Writing Post Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

This article explains how writing served the author as a method of inquiry for several decades and how a long preparation using Derrida's deconstruction, Foucault's historical approaches, and Deleuze and Guattari's experimental concepts slowly deconstructed conventional humanist qualitative methodology enabling *post qualitative inquiry*. The author encourages those who inquire now, after the ontological turn, to break the habit of rushing to preexisting research methodologies and, instead, to follow the provocations that come from everywhere in the inquiry that is living and writing.

I first encountered the incommensurabilities between what I've called "conventional humanist qualitative methodology" and the poststructural theories I'd studied simultaneously but separately as I wrote my dissertation (St. Pierre, 1995). It was *in the writing* that I realized those two structures could not be thought together, that their ontologies and epistemologies were incompatible because of their very different descriptions of human being, language, discourse, power, agency, resistance, freedom, and so on (see St. Pierre, 2000). Conventional humanist qualitative methodology provides a handy preexisting research process to follow, a container with well-identified categories into which researchers are expected to slot all aspects of their research projects so they are recognizable, clear, and accessible. And even though qualitative methodology still claims to be "emergent," its concepts and categories, which have been tightened up over the years, tend to control the study. Following the process systematically is supposed to guarantee validity, so it's not a good idea to veer too far off the path—to include odd categories, to do things out of order, or to do things that have not been approved by, for example, an Institutional Review Board and, for doctoral students, the dissertation advisory committee. That qualitative methodology has come to this, has become so formalized, systematized, and positivized, is surprising, given that it was invented during the interpretive turn that resisted positivism and shifted from measurement, quantification, and prediction to understanding people's lived experiences (interpretive research) and, when those experiences seemed unjust, to transformation and liberation (critical research).

A Failure of Humanist Qualitative Methodology

As I look back on my dissertation research that involved interviewing 36 older women and doing ethnographic fieldwork in my hometown, I wonder why I thought I should interview anyone at all given that I was thinking with Foucault (1971/1972), who made it clear he was not interested in the speaking subject. And why did I think words in interview transcripts and field notes could be *data*—the ground, the foundation of knowledge claims—given that I was thinking with Derrida who made it clear that meaning cannot be closed off and contained in language, that meaning always escapes. And how could a researcher enchanted with Deleuze and Guattari's *rhizome* think qualitative methodology at all given that the rhizome is so clearly anti-method? I surely didn't ask myself how Foucault or Derrida or Deleuze and Guattari might inquire when I was a doctoral student. I bypassed the theory I'd studied and leapt right to qualitative methodology, to *application*, because I had been taught that using qualitative methodology was *what one did when one did research.* I certainly didn't consider quantitative methodology, which I'd studied a bit but refused. And I was not introduced to historical research or philosophical research or any other kind of research in my doctoral studies. It never occurred to me that particular onto-epistemological arrangements enable particular methodologies or *no methodology at all.*

So I did not begin with Foucault or Derrida or Deleuze and Guattari. I began with the qualitative research process and accomplished what I thought was a rich, thick qualitative study, interviewing and observing women who had lived their lives as the humanist subjects poststructural theories refuse (St. Pierre, 2011a). I collected words in face-to-face interviews, privileging Derrida's bane, *presence*, and

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produced words in field notes that supposedly captured and represented what I observed, assuming the Cartesian subject/object distinction and categorizing the world through common sense and good sense in a dogmatic image of thought. It was only after I'd done all that humanist research, all that *fieldwork* demanded by a particular empiricism (see St. Pierre, 1997a, for a critique), that I cast about for some way to use poststructural theories that refuse humanism in my analysis and write up. At that point, I knew I was in trouble.

Theory came too late in my study, as it does in many qualitative studies. It was not that I hadn't studied theory but that I had not let it guide my inquiry. Again, if I had, it is unlikely I would have done a qualitative study at all. But this disconnect between the "posts" and humanist qualitative methodology is not uncommon. Students who are now trying to do post qualitative inquiry (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011b, 2013a) often email me *after* they've designed a humanist qualitative study and collected data in the field and ask, for example, how they can use a Deleuzian concept like the rhizome in their autoethnography or what they should do with their face-to-face interviews which they now realize don't make much sense in post qualitative inquiry. I respond that it may be too late to salvage those studies, though the students seem to already know that.

Post Qualitative Inquiry

How, then, does one do post qualitative inquiry? My advice (see St. Pierre, 2015) is always to read and reread as many primary and secondary sources about the theory(ies) and/or theorist(s) as possible until one *becomes* Foucauldian, becomes Deleuzian, becomes Derridean and has those analyses in one's bones, until one's life becomes rhizomatic as it has always been, until deconstructing all the structures we create is second nature, until one is always analyzing power relations and investigating the "history of the present" (Foucault, 1975/1979, p. 31). In other words, the post qualitative researcher must *live* the theories (will not be able *not* to live them) and will, then, live in a different world enabled by a different ethico-onto-epistemology.

I want to emphasize that post qualitative inquiry does not involve studying humanist methodology and methods except to understand why they are not appropriate for this kind of inquiry. Post qualitative inquiry, "thinking without method" (Jackson, in press), and "minor inquiry" (Mazzei, in press) all require "a very lengthy preparation, yet no method, no rules, nor recipes" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 8). The *long preparation* for post qualitative inquiry is reading, thinking, writing, and living with theory in "experimentation in contact with the real" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 12). The long preparation requires, for example, more than reading a few of Foucault's books, essays, interviews, and lectures or focusing solely, for example, on

his genealogical approach. It requires reading the broad range of Foucault's work to understand how genealogy works with his archaeology, his power/knowledge reading, his final ethical analysis, his governmentality, biopolitics, and so on. It requires reading many of the secondary sources about Foucault's work now available, reading biographies of Foucault, and so on. A doctoral student is unlikely to find doctoral courses that require such depth and breadth of reading; rather, the student must accomplish the independent scholarship expected of the doctorate but which can be and too often is postponed or avoided altogether by the *rush to application*, to methodology.

The *experimentation* required in post qualitative inquiry cannot be accomplished within the methodological enclosure. This experimental work is risky, creative, surprising, and remarkable. It cannot be measured, predicted, controlled, systematized, formalized, described in a textbook, or called forth by preexisting, approved methodological processes, methods, and practices. In this work, something in the world that is unintelligible and unrecognizable within existing categories and practices "kicks back" (Barard, 1999, p. 2), sticks, and takes hold. An intensive, barely intelligible variation in living that shocks us asks us to be worthy of it and to "trust that something might come out, though one is not yet completely sure what" (Rajchman, 2000, p. 7). Deleuze and Guattari (1991/1994) asked us *to believe in this world* and "its possibilities of movements and intensities, so as once again to give birth to new modes of existence" (p. 74). This is the provocation and challenge of post qualitative inquiry—to create different worlds for living. But such experimentation, intensity, and movement are arrested by methods and methodologies, by existing categories, by what we recognize, by the normal, by common sense, by what "everyone knows" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994, p. 61), by methodology's "dogmatic image of thought" (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 148).

In other words, the empiricism of post qualitative inquiry (see St. Pierre, 2016) cannot be taught or learned. Instead of asking for the conditions of possible experience (What is going on here? How did this happen?), it looks "for the conditions under which something new, as yet unthought, arises" (Rajchman, 2000, p. 17). Its focus is not on things already made but on things in the making. For that reason, there can be no textbooks with titles like *Post Qualitative Methodology*, or *Post Qualitative Research Designs*, or *Post Qualitative Research Practices*, just as there can be no books titled, *Ten Steps for Foucauldian Genealogical Research*, or *Rhizomatic Data Analysis Techniques.* This inquiry is always becoming in the same way that "writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience" (Deleuze, 1993/1997, p. 1). Thus, the post qualitative inquirer does not know what to do first and then next and next. There is no recipe, no process.

This is truly experimental inquiry—attending to the surprises that point to difference and refusing the impoverished answers we've given to the questions the world has posed. If one has read and read, one cannot not put theory to work—it will happen. The post qualitative inquirer who has prepared herself must trust herself and do the next thing, whatever it is—to experiment—and to keep moving.

Writing, Thinking, Doing, Becoming

I return now to *the writing* with which I began this essay and to Deleuze's comment that writing is becoming. First of all, I was lucky to have studied as a doctoral student with Laurel Richardson at The Ohio State University, and I took very seriously her proposal that writing is a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1994; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Richardson brought this understanding of the movement, the work of writing, which "real" writers know well, to social science writers.

In my dissertation, writing was my field of play, and in the first chapter I wrote an *aside* in which I described a dream that introduced one of the women of my study who I realized should not "officially" appear until a much later chapter in a section with descriptions of participants—more than a hundred pages away! The dream I had dreamed about the woman appeared as I wrote. I did not intend to write it—*the aside happened*—and immediately set off the ongoing deconstruction of the long text I had yet to write. I was only four pages into my dissertation, and already the text ahead of me quaked and shuddered. The last sentence of that first aside was, "The aside is the field" (St. Pierre, 1995, p. 8). Later, I understood that that short sentence I did not intentionally write—*it wrote itself*—did what it needed to. First, it marked my resistance to the linearity of the conventional qualitative research report and, second, it marked my claim, following Richardson, that writing is also an empirical field of inquiry. I needed the aside to think-write, so I thought and wrote it. As I continued to write, I wrote other asides, using them as a different writing space, a breather in the long, formal text of the dissertation. In the space of the aside, I took risks and experimented. I wrote playfully and poetically, and, in that "free" space, I deconstructed the formal, academic text I believed I had to write even as I wrote it. Derrida (1972/1981) might call this *doubling* or writing with two hands (p. 6), and Derrida (1966/1970) might also remind me there are no free spaces, only "freeplay" (p. 248) in a structure. Still, the aside worked, and I plugged one text into the other, always moving in thinking-writing.

It was in an aside that I wrote what was to become the *refrain* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 10) of my dissertation, "This story has no beginning but has always been, and I slip into it over and over again in different places, and it is as if I too have always been there" (St. Pierre, 1995, p. 115). The refrain enables a "*consistency*: the 'holding together' of heterogeneous elements" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 323), and, because my text was always taking off in all directions, my refrain enabled a pause, a gathering that was also an intensity that would explode as thinking-writing picked up speed again.

As I wrote, I also began to realize the power of the more traditional academic essay, its capacity for movement, for thinking-writing differently. I took pleasure in moving between the two capacious writing spaces of the aside and the conventional essay, and I learned to trust writing to take me somewhere I couldn't go without writing. I learned in that first troubled research project that writing was, indeed, thinking. Even though I wrote in the cold, dark Ohio winter when the sun didn't shine for 10, 12, 15 days in a row, I couldn't wait to begin writing each morning. Writing was magic, and my days sparkled.

Deconstruction happens. The text undoes itself. The movement of writing takes over, and the writer, the person (neither noun works in post qualitative inquiry) loses control and finds herself barely able to keep up in the thinking-writing as words appear on the computer screen she could not have thought without writing. This writing does not begin in recognition (Ah, I recognize that—that's what that is! I'll describe it.). This writing is adventure, experimentation, pushing through toward what? Toward the unintelligible, toward Derrida's *différance*, Deleuze's pure difference, perhaps toward a different world.

I read Deleuze so early in my doctoral studies that his and Guattari's concepts like the *rhizome, assemblage* (see Buchanan, 2017, for a critique of how assemblage has been taken up in the social sciences), the *fold*, and *haecceity* had already infected me, taken me over. They were always working, working, deterritorializing the categories I was thinking with, seducing me, pointing somewhere else. Though I surely didn't *understand* them—and still don't—they worked; they "become the means by which we move beyond experience so as to be able to think anew . . . in other words, concepts must be creative or active rather than merely representative, descriptive or simplifying" (Parr, 2010, p. 54).

I remember thinking that writing the methodology chapter of my dissertation would be easy because I knew exactly what I should write. I knew the section headings of the chapter should include at least the following: research problem, research questions, research design, site of study, participants, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis, and so on. Those categories are well-defined in qualitative methodology textbooks. I was a good girl and wrote what I should.

But Derrida's deconstruction of the structures that trap us and Deleuze and Guattari's deterritorializing concepts proved fatal, and I did not believe the representation I wrote. Derrida had taught me that words cannot capture or transport meaning from one "person" to another, so I did not

believe that words in interview transcripts and field notes could serve as brute, foundational data (meaning, evidence) that represented the real. I became distrustful of representational logic, methods, and "modes in which what is represented and/or signified is most often humanity as the originating subject of all knowledge" (Cullenberg, Amariglio, & Ruccio, 2001, p. 32). More to the point, why would I want to stop inquiry and represent (repeat) when I could continue to inquire? I learned that the shock of the real forces a "groping experimentation" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994, p. 41). The real, then, was a provocation to continue, not a foundation for stability. To solve my methodology problem in my dissertation, I first wrote the required conventional methodology chapter and then proceeded to deconstruct it using the concept, the *fold*.

At that time, my groping experimentation mostly took the form of deconstruction because I could no longer think conventional humanist qualitative methodological concepts like *interview*, the *field*, and *data*. They didn't work. We are taught that the qualitative interview should be face-to-face to capture the true essence of the participant, the pure breath of her body that comes forth in her voice. What could be more reliable, more valid, that what someone tells you face-to-face? But this is *phonocentricism* which prioritizes speech and the metaphysics of presence. I wondered what exactly counted as an *interview*. Ohio State's Institutional Review Board had given me permission to interview the old women in my hometown who met my sample selection criteria, but it had not given me permission to interview an old school friend I met downtown whom I talked with as we ate hot dogs sitting at the same drugstore counter where we'd sat eating hot dogs as high school students. Could I use that data and data from all the other unapproved conversations I had during fieldwork to write with?

My hometown was officially the *field* of my study, the natural setting. But my school friend and I both remarked during that lunch that we felt we were in the past as much as the present. *When* was the field? During fieldwork, I was, indeed, in the past–present–future—time was untimely. I'd been studying that small tobacco town since I moved there from Yankee country as a child of five. It had borne my never-ending scrutiny because I had been the Other there, never quite fitting. I had 35 years of field notes and interviews to work with, and, as I wrote, I strayed far from "official" data, overwhelmed with a lifetime of the real. So I made the field as I wrote. I *laid out the field* in sentence after sentence in all the writing spaces I could find. There could never be an "audit trail" from official data in interview transcripts and field notes to the sentences I wrote. I suppose my study wasn't valid.

I have written much about my troubles with *data* and *data analysis* (e.g., St. Pierre, 1997b, 2013b; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014) as described in qualitative textbooks. I had certainly "collected" official "data" during official "fieldwork," but data appeared in dreams, in my body, and in memories. Thus, as I wrote, I culled decades of prior fieldwork for just the right turn of phrase or for an adjective that suited the rhythm, the movement of the sentence. Trying to cram "official" data from interviews and field notes into sentences most often slowed me down, weighed me down. There were, indeed, provocations in "official" data, but as often as not the "unofficial" data I had always had was sufficient. *Data* became irrelevant and *data analysis* was writing and thinking and laying out of the field of the text, moving. "And . . . And . . . And . . ." (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 10).

Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/1987) concept *assemblage* helped me think this work—assemblages as "multiplicities or aggregates of intensities" (p. 15). Here, the assemblage is the minimum unit. Not a person. Not an interview. Not the field. Not a datum. "And the only assemblages are machinic assemblages of desire and collective assemblages of enunciation. No *significance* [*sic*], no *subjectification*" (p. 22, emphasis added). In this work, "a writer is invented by an assemblage at the very moment when, in his originality, he is inventing it" (Lecercle, 2002, p.188). Do you see what can happen? It is just this easy to be seduced by Deleuze and Guattari's radical ontology. It is just this easy to refuse categories like the *Interview*, the *Field, Data*, and *Data Analysis.*

The greatest seduction for me was Deleuze and Guattari's concept *haecceity*, a "mode of individuation that is neither that of a subject or of a thing" (Lecercle, 2002, p. 93), perhaps a season, a moment in time, a poem. In this nonsubjective, preindividual, impersonal individuation, the "I" becomes imperceptible to itself. My dissertation focused on subjectivity, but that concept faded after *haecceity* went to work on the text, and *I* faded in becoming as it wrote itself. Words, words. Never enough but more than enough come in writing.

Looking back now, I can see that I began to write my way into *post qualitative inquiry* (St. Pierre, 2011) in 1994 as I wrote my dissertation and continued to write toward it until that phrase wrote itself one writing day in 2010 in a handbook chapter that was published a year later. Over the years, conventional humanist qualitative methodology became increasingly incoherent and impotent for me and deconstructed itself as the "posts" pushed it aside and opened toward the too much. There's more, of course, much more beyond the post qualitative, but this is slow work that requires a long preparation. There seems to be a gathering of work now coming out of the onto-epistemologies of the "posts" and the ontological turn that refuses the methodological enclosure, that's risky, experimental, and may well not look much like "research." We have to trust in the world, trust that something different will come out of this radical, experimental empiricism which nobody knows.

The Too Much

The problem with preexisting, formalized, methods-driven methodologies is that they are never enough for the too much of inquiry. Those structures based on a version of the Enlightenment's scientific method and its promise that rigorous, systematic method can ensure true knowledge cannot accommodate the always already more than, too big of inquiry. They fail and fail, and those who follow them prune and prune their studies, discarding what seems too strange to count as science. The too strange is, however, the provocation, the knot, the world kicking back, the too much that demands experimentation. Inquiry should *begin* with the too strange and the too much. The rest is what everyone knows, what everyone does, the ordinary, repetition. Post qualitative inquiry asks that we push toward the intensive, barely intelligible variation in living that shocks us and asks us to be worthy of it. It asks us to trust that something unimaginable might come out that might change the world bit by bit, word by word, sentence by sentence. Writing is, after all, a method of inquiry. In writing, we can and do invent and reinvent the world.

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