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Resistance, desistance: bad girls of post-qualitative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Who or what might be the illegitimate offspring of the “bad girl” as a figure for post-qualitative research? I consider the witch as a figure of posthuman efficacy and affective relationality, drawing on recent invocations of witchcraft and divination as theoretic practice. The witch might help post-qualitative methodology fulfil its own aspirations to get beyond language and the closures of coding by infusing method with divinatory practices. Examples of such practices in recent qualitative research studies are discussed. Divination does not seek to understand, but to transform from within, by sensing and redirecting the flows and intensities of that which is coming into existence. I also consider, more briefly, the witch’s near relation, the crone—a figure that feels more befitting to my own age and status. As an anomaly in the networks that sustain human conviviality, the crone’s uselessness might also have some disruptive force. I suggest that post-qualitative method might learn from the witch the arts of transformation and resistance, and from the crone the power of desistance and the passion of disinterest.

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To think is always to follow the witch’s flight”

[Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 41]

I desist and behold, the world fits in my weak hand.

[Clarice Lispector, 1988, *The Passion of G.H.*, p. 128]

Introduction

In this article I consider who or what might be the illegitimate offspring of the “bad girl” as a figure for post-qualitative research in the Anthropocene, where posthuman and process philosophies are belatedly looking for modes of thought, being and action to counter the human exceptionalism that has poisoned planetary futures. I consider the potential of the witch as a figure of posthuman efficacy and affective relationality, drawing on recent invocations of witchcraft and divination as theoretic practice (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Ramey, 2012; Semetsky, 2013; Stengers, 2008; see MacLure, 2021). The witch might help post-qualitative methodology fulfil its own aspirations to get beyond language and the closures of coding by infusing method with divinatory practices that deploy the pragmatic and speculative arts of “immanent discrimination”

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(Stengers, 2008, p. 39). The witch does not seek to understand, but to transform from within, by sensing and redirecting the flows and intensities of that which is coming into existence. Ultimately however, as befitting my age and status, I am also drawn to the abject power of the witch's near relation, the crone, whose sterile *inefficacy* might block the febrile churn of dogmatic critique, hyper-affectivity and noisy utterance that changes nothing. I suggest that post-qualitative method might learn from the crone the arts of desistance, and the passion of disinterest.

The article had its origins in a presentation to a symposium entitled "Bad Girl Theory and Practice: Qualitative Research in Post-Truth Times."¹ We symposium presenters had been invited by Patti Lather, the organiser, to reflect on the history and the contemporary significance of the bad girl researcher for feminist theory and practice. I will express some reservations about the academic bad girl in what follows, so it is important to start by asserting that the field of educational research is indebted to the insubordinate critique, the intransigent thought, and the political activism of generations of outstandingly good bad girls who are also exceedingly good scholars. I have felt their impact profoundly, not only from reading and being incurably infected by their writing, but also by experiencing the affective charge of their presence at conferences and events. I vividly recall the first of many such experiences: a packed conference symposium decades ago whose headline presenters were Patti herself and Deborah Britzman (who also took part in the more recent Bad Girl symposium). I remember the spiky hair, the doc martens, the biker jackets; women standing in every spare space, and sitting in the aisles, bodies almost piled on top of one another. It was powerful magic, and everyone there felt it. It would be impossible to over-state the difference their work, and their presence, has made.

Still, I am not sure the bad girl is entirely good for us. The bad girl identity can be powerful and transformative, but it can also be toxic or inefficacious, both as a conceptual persona for "Theory," and as an identity ascription for girls and grown women. The uncontrollable energy of the "wayward" girl (Hartman, 2018) has always been an offence to society, and incurring that label has always posed a real and lethal threat to young women. Girls' supposed badness is being aggressively disciplined these days in new (as well as old) ways: for example, when girls are incited on social media to be bad and are then punished and damaged for it.

The appellation of bad girl as a positive force or a powerful agent of change has always been more available to some groups of women than others, particularly white women who have had access to educational resources, and have been able to parlay their badness into intellectual prowess without incurring the extremes of punishment reserved for bad girls without power. The academic or literary bad girl (if I dared to include myself, it would be as a very meek version) has had the luxury of occupying the moral high ground while enjoying the frisson of transgression. That is a potent cocktail as long as it remains unstable, emergent and unpredictable: then it can be mobilised for change. But it becomes drained of its power, I think, if we try to claim it as an identity or achievement.

The same might be said of other claims to transgression or transformative dissidence that have animated qualitative inquiry over past decades. At various times qualitative researchers have professed to conduct *daredevil* research (Jipson & Paley, 1997); to embrace *promiscuity* as a boundary-breaking practice (Childers et al.); to inhabit the *ruins* of qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre & Pillow, 1999); to do *rebellious* research (Burnard, Mackinlay et al., 2022). I have embraced some of these labels myself, and I value the important work that has been done under these banners. But as Derrida (1989) once wrote: "Monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: 'here are our monsters', without immediately turning the monsters into pets" (p. 80). I feel kind of the same way about claiming the appellation of bad girl. The gesture of emphatic self-definition refutes that which is deconstructive, liminal or destabilising in the concept. I have always had an uneasy feeling that we may not be as bad as we think; that things are never as ruined as we hoped (MacLure, 2011); that the edge is *necessarily* somewhere other than we think it is. In

claiming the name of bad girl of theory, I worry that I might misrecognise the nature and amplitude of any shreds of efficacy I may have possessed.

This leads me to think further about the problematics of liminality and transgression, which were the super-powers of the bad girl in the post-structural feminist turn of the late twentieth century. The bad girl as a mischievous figure of post-structuralism appeared in various guises: cyborg, trickster, mestiza, madwoman in the attic.² “Woman” was thus repeatedly appropriated as conceptual cannon-fodder for poststructuralist theory, standing for the “untruth of truth” that evades representation (Derrida, 1979, p. 51). These are all *liminal* identities of in-between-ness, inhabiting and bothering boundaries: between human and inhuman, truth and falsehood, belonging and alienation, rational and irrational. It was precisely this indeterminacy that afforded such post-structural figures the capacity to unsettle humanist thought. The figure of the mischievous woman undermined the coherence of the human subject, challenged essentialist notions of truth, and ridiculed the humanist fantasy of subduing the world through the exercise of reason, in the putative interests of “progress.”

There was always a price to be paid, however, for the transgressive power that was found and released in liminality. Women’s liminality lent them an ambivalent status as the dark muses of post-structuralism. “Woman” became useful for Theory, standing for the void at the heart of representation, but women tended to disappear in their own right. Questions about women’s material interests, and the nature of women’s subjectivities were often displaced. Braidotti (1991, p. 133) was moved to ask: “When a whole culture in crisis ‘feminizes’ itself ... what space does it make for women’s language? What sort of ‘feminine’ is this?”

The witch

The trouble with transgression is that it presupposes going beyond *something that already exists*. The terms of the transgression are fixed in advance. The speculative or posthuman turn, by contrast, demands a leap into the unknown. I am currently thinking therefore about the potential of the *witch*, and of witchcraft as method, in a renewed bad girl theory and practice. It would be impossible here to distil the essence of witchcraft practices that extend back over millennia and stretch out across the globe (c.f. Grossman, 2019; Doyle, 2019; Rountree, 1997). As a working, albeit selective definition, I understand the work of the witch as seeking not simply to transgress but to *transform*, to give birth to the new through spiritual, material and incantatory experiments with the forces of the cosmos. The witch cultivates occult knowledge that lies outside the ambit of “official” State or patriarchal knowledge and can therefore be used against it, and uses this knowledge both to craft her cosmic experiments and to tend to the needs of the planet. She practices an ethics of relationality with all living and non-living things that acknowledges her affinities with matter and the more-than-human.

Although witches are not always female, there has been a particular alignment of witchcraft with feminist activism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The WITCH collective (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) triggered a wave of interventions in the late 1960s and 1970s when it hexed Wall Street and other institutions at the heart of capitalist, patriarchal power. The neopagan witch Starhawk incorporated ritual into a “Take Back the Night” march on Washington Square Park in 1978 and codified the practice of the modern ecofeminist witch in her influential book *The Spirit Dance* (1979/1999). Mass hexings have increased in the US and elsewhere in recent years in response to escalating assaults on women’s autonomy by a hostile state: for instance against the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, against the derisory sentence handed to the “Stanford rapist” Brock Turner, and against the elevation of accused sexual predator Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court (Doyle, 2019). The effectivity of this kind of magic must be evaluated on a longer or a more delicate scale, but as Pam Grossman (2019) observes, at the least it “amplifies the voice of resistance” (p. 224).

Witchcraft has also been re-energised by digital and social media, using the power of the virtual to create new communities and summon alternate realities. TikTok and Instagram have flourishing witchy communities organised by hashtags such as #witchtok and #witchesofinstagram, and prominent witches such as Pam Grossman, Starhawk, Alice Tuck and many more maintain blogs and podcasts, and run online courses.³

How might witchcraft resonate with the speculative philosophies that inform postqualitative inquiry? Both, for a start, involve a kind of “divination” (see further, MacLure, 2021)—practices of sensing and modulating the forces that one is also caught up composed by. Both deploy occult or, in Deleuzian terms, “minor” knowledges in order to evade the striations or the straight jacket of official science. Isabelle Stengers (2008), exploring the significance of witchcraft for speculative philosophy, defines magic as “an experiential and experimental art, daring to try and test what it takes and what it requires to produce ethico-aesthetico-political empowerment.” The task is to craft “efficacious propositions” (p. 40), in which language is detached from its usual role of signifying and attains a material force inside ritual practices.

Stengers counts Deleuze and Guattari amongst the professors of such arts of magic, along with modern witches such as Starhawk. In the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari (1994), witchcraft is a *diagrammatic* practice—a matter of trying to draw lines from the known to the unknown by divining the abstract or virtual forces and intensities that connect and move in events. Indeed, this is the mark of genuinely creative thought: “*To think is always to follow the witch’s line*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 41; emphasis added).

Joshua Ramey (2012), like Stengers, discerns a hermetic strain running through Deleuze’s philosophy. The figure of the witch, together with the sorcerer and the shaman, recur both in Deleuze’s solo work and his writing with Guattari. Ramey describes Deleuze’s account of the counter-actualisation of sense as akin to magic, in its aim of enabling us to become “avatars” of events, as opposed to merely passive victims of them. Counter-actualisation involves practices of tapping into the virtual forces and intensities in events, in order to redirect their energies into altered outcomes. This is not dissimilar, I would argue, to how magic ritual is intended to work.

Ramey notes, as does Deleuze, that these practices can always fail. In trying to harness the dark forces of the cosmos, we can get the mixtures wrong, and fail to effectuate anything. Or else we may experience a horrifying psychic disintegration as a result of trying to inhabit the border zone where the relations between language and the body are unmoored—no longer policed and insulated from one another by the mediations of representation. Such was the fate, according to Deleuze (2004), of Antonin Artaud, whose art relentlessly pierced the fragile boundary that separates words and body, ending in his schizophrenic collapse. It is for this reason that, to quote Ramey (2012), “magic is almost universally undertaken as a tentative, ambulant and experimental enterprise” (p. 175). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) say that it requires an “art of dosages,” to avoid the fate of “cosmic artisans” such as Artaud who courted the black holes of “cosmic force gone bad” and paid a terrible price. Stengers (2008), in a similar vein, notes that the witch needs carefully, and repeatedly, to “taste” the effect of her potions.

The witch is not necessarily a social isolate or outcast. Indeed many witches are committed to collective action as a means to amplify the forces released in occult events. Krzysztof Skonieczny (2017) points out that although the sorcerer, like the witch, may entertain unnatural relations with animals and other non-human entities, and therefore occupy an anomalous position with respect to the laws and norms of society, he or she is also intensely sensitive to the hidden forces that compose the social. Skonieczny describes the sorcerer as “a finely-tuned receiving device, who ... can attune him- or herself to something which is ‘not yet conscious’ for society as a whole, and yet permeates it and pushes from underneath” (p. 976). This description could also, I suggest, apply to the post-qualitative feminist researcher.

Summarising so far: the post-qualitative witch-researcher would cleave to a belief in the power of the body, affect and matter to act as a counter to the privileging of abstract reason. Her “methods” would be akin to divination rather than coding: a matter of trying to tap into the

forces and intensities that compose events in order to craft something new, instead of looking for generalisations or “themes”.

Two examples

What might the work of the witch look like in contemporary post-human or post-qualitative research practices? I consider two examples, not as models to be followed, but as glimpses of the tentative fabrication of witchy method.

The chair

One possible example can be found in the research of E.J. Renold and Gabrielle Ivinson with young people in an impoverished former mining community in the Welsh Valleys. Renold and Ivinson (2019) describe a series of “artful events” that have emerged from their engagement with the young people—events that they describe as pre-eminently future oriented. These events are built from, and emerge out of, engagements with the young people’s stories: with their yearnings, their dread, their joy and their anger; with their solidarity and fierce allegiance; with the transgenerational hauntings of the vanished culture that they still carry in their bodies; and with the all-too-present wounds of sexual violence and public censure that they bear. Out of these engagements, the researchers, the young people, and their artist-collaborators craft artefacts, films and performances that “carry proto-political affective residues” of making processes that attempt to transform trauma and bad affect into “the more-than of not yet realised futures”.

One such art-ful intervention that they describe in the article was a chair. The Chair intervention was triggered by the angry pronouncement by some of the girls that they would like to make the boys feel the pain that they felt by tying them to a chair, shining a light onto their eyes and interrogating them. Trying, as they report, to “affectively tune into their desire for vengeance without closing it down,” Renold and Ivinson report how, in the wake of an exhilarating and testing outdoor experience, the group began to make something from a chair and assorted materials.

The chair eventuated from silence, hesitation, argument, rhythmic banging and ultimately, unspoken and unchoreographed collaboration. Its seat was encased in black tape and surrounded by hammered-in nails, from which labels were hung, each bearing a hate word or slur that the girls had received. The authors continue:

One of the youngest in the group, Katie, crafted a small sobbing figure out of plasticine. The group placed the figure on the centre of the blackened seat. Objects seemed to carry affective residues for the group which worked to bond rather than break the group apart.

The chair’s uprights were wound with pink and blue sparkly thread. The Beyoncé slogan “slay queen” was attached to the back, and a cut out of a NIKE shoe was hung underneath. Butterflies and feathers were attached. One upright was wrapped with luminous orange and green tape, suggesting to the authors “a warning or maybe a protecting, or ‘safe-guarding’ of some kind?”

The chair, write the authors, had become “more-than,” as the group “effectively re-routed the circuit of bad affects that had previously over-whelmed them.” “For a moment,” they write, “we caught a glimpse of how ‘things in the making can cut their transformational teeth’” (quoting Massumi 2015, p. ix). The materializing of the chair “took on an extra charge, re-assembling care, enabling the group to take care, and maybe to begin to touch the affective traces of a communal loss in careful ways”.

The chair has subsequently made several public appearances, and this is important. It has lurked among other chairs at an anti-bullying event; accompanied the collective on stage in conference presentations; been part of culture festivals. Its most memorable appearance to date, according to the authors, was at an official launch of a Welsh government health initiative, where it appeared on

stage alongside the more mundane chairs that held the members of a discussion panel. This event followed a keynote from the Welsh minister who had just cut the community budget that would shortly devastate the young people's youth centre and put its workers out of jobs.

Renold and Ivinson, quoting Deleuze, suggest that the chair has become an object that "detach[es] and deterritorialise[s] a segment of the real in such a way as to make it play the role of a *political enunciator*". Put differently, the chair has assumed a sacred or oracular power as a condensation of imperceptible forces and affects. I can attest to the uncanny power of the chair as a ritual object. It made an appearance, along with its confederates, at the 2017 Summer Institute in Qualitative Research, and its affective charge could be *felt*.

Stengers (2008) describes witchcraft as the practice of "care and concern demanded by that which is 'coming into existence', and by its milieu, which may nurture or poison it. Poisoning is easy," she notes, "but nurturing is a craft." The chair intervention led by Renold and Ivinson strikes me as operationalising, in a research context, Starhawk's (1999) assertion that "Political actions could be more effective if they were consciously understood to be energy workings" (p. 145). In so doing, they are fabricating methods or practices that diverge from those of conventional qualitative methodology. These are "bespoke" methods, suited to, and emerging from, the situation that they address. They do not seek to categorise or code the young people's experiences therefore, or to produce generalisable knowledge for helping young people experiencing trauma. They do not comb interview transcripts looking for what recurs. Rather, they try to tap into that which cannot be put into words, but which has potency *precisely because* it expresses the trauma in sensory or affective ways, and is lodged in the unique experiences and culture of these young people. This does not mean that nothing can pass across the boundary between these and other young people's experiences, or indeed between those of the reader and the protagonists. But that passing would have more of the character of a leap, a jump, or a spark of intensities (see MacLure, 2021; Stengers, 2008).

It is also worth pointing out that this is an exquisitely ethical piece of research. The adults and young people were obliged at all times to test the effects of their creations and their power to harm or heal. Situated knowledge is collectively felt, and depends on a profound *trust* that something unexpected will emerge that might unsettle the dread of custom and habit.

"Filthy creation"

Another example might be Rachel Holmes' (2016) article, "My tongue on your theory: the bitter-sweet reminder of every-thing unnameable." Holmes herself prefers to use the figure of the monster in her unsettling of the discourses of childhood and of methodology in educational research; but the article can also be read as a phantasmagoria—a summoning of unnameable forces in unholy alliance to induce a kind of delirium of thought, language, body and senses. Data, analysis, policy and the researcher's identity are dissolved and transmuted in a synaesthetic fabrication of "filthy creation" (p. 663) that renders a piece of video data of children playing in the playground viscerally perturbing. The video shows some young boys grabbing a young girl in a whirl of motion.

As I turn away from the dissecting slab, breathing in the unworldly stench of the data's empirical death and its gruesome resurrection, I am aware that at the slaughterhouse, some things never die. Something of the playground data's odour has been ingested into my blood stream and body's fibres ... I am plunged into the depths of my imagination that desires to exceed my body, already deeply entangled in the playground event. I find the data gnawing on my body, my tongue all over the screen, being swallowed by time and the pace of the playground chase, beginning to feel myself unravelling, no longer a researcher in singular human form, bound by skin (pp. 666–667)

Inside the affective turbulence conjured by her assemblage, Holmes begins to sense "a formlessness, an in-between-ness, a space that is not easily classified or categorized, and therefore, for now, is rendered unintelligible and monstrous" (p. 670). It is a space of possibility opened by

witchcraft, I think, in the face of the closures of official discourses about childhood, gender or “behaviour.” As in the first example, the author does not use standard methods, techniques or recipes that can be applied across contexts, as if the “materials” or data were indifferent to where they were found and how they are lived. Rather, she cultivates an attitude of attentiveness to the power of the overlooked and the hidden—the turmoil of senses, movement and inchoate vocalisations. The writing embraces the force of “improper” feelings such as fear, nausea or revulsion, and messes with the boundary between words and body.

Both of these examples begin to fabricate *immanent* research methodologies that work (from) the middle, where data, researchers and events are mutually emerging. They challenge the ingrained humanism that resides in qualitative methodology, in the persona of the sovereign human interpreter who grants meaning to the world by attending to that which is inhuman or more-than-human: the materiality, the affect and the creative energy that inhabits events. This kind of research resists the reductionism of the “official” discourses of education, the family, or “the child”. It is not always comfortable to conduct or to read.

The crafty and collective propositions of the witch might help post-qualitative methodology move beyond dogmatic critique, by infusing method with the pragmatic and speculative arts of “immanent discrimination” in Stengers’s (2008) phrase. Immanent discrimination or critique is based on an alternative mode of ethics to the “debunking” or iconoclastic critique that is characteristic of academic discourse (Latour, 2004), which is devoted to the exposure of error or the delusions of ideology. Such critique tends to be based on the exercise of “judgemental reason” (Massumi, 2010) aimed at destroying or undermining local knowledges or belief systems, in the service of a supposedly “higher” rationality. Not only is such triumphalist critique inherently antagonistic; it is also, Latour argues, ineffective—seldom delivering the epistemological triumphs to which it aspires, and prompting instead endless claims and counter-claims like the beats of the battery bunny in the advert (Latour, 2004).

Massumi (2010), after Deleuze, envisages critique as a form of “clinical practice,” though his account of this suggests that it might equally be thought of as magical practice. He envisages an immanent, “diagnostic art” of “modulating,” or sensing and intervening in events from *within* the situation (p. 338). This kind of “affirmative” critique is, he suggests, “very different from ... negative critique” (p. 338). I would suggest that the work of Renold and Ivinson discussed above can be thought of in this light: that is, as clinical or magical practice.

Discrimination or immanent critique is a practice therefore of sensing the flows and intensities of that which is coming into existence, not in order to judge it, but in order to change it. In following “the witch’s flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 41)), methodology would become: transversal; ambulant (i.e. following the contours of abstract form); experimental; lodged in the queer temporality of the event; efficacious (concerned with what can be done, not what is meant); adept in forcefully wielding words for transformation, rather than explanation; sympathetic to more-than-human subjectivities.

The crone

At this point in my own life I am also drawn, however, to that near relation or alternate manifestation of the witch—the ancient crone or hag. Again, there is not space here to do justice to the history of the crone and her relation to the witch (see Federici, 2004; Rountree, 1997; Walker, 1991). Many contemporary feminist witches connect the crone with the third phase or aspect of the Great Goddess worshipped in prepatriarchal societies (c.f. Walker, 1991). In the Goddess trinity of Maiden-Mother-Crone, the latter aspect represented ancient female wisdom. She occupied a pivotal position between life and death in the circular movement of the cosmos. Relieved of sexual and reproductive capacity, the crone ushered in death, yet also presided over birth through her skills of midwifery and medicine. These powers—both respected and feared in

ancient societies—became the pretext and the target of the brutal witch persecutions carried out in the name of Christianity in Europe and, later, the United States, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth Centuries. Rountree (1997) writes: “The Crone, the old woman post child-bearing age who speaks her mind without fear of losing male approval ... offers nothing attractive to patriarchy. The Crone symbolises death. The witch is Christianity’s diabolised Crone” (p. 226). However it was the crone’s sexual and reproductive uselessness that posed her greatest (perceived) threat to patriarchal Christianity, since her indifference to male approval and interest removed her from their sphere of influence. Federici (2004) notes that old women were also seen as obstacles to the transition to capitalist relations in early Modern Europe, on account of their central role as repositories of communal wisdom and memory. Walker (1991) concludes that the medieval persecutions transformed the wise woman into the witch, and changed the word Crone “from a compliment to an insult” (p. 122).

Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong’o (2018) have recently explored the possible contours of a “rewilding” of theory. One of their versions of wildness calls to mind the powers of the crone and opens up, for me at least, some possible aspects of a “crone methodology.” In addition to a variety of queer, anti-colonial and overtly transgressive forms, Halberstam and Nyong’o conjure a version of wildness that has “forgotten its manners,” embracing “forgetting, senility, menopause, and absentmindedness as evasions of compulsory performances of youthful rebellion” (p. 456). The wild can include:

that which has gone to seed, that which failed to thrive, those who are both in and out of the game. The wild can be loud and dangerous, but it can also be placid and unruffled, even neutral and sterile” (p. 456).

In the obdurate force of her supposed social and reproductive uselessness, the crone is equally indifferent to the flames of bad affect that fuel the insults of the post-truth warrior, and the embers of *ressentiment* that warm the impotent critical theorist in his holy war for meaning.

The crone has no truck either with the haptic connectivity that is supposed to link us all in a post-human network of affective relationality.⁴ This makes her a fitting figure for an era in which, according to Claire Colebrook (2011), we have become “glutted by affect”. Or rather, in Colebrook’s analysis, we have become so hooked on the immediate, bodily “affections” afforded by digital life and accelerated speeds of consumption that we have lost the capacity to distinguish these excitations from affect as intensive power or force *as such*. Affect, in Colebrook’s Deleuzian analysis, is an autonomous, inorganic force beyond the organism that seizes the body and yields affections. Colebrook refers to Deleuze’s interpretation of Francis Bacon’s painting an instance of art’s ability to capture the incorporeal “autonomy” of affect. The scream of Bacon’s screaming popes is not an expression of “the feeling of horror, felt by the body, but a depiction through the body of the forces that seize it.” (p. 56)

Colebrook, like Deleuze and Guattari, views affect as intensive—an impersonal force unmoored from the lived, and liberated from the enclosures of the organism; freed for the work of “creating new relations and lines of thought, opening different mappings or potentials among what is, what is lived, and what might be thought.” It is in the “*not acting*”—the delay or interruption between receptiveness and relation—that affect pulses, opening to the future (p. 54).

As an interruption or anomaly in the networks that sustain human conviviality, the crone’s perceived uselessness might have some disruptive force. Uselessness “lends itself to invention” as Brian Massumi (2002, p. 96) observed. It is, he claimed, the vocation of philosophy. The crone can perhaps be likened to Bartleby the Scrivener in Melville’s short novel. Deleuze (1997) noted how Bartleby’s formula, “I would prefer not to”, opened a “vacuum”, or perhaps it is a vortex in language, into which wild things flooded (1997, p. 73; see MacLure, 2021).

Desistance

Colebrook (2011) describes affect as “a power or force with a tendency to endure” (p. 55). The crone also endures. But is it a question of persistence, or of desistance? Already well into old

age, I see some appeal in what might be called the passion of disinterest. Desist. Fail to engage in the panicky policing of moral conduct, or the posturing of academic critique. Evade the haptic embrace of posthuman solidarity. And in so doing perhaps open a crack in the carapace of the “I” where strange ideas might scuttle out, and inhuman relations might be contracted.

Let us consider one final example, this time from literature rather than research. In Clarice Lispector’s (1988) novel, *The Passion According to G.H.*, the un-named protagonist is transformed by an encounter with a cockroach in her maid’s room, during which she accidentally squashes the insect and watches in paralysed horror as its bodily fluid seeps out, and it slowly dies. G.H. (who is not an old woman) undergoes a series of meditations/metamorphoses through which human concerns—class, gender, culture, beauty, desire, place and linear time—progressively become meaningless. Finally, she is brought to a deep rejection of “humanization” and the base purifications of language. She yearns for “the materiality of things. Humanity, she observes, “is steeped in humanization, as though it were necessary [...] There exists a thing that is broader, deeper, and deeper, less good, less bad, less pretty. Even though that thing too runs the risk of becoming transformed into ‘purity’ in our gross hands, our hands that are gross and full of words” (p. 114).

In a final act of renunciation of her human nature G.H. consumes some of the viscous cockroach matter. She experiences an ultimate “depersonalization” (p. 125)—a vertiginous dissolution of self as she merges with the impersonal and inhuman forces of the cosmos. Rosi Braidotti (2002) reads the transformations of G.H. in terms of the series of minoritarian becomings mapped by Deleuze and Guattari (1987): becoming-child/-animal/-woman/-molecular/-imperceptible. That is, she understands them as expressions of the inhuman becomings that precede and exceed the orders of being. In courting the a-signifying forces of the cosmos, G.H. pays the cost of becoming imperceptible, enduring the shattering of the self and the loss of language that this incurs. Freed from the hope and vanity of human aspiration she finds, in desisting, an unlimited abundance of inhuman connection. “I desist and, behold, the world fits in my weak hand” (p. 128).

What might desistance, in the figure of the crone, have to offer post-qualitative inquiry? Might the refusal to plug into the usual circuits of interaction, interpretation, explanation and critique open inquiry to different modes of thinking, acting and relating? If we reject haptic connection as the founding gesture of affect theory, would this help us to rediscover the power of theory as always to an extent *inhuman*? Colebrook (2013) challenges the “easy comfort” (p. 11) of posthuman ontologies of immediate, unbounded relationality and instead imagines theory as “a comportment to the world that is without home, solace, identity or body – or at least where embodiment and dwelling offer almost nothing” (p. 10). What would be the risks and rewards of activating such a theory for post-qualitative inquiry?

I do not suggest however that post-qualitative researchers should choose between the witch and the crone. Both have the capacity to disconcert the usual arrangements of normative method and official knowledge. It would be a matter, rather, of diagnosing which form of disconcertion is called for in the moment at hand: the transformative energies of the witch, or the implacable disinterest of the crone.

Notes

1. “Bad Girl Theory and Practice: Qualitative Research in Post-Truth Times.” Symposium held at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, April 2019. Organised by Patti Lather. Presenters: Patti Lather, Deborah Britzman, Janet Miller, Lisa Weems, Maggie MacLure.
2. On the figures of the cyborg, trickster, mestiza and madwoman, see respectively Haraway (1991), Johnson (1987), Anzaldúa (1999), Behar (1995).
3. Current examples include Pam Grossman’s podcast, *The Witch Wave* (<https://witchwavepodcast.com>); Starhawk’s blog (<https://starhawk.org/blog/>); Alice Tuck’s ‘Toil and Trouble’ workshops (<https://alictaruck.net>).

4. Not all contemporary crones favour disconnection and desistance: see for instance collectives such as Crones Counsel (<https://www.cronescounsel.org>).

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