not mirror or indirectly represent an external reality but seeks direct contact with the unrepresentable "Outside". What matters is not what the book means, but whether and how it *works*. "[S]omething comes through or it doesn't. There's nothing to explain, nothing to understand, nothing to interpret. It's like plugging in to an electric circuit" (p. 8).[1]

Deleuze calls this mode of reading *intensive*. He goes on to characterise it in these terms:

> This intensive way of reading, in contact with what's outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things, absolutely anything… is reading with love. (Deleuze, 1995, pp. 8–9)

To read intensively is, by this account, to enter a turbulence of flows. It is immanent (undertaken in the midst of events) and experimental. It also involves a certain *violence*: the book must be torn to pieces before it can be pressed into unholy alliance with the heterogeneous extra-textual components that co-compose the assemblage. Lecercle (2010) calls it "strong reading", which does not aim to produce an interpretation, but is rather "a form of interference, an intervention, a forcing of the text" (p. 61). A certain violence is necessary, Deleuze has frequently argued (e.g. 2000), to force us to *think*. An affective shock is needed to jolt thought out of the banal structures of common-sense and allow it to participate in new possibilities of life.

Deleuze (1995) concludes the quoted sentence above, perhaps surprisingly, with the pronouncement that intensive reading is nonetheless "reading with love" (p. 9). Intensive reading is in thrall to the text that it also assails, producing a "monstrous" child that nevertheless remains the offspring of the original author (p. 6).[2] Intensive reading is not therefore a matter of unconstrained or unmotivated "play" with a text, allowing it to mean whatever one chooses. It is inextricably entangled in the text itself, to allow that which cannot be directly represented to "come through" in the affective encounter of reading.

Opening the path through the library

The description above of reading as experimentation "*in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books*" holds a special appeal for the empirical social researcher who is inescapably caught up in the midst of events—always looking, and hoping, for something "in" a text that might spark new connections to its outside, and effect a small rearrangement of the

commonplace propositions that regulate the field. This notion of reading "in the midst" runs contrary to the status commonly accorded to reading in conventional empirical or ethnographic research. As the editors of this special issue note, "the literature" is supposed to be critically read and reviewed "first," in advance of the foray into the field. The rationale given for such prefatory reading is that it will help researchers mark out the boundaries of that field, sharpen their focus on what will count as significant or relevant (for the purposes of the study), and provide conceptual or substantive resources to guide the onward conduct of the research. Although the front-loading of reading in this way might seem to devalue its importance as part of the research proper, in another sense it grants it a highly significant status. Front-loaded reading sets parameters for the inquiry to come. It is both proscriptive and prescriptive, setting the path to be followed and eliminating other possible adventures.

I have no real objection to this mode of reading—let us call it "professional" reading, to distinguish it from intensive reading—as long as it does not pre-empt other ways of reading as part of the research process. It is important that researchers begin by locating their inquiry in the debates and theoretical positions that run through a particular substantive research area and trying to document the ideas and knowledge claims that seem to coalesce, however imprecisely, into a field. It would be impertinent to step into that field in wilful ignorance of what had previously been argued.

But in fact "professional" reading is no less a matter of reading "in the midst" than is intensive reading. Even at the very outset of a research project, reading is inescapably done from the middle, trailing its ties to past and current reading and doings, putting out feelers toward what the inquiry might become. Reading always holds the promise, I suggest, of becoming intensive rather than merely documentary. When this happens, reading seems to wander, or jump clear of its own path. Something unexpected "comes through", offering unanticipated connections and moving thought in new directions.

This sense of new connections opening up often develops, in my experience, as a kind of slow burn or barely perceptible registering of a shift in intensities, though it may culminate in something like a lightning strike. An example from my early career as a researcher, decades ago, still resonates. As a linguist researching language in the classroom I wandered from reading linguistic analyses of the structure of classroom talk into the "new sociology of education." This was a heady, if somewhat uneasy mixture of Marxist analysis, ethnography and Schutzian phenomenology (see Woods & Hammersley, 1977). Its impact on this naïve scholar was profound (or feels so in retrospect). It showed how schooling is not only connected to class structures, but how these connections are coded right into the structure of classroom talk. It does not matter, for my purposes here, whether I have moved away from the theories underpinning these ideas; nor that the always-fragile theoretical coherence of the new sociology of education eventually fragmented amid theoretical and substantive critiques. What "came through" in the reading of it not only sent repercussions throughout the whole conceptual edifice that had contained my thinking, but also fundamentally changed the nature of the research itself. It allowed me to think the relationships between schooling, children, knowledge, language and power in a new way, and as a result to do research differently. Of course the reading was itself part of an assemblage of heterogeneous elements, both textual and extra-textual. It emerged within a tangle of events, memories, affects and experiences. Most of these are no longer available to conscious scrutiny, and probably never were. But they may have included personal experiences of linguistic prejudice as a student/novice academic whose working-class accent had attracted attention and ridicule. The reading also undoubtedly connected with my participation in Marxist groups, and the company of leftist colleagues and friends. It probably resonated with wider events such as the emergence in England of the far-right National Front and the resistance of groups such as the Anti-Nazi League, of which I was a member.[3] It may even have had something to do with a childhood imbued with Scottish iconoclasm. The reading, in other words, both emerged from, and connected to allegiances, desires and events which, to requote Deleuze (1995, p. 8), had "nothing to do with books."

The epistemic and ontological "violence" wrought by this encounter opened one particular path through the library that has continued to ramify over many years, concerning the socio-political and ontological status of language and its relevance for research. At its most powerful, an experience such as this meets Claire Colebrook's (2011) description of reading, not as recognition but rather, "an encounter with a power *not* already our own that might open new images of thought" (pp. 53–54).

As I have suggested above, there is an element both of chance and necessity involved in the encounter with a text that forces us to think and thereby sets something in motion. Within an immanent ontology, the reader is part of the assemblage that is forming: we cannot decide in advance where the path is going to lead and what kind of territory it is going to establish through its multifarious connections. The book that we choose also in a sense chooses us. In his reading of Proust, Deleuze (2000) referred to this dynamic as "the adventure of the involuntary" (p. 62; see also MacLure, 2024). The provocation to thought must necessarily come from somewhere "outside" our own volition or subjective choosing. It appeals to something impersonal, unwilled and prior to consciousness.

It helps to read "outside" in a quite literal sense also. In common with other contributors to this volume, I have often turned to disciplines outside of my own specialist areas in search of concepts or ethics that might disturb the humanist assumptions that regulate prevailing views of children and education. This move is in keeping with a post- or transdisciplinary turn in posthuman theorising (Braidotti, 2019), in which academic reading has overflowed its containment within the disciplinary silos of humanist scholarship and assumed a more creative and dynamic role in the generation of new possibilities for thought and action. The Deleuze-Guattarian mode of intensive reading that I elaborate in this article is only one of an array of reinvigorated practices that grant reading the power not only to recapitulate what is already known, but to tangle with matter and to intervene in the generation of new realities. "Diffractive reading", for example, draws on Karen Barad's (2007) concept of diffraction to bring texts into productive interference with one another to create new patterns of knowledge across the boundaries of matter and discourse (e.g. Murris & Bozalek, 2019). Speculative fiction has also provided resources for the theorising of posthuman subjectivities and modes of being (e.g. de Freitas & Truman, 2021).

The wonder of reading: an example

Some years ago now I strayed into the library of baroque art and history. A key moment was an encounter with baroque art, which subsequently opened a new reading assemblage. A chance visit to an exhibition of seventeenth century Netherlandish still lifes brought me face to face with *trompe l'oeil* paintings: works that represent their objects so realistically that they induce a tiny ontological panic in the viewer—a slight glitch in the confidence of the humanist subject accustomed to mastering the world from an external viewpoint and knowing the difference between essence and appearance (Bryson, 1990). I felt that momentary ontological frisson; and more than this, I sensed that it would connect—in ways that were yet to unfold—with the methodological issues that I was struggling with at the time. These issues included the "crisis of representation," immanent ontologies, and the implications for early childhood research.

This art encounter sparked an explosion of reading: about the baroque in art and art history (Bal, 1999; Bryson 1990), and the reappearance of the baroque in continental philosophy and cultural theory (Deleuze, 1992; Lambert, 2004). The spark of the unexpected encounter with the baroque paintings felt as if it fed directly into "the library," lighting up a path or paths among books that I had no idea would interest me, but felt as if they were somehow waiting for me. It also prompted forays into other art movements and periods where relation between reality and representation is interrogated: ancient Roman frescoes, Dada and surrealism.

Parts of this adventure appear in an article entitled "The bone in the throat: some uncertain thoughts on baroque method" (MacLure, 2006).[4] The article found methodological resources for

qualitative inquiry in the disorienting techniques of baroque art. Motifs such as the mirror, the fold, the labyrinth, and the trompe l'oeil worked to decentre the subject and render the contours of the world radically uncertain. Linear time and space were displaced through abrupt shifts of scale and focus. The article also (re)discovered the power of affect through baroque techniques for inducing disconcerting states in the reader/spectator: fascination, vertigo, and above all, *wonder*.

Wonder turned out to be a very productive affect/concept in the attempt to envision an immanent methodology. Wonder inhabits thresholds—between unknowing and knowing, thinking and feeling (Lugli, 1986). It destabilises the opposition between subject and object, inside and outside, by seeming to inhabit both. It short-circuits the mechanisms of choice and the exercise of will, since to experience wonder feels both like choosing and being chosen. The article alighted on cabinets of curiosities or *wunderkammern*, collections of objects and marvels assembled by princes, merchants, apothecaries and colonial adventurers. The cabinets reflected both the attempt to categorise and master the world, and the uncanny thrill/melancholy induced by curios and monstrosities that evaded such capture. Through their secrets, illusions and miniaturization of the world, the cabinets induced a multi-sensory thrill of *intensification*.

Cabinets of curiosities are themselves assemblages, congregations of items brought together via "a syntax of unanticipated associations" (Lugli, 1986). The article ended with an attempt to fashion a research assemblage as a kind of cabinet of curiosities. This effort emerged from a research project on the problematics of touch between adults and children. Entitled "The Gothic Child," the cabinet represented an attempt to escape the weary oscillation between entrenched positions that tends to frame this topic in "good/bad" terms—touch is either seen as an essential component of healthy adult-child relationality, or as a site of danger for children and/or adults. The cabinet was entitled "The Gothic Child" and displayed extracts from academic texts and Henry James' "Turn of the Screw" mixed with interview data, surrealist and baroque art images, a Simpsons cartoon and editorial comment (MacLure, 2006, pp. 738–739).

The "Gothic Child" assemblage was an attempt to show how reading always meddles and muddles with fieldwork, writing, thinking, seeing, feeling. Always in the midst. It was an attempt to convey the intensities that inhabit the virtual plane, as the unaccountable residue of the forces required and released in the leap across difference (Deleuze, 1994). Elements in the assemblage are connected despite and because of their *in*commensurability. It might seem strange to view the cabinet of curiosities, with its immobile contents arranged in drawers or shelves, as a dynamic assemblage. But the "paths" among and beyond these objects are intensive: the cabinets are repositories of *potential* movement, to be released in the encounter with their discordant contents. In his ABC primer Deleuze, referring to travel, prioritises intensive over extensive movement.

> I feel no need to move. All the intensities that I have are immobile intensities. Intensities distribute themselves in space or in other systems that aren't necessarily in exterior spaces. I can assure you that when I read a book that I admire, that I find beautiful, or when I hear music that I consider beautiful, I really get the feeling of passing into such states. (Deleuze, 1996)

Still, I am not sure how successful "The Gothic Child" was as a working "machine." It was intended to be used as a pedagogic device as well as a methodological experiment. Students and researchers were invited to add text or image to the cabinet—to plug it into their own concerns and *vice versa*. That seemed to work reasonably well, in generating some interesting discussions around touch and children. But by the time the "items" in the textual cabinet had been arranged on the journal page, the felt sense of vertigo and weird connections had dissipated somewhat, and the juxtapositions looked somewhat clunky on the printed page. It was impossible to invoke, simply by arranging textual and visual items on a page, the

unrepresentable, and sometimes unbearable, intensities generated by reading in the midst of the research assemblage.

The jump

For me at least, there comes a point in the research, and in the writing of it, where the reading, writing, thinking and seeing do not really feel like distinct activities or modes. They connect and bounce off one another in ways that seem indifferent to their inherent differences. That is, of course, the nature of the assemblage. At those points in the research process the reading does not really know where it is going, although it always feels as if it is going somewhere. So although I have referred copiously in this article to the "path" through the library, the path is neither linear nor continuous, but is rather composed of those transversal, intensive *jumps* across difference that are characteristic of immanent thought (Deleuze, 2000). Such jumps, Isabelle Stengers (2014) notes, demand a certain trust in the jumper—a faith that some kind of ground will rise up to meet one's feet. But she also asserts that a landing is guaranteed since one never entirely leaves the ground in the first place. Reading Whitehead alongside Deleuze, Stengers summarises what both philosophers knew:

> that the jump is not only toward, that it cannot be dissociated from the ground it leaves. You never trust in general and you never jump in general. Any jump is situated, and situatedness here is not limitation. If a jump is always situated, it is because its aim is not to escape the ground in order to get access to a higher realm. The jump, connecting this ground, always this ground, with what it was alien to, has the necessity of a response. In other words, the ground must have been given the power to make itself felt as calling for new dimensions. (2014, p. 203)

To read or think intensively, or in Stengers' vocabulary, speculatively, is to make that jump that arrives in alien terrain but also never loses touch with the ground from which it takes off. Like Deleuze, Stengers notes that there is a necessary chance or hazard involved in the transversal leap. "It is only when no habit veils the risk of failure that we feel the jump to be a 'speculative' one, dramatizing that it speculates about a possibility that has no stable illustration in the world" (p. 203).

How, then, to describe what happens in intensive reading of a book? Where and how does the transversal leap happen? In my experience, it begins as a dimly sensed incipience or a kind of "glow" (see MacLure, 2013). A slight fizz or buzz seems to start up as the apprehension of potential connections begins to take hold and grow in intensity. This sensation has many of the liminal characteristics of wonder outlined above: it is a kind of *thinking-feeling*—both embodied and abstract, affective and cognitive; and it seems to be located both "inside" me and in some uncharted outside. These sensations may be registrations of the "immobile intensities" described by Deleuze, above, that "distribute themselves in space or in other systems that aren't necessarily in exterior spaces".

An *event* of reading seems to be taking place, according to the Deleuzian conceptualisation of the event (Deleuze, 2004). Relations among things and concepts shift and realign, not "in" the book, or any determinate place, but on a virtual plane where new possibilities of connection are enabled. Let me revisit one final research example first outlined in MacLure et al. (2010), which began with a recurring incident in a classroom of 5-year-olds, where a small girl refused to say her name when called upon by the teacher during the morning registration. This incident puzzled us. At some point in our working through of this puzzlement over what the incident might "mean," a connection seemed to emerge with Herman Melville's novella *Bartleby the Scrivener,* where the non-compliance of the eponymous clerk, always expressed as "I would prefer not to," disconcerted his employer and colleagues, rendered him homeless, and ended in his death from starvation in prison. Another connection was sparked by an encounter (or the memory of an encounter) with the video for a Radiohead song, *Just*, where a man lying in the street refuses

to explain himself to a succession of concerned individuals, ending with a zoom out which reveals all the participants lying immobile on the pavement. The "precursive jumps" from the data, to the reading, to the video do not capture something that the three instances hold in common. Nor do Bartleby or the video "explain" the child's recalcitrance. To recall the quotation from Stengers (2014) above, I would suggest that they connect "the ground" of the research problem with "that which it was alien to", and in so doing, gesture toward something unrepresentable concerning the violence that haunts the desire for explanation and the pedagogic relation.

Conclusion

Intensive reading is "errant." It involves a certain wandering off. But this errant reading is not like the dilettante meanderings of the flaneur(euse); and assemblage is not the tinkering of the bricoleur. To read is to experience the claim of *this* book at *this* point, and to feel its propulsion toward something not-yet-present. That forward momentum, and the fragmentary path it makes, is always connected to, or haunted by, an originary problem or question: for instance, what is there in this event, or piece of "data," or policy statement that cannot be put into words? Intensive reading, to recall Stengers' description of the speculative jump (2014), summons "a possibility"—something portentous and deeply connected to the original problem, that "has no stable illustration in this world" (p. 203). The task of reading is then to mobilise this possibility in order to make a creative intervention in thought or action. The point of the jump, as Stengers (p. 206) notes, is not to remain suspended above the field, but always "to land again with renewed attention and imaginative questions".

Notes

1. See Jackson and Mazzei (2012) for a discussion of "plugging one text into another" as a way of activating theory in qualitative research. St. Pierre (2004) refers to Deleuze's notion of intensive reading in her advice to students to ask whether a book "works" rather than what it means.
2. The association of reading with sexual violence here echoes an infamous pronouncement earlier in the same text, where Deleuze describes his mode of reading philosophy as "a sort of buggery or … immaculate conception. I saw myself as taking an author from behind and giving him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous" (p. 6). Lecercle (2010) attributes this "unfortunate metaphor" to the flippant informality of academic relations in "the heady 1970s" and the specific context of this text, in which Deleuze is mirroring the insubordinate tone of the student and "harsh critic" to whom he is responding (p. 44). Distancing himself from the problematic metaphor, Lecercle nonetheless embraces the "connotations of violence, intensity of affect and the paradox of the necessary impossibility or miracle" (p. 44) that are key to Deleuze's conceptualisation of reading.
3. Documents relating to the National Front and the anti-facist and anti-racist opposition groups can be found the Modern Records Centre, Warwick University: https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/studying/docs/racism/1970s/
4. The title is taken from Lambert (2004).

Disclosure statement

No competing interests were reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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