

Review Essay

Propositions for posthuman teaching and research: a diffractive re-view of three books

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Snaza, N. & Weaver, J.A. (eds). 2015. *Posthumanism and Educational Research*. New York and London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-138-78235-8. Hbk, 203 pp.

Taylor, C.A. & Hughes, C. (eds). 2016. *Posthuman Research Practices in Education*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave MacMillan. ISBN: 978-1-137-45307-5. Hbk, 272 pp.

Vannini, P. (ed). 2015. *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*. New York and London: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-71301-6. Hbk, 194 pp.

Rupturing conventional styles of book review writing that foreground (rational) *critique*, I have chosen to use the posthuman diffractive methodology developed by Donna Haraway (1988) and Karen Barad (2007, 2014). Reading diffractively through one another, I have chosen three books on posthuman, non-representational research: Taylor and Hughes (2016)(T&H), Vannini (2015)(V) and Snaza and Weaver (2015)(S&W). The shortened references to each book are in brackets and in the in-text references, I have added the surname of the authors of the chapters that are part of the entanglement (e.g. in T&H: author: page number). Rather than looking for similarities or making comparisons between the books and their chapters, pitting one against the other or pointing out what each might lack, the method is affirmative, creative, connecting, non-representational and ethical. By paying attention to the differences that matter without creating oppositions, new patterns of thought, interference patterns and ‘superpositions’ are created - a ‘cutting together-apart’ as one move (Barad, 2014). This new academic style honours our inheritances, because diffraction patterns *are always already there*, that is, the authors’ ideas *are* entangled like waves in the sea without fixed boundaries, and the task is to make this evident. Hence, the diffractive apparatus is *not* about making analogies, or pulling together ideas in assemblages, but tracing some entanglements by focusing on the specificities of the texts and what might not be visible, there and then.

As Karen Barad’s diffractive reading of queer theory and quantum physics proposes, past, present and future are always already threaded through one another, thereby unsettling modernity’s unified notions of the self and a metaphysics of presence with its disentangling of epistemology, ontology and ethics that has led to unspeakable cruelty to the subhuman (e.g. child, woman, person of colour) and the nonhuman. So, diffraction is not only spatial, but also temporal. Barad’s *agential realism* implies that ‘the past remains open for future re-workings’, and yet, the traces of iterative materialisations are ‘*sedimented* into the world’ (Barad, forthcoming), hence a response-able re-view of books is in that sense *objective*. I

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make these diffractions, or intra-actions, work in a particular way, without positioning myself *outside* of it: my own subjectivity is constituted in and through the methodology. Unlike a literature review, I am *co-constituted*, not as individual agent, but as part of the always-becoming of the world. I am *of* the world, not *in* the world and so is the re-view. I am reading theory *with* practice diffractively, thereby adding force to all ‘three’ books, through carefully selected examples and truncated arguments thereby producing propositions for posthuman pedagogical and research practices.

What drives this piece of writing is my desire to point into the in/determinate direction of what posthuman teaching and research might look like in practice, thereby not ignoring but simply putting aside the complex discussions about the appropriateness of referring to ‘methods’ or ‘methodologies’ as human-centred activities (e.g. V: Manning; T&H: Jones & Hoskins). Instead of applying a prescribed framework, the key is to be creative and experiment, and to offer an imaginary, by asking not the ‘right’ questions, but at least different questions that e/merge when we encourage a move away from, for example, human experiences of objects. Perhaps it is true that a disruption of the human obsession with representationalism is the most to hope for – ‘an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation’ (V: Vannini: 1-2).

There is an important political and ethical point about building a different relational ontology in the Anthropocene, a geological period of permanent change to the planet’s biosphere caused by industries in developed countries. Unlike ecologists who assume that natural systems are universal and ‘outside, or separate, from human communities’, posthumanism offers a transdisciplinary approach that disrupts the nature/culture binary and attends to land, the temporality of place and offers a way of ‘experiencing ecology as an intensive quality of experience’, for example, attending ‘to the smell and texture of grass, soil and plants (S&W: Rotas: 91, 97). Education and research is required for ‘an affirmative ethico-political economy’ that addresses the ‘problematic of a dying species such as ours who is on the trajectory to extinction’ through a shift that includes ‘trans-subjective and transhuman forces’ (S&W: jagodzinski: 128).

But there is still little support in non-representational, posthuman research at educational institutions, so with an emphasis on suggestions for certain ‘do’s’ (without many ‘don’ts’), I produce some ‘propositions’ for researchers and practitioners to consider: ‘A proposition versus an instruction triggers conditions of emergence activating self-organizing potential’ (S&W: Springgay: 78). I will not start at the beginning and give an evaluative ‘over-view’ as if I am ‘detached’ and at an ontoepistemological distance, but I am always in the ‘middle’, a thinking in movement (V: Manning), ‘where things pick up speed’ (T&H: Holmes & Jones: 112, quoting Deleuze and Guattari). In fact, I have already started.

For convenience sake, although posthumanism and non-representational theory do not necessarily overlap, and the latter tend to erase or silence the work of feminist philosophers (V: Sheller: 132), I will use the two terms interchangeably, because all posthuman practices try to be as non-representational as possible and place human and the more-than-human in a ‘nonhierarchical web’ (S&W: Morris: 43) that *produces*, not *reproduces* knowledge (V: Manning: 62). At the same time, these propositions are offered with epistemic humility as the posthuman can only be kept in one’s ‘peripheral vision’ and we need to resist ‘clarity or

certainty about how it might be secured, asking questions rather than providing answers. And attention needs to be drawn to generative failures – that is to the (im)possibilities of both method and pedagogy’ (T&H: Gannon: 146). As Barad (Juelskjaer & Schwennesen, 2012: 22) stipulates in an interview: all the ‘re’s,’ (as in re-membling, re-turning to data, or re-viewing books) ‘must be taken as questions, not answers’. By re-turning to ‘the’ past, new experiences are created.

Posthuman philosophy needs its own methods of analysis, queering (an undoing of identity) power-producing binaries between object/subject, cognition/emotion, world/researcher, mind/body, nature/culture, child/adult, language/reality, knowing/being and individual/group. It has ‘the potential to reconfigure education. The whole thing: not just pedagogy, not just curricular design, not just educational research, and not just disciplines or even institutions such as schools at different levels (from preschool through doctoral programs)’ (S&W: Snaza & Weaver: 1). And this is because it has been assumed that education is only for and about humans – Man as the measure of all things, and ‘whether [research is] quantitative or qualitative – all presume a knowing ‘human’ researcher capable of objectively knowing the students, teachers, schools, and curricula s/he observes, measures, and seeks to understand’ (S&W: Snaza & Weaver: 8). Education services (global) human economic growth, but the latter’s material basis is the systematic and institutionalised exploitation of, for example, nonhuman animals: ‘globalized animal agribusiness; ecological cleansing in the intensification of land use; hunting and fishing; the capturing, trading, and breeding of wild animals for circuses, laboratories, pets, trophies, sport, and other purposes; and biotechnology’ (S&W: Pedersen: 67). There are ‘many ways of relating to the world, of which ‘human’ ways only constitute a small subset’ and human language is after all, only ‘part of a wider natural-semiotic system’, transcending ‘traditional disciplinary boundaries between natural sciences and social/humanist sciences’ (S&W: Pedersen: 60, 65). In education we tend to rely on words to define, to pin down truth, but ‘adrift upon the printed page, the word has lost its voice’ (V: Ingold: ix). So, how can we find other, more tacit ways of experiencing the world that also account for more-than-human experiences - what to look out for and what to avoid when teaching and researching with a posthumanist orientation?

These questions, my questions as the re-viewer, are always already entangled with the newly produced. In contrast, representational methods of research distance the researcher from the world. The knowing subject has so-called ‘objective’ access to this world with the *mind* extracting data through cognition. But instead of ‘bringing back data from the “field” for analysis and presentation’, posthuman scholars ‘are staying there’ (V: Sheller: 134). The human knowing subject is transindividual and cannot be taken as the starting point (S&W: Springgay: 78). Hence, I cannot return in a linear fashion to an objective past, to these events in spacetime when reading these books. The ‘decentered (and recentered) versions of the subject [is] based on fluid ontologies and refracted epistemologies (S&W: Petitfils: 39). Past, present and future are always intra-actively threaded through one another (Barad, 2007) – the reason why posthumanism is not *post*, leaving humanism *behind*. Thinking is already entangled in worldly relations (V: McCormack: 92). Teaching and researching are worlding *events*: human and nonhuman bodies do not move *between* points in space and time, but *are* ceaseless movements (S&W: Springgay: 80), and it is possible to *re*-turn (not ‘return’) to ‘data collected’, like an earthworm making compost (Barad, 2014). This is not done through

the use of a different ‘lens’, which would suggest that it is optional and instrumental (T&H: Gannon: 132). Instead, it is a shift from ‘seeing, observing and knowing from afar to entanglements and relationalities, focusing instead on making and marking differences from within as part of an entangled state’ (T&H: Iverson & Renold: 171), and this includes the human eye, as well as the eye of cameras and video-recording devices.

Now, if human and more-than-human bodies are always entangled networks of relations, and differences between bodies in a monist ‘flattened’ ontology are from within, and not from without, it also follows that non-posthuman research can be diffracted with. For example, it is possible to rescue ‘autobiography from...self-absorption’ (T&H: Gough: 154), despite the risk of representing internal states of mind, such as thoughts, ideas, motivations, drives, values, beliefs, traits and attitudes. Instead of (auto)biography, ‘multibiography’ has been proposed: attending to the ‘diverse forces’, ‘properties and qualities of things’, such as atmospheric things by using Jane Bennett’s method of defamiliarizing ourselves with objects and ‘track the surge and transmission of affective processes’ (V: McCormack: 91-93) through precognitive, preintentional experimentation (V: Sheller: 133). This would mean, not asking, for example, ‘What is it like to be an object?’, or ‘How to make objects talk?’ (T&H: Bennett: 66), but to make an ontological shift by de-centering the human and ask: ‘What is the vibrant matter animating in an agential assemblage?’ (T&H: Jackson & Mazzei: 95). The human should not be assumed *a priori* as there are worlding practices that do not need humans at all (e.g. mountain ranges). Humans are *part* of the ‘common world’ (inspired by Bruno Latour), which expands the social to include the being and becoming of other species, broadens what forms of intelligence are included, and shifts what counts as research subjects: ‘16 children, eight early childhood educators, three graduate students, deer, earthworms, raccoons, stick bugs, lichen, fungi, mosses, chickadees, brown bears, crows, ravens, owls, ferns, douglas fir, arbutus, maples, blackberry, holly, English ivy and a myriad of other species’ (T&H: Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor & Blaise: 153).

A posthuman relational ontology changes how we see the more-than-human; from inert, passive things *in space* (as mere *background* to what happens, for example, in a classroom), to objects we have no access to (see: Object Orientated Ontology [OOO]), and then again to *assemblages* with *agency*, which requires an un/learning of agency ‘outside the acting, human body’ (S&W: Rotas: 94). Jane Bennett’s (2010) extended notion of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘agentic assemblage’ includes both animate and inanimate objects and is powerfully illustrated by Jackson and Mazzei’s example of a student’s performance piece ‘Carry the Weight’ (T&H: 93-107). Raped by a fellow student on campus, after which the rapist is declared innocent by the university, the student, Emma, chose to carry a 50lb mattress around campus. Its sheer weight invites others to help her carry it. This political action is not only symbolic, but the mattress has material-discursive performativity (Barad, 2007). It is not simply a thing as a bounded object that has power, but the mattress has thing-power *as part of* the assemblage mattress-Emma-rapist-friends-strangers-media-campus-administration. Always already entangled and intra-acting they ‘become an-other body or agent’ with in/determinate affect and without boundaries, always shifting and changing (T&H: Jackson & Mazzei: 96). Affect is more than emotion – it does not belong to a bounded body (S&W; Springgay: 82). So how are assemblages to be analysed?

We can no longer simply assume that data analysis is about discovery and a description of a world-as-it-is. We tend to look at, record and analyse what people say and do in educational research: the predominant analytical gaze of visibility (T&H: Gannon: 129). As assemblages of human and nonhuman bodies are always on the move, the idea of ‘capturing’ ‘it’ is problematic. This requires an attitude of epistemic humility if the ‘arrogance of interpretation and the confidence of coding are abandoned’ (T&H: Gannon: 132). The posthuman notion of distributed agency (Bennett), or mutual performativity (Barad), changes how we think about causality, and shifts what we mean by knowledge-production in teaching and research. It is no longer trying to understand *why* Emma did it (e.g. psychologising), but ‘*noticing what is set in motion*’ (T&H: Jackson & Mazzei: 104) – a *tracing of the entanglements* and paying attention to what is included and excluded (Barad, 2007). Knowledge production and learning is more than what happens *in* humans. The research shift involves not only noticing the material ‘background’ or ‘context’, but recognising that utterances do not come from ‘inside’ a human, but are ‘instituted through and by the event of research’ (T&H: Gannon: 136). Hence the need to look elsewhere: the mutual entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds (‘enfleshed pedagogy’) as sites of complex, messy relations with in/determinate openings to *affectivity* and therefore requiring a different ‘listening’ to the data (T&H: Gannon: 143) – also by focusing on what is invisible and perhaps cannot be articulated - to not always rely on pen, paper and camera, but to close one’s eyes in order to ‘privilege smelling, listening and feeling within a multisensory encounter’ (T&H: Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor & Blaise: 156). What is *not* said, or *not* felt, or not ‘there’, is also important data and part of the relational ethics that posthuman teaching and research implies - a response-ability for what is included and excluded (e.g. ancestors, land).

By foregrounding the material (e.g. desks, chairs, atmosphere, insects in the carpet, policies, land, buildings) questions emerge that might ‘seem awkward and strange; our thinking is already shaped for us by the logic contained within the language we write and speak’ (T&H: Jones & Hoskins: 82). ‘The usual logic of English grammar (Object: passive; subject: active) reflects and reproduces a Western subject-object dualism’ (T&H: Jones & Hoskins: 81). Hence, following Jane Bennett (2010), it has been suggested to carefully anthropomorphise objects to ‘allow for moments of naivety’ as a decolonising move, for example, by turning to Indigenous (animist) ontologies. However, this risks not only a superficial, but potentially colonising methodology if the researcher does not also immerse herself ‘in the languages and cultures that produce them’ (T&H: Jones & Hoskins: 85).

So where does this leave the teacher-researcher in education? What does it mean to know and learn? Although it might not be possible to outline a posthuman pedagogy or research (S&W: 3), some features can be traced in the interference pattern created by reading the three books diffractively through one another. What are some of the affirmative ‘do’s’ of posthuman research? What are the propositions?

To *live* without bodily boundaries (Barad, 2014: 178) by: Resisting the desire to fix meanings and to pin down sense; asking speculative hypothetical (e.g. ‘*what if*’) questions that include the human and more-than-human; following multispecies *relations* and tracing entanglements (not following the human); encouraging imaginative, speculative philosophical enquiry that ruptures, unsettles, animates, reverberates, enlivens and

reimagines; opening up to the unknown and not knowing (epistemic humility); accepting that much is not knowable cognitively and can never be articulated; transcending the human and focusing on the 'in-between' inanimate objects, place, technologies, etc.; paying attention to *affect* in knowledge production (moods, passions, emotions, intensities) and being open to be affected by the more-than-human; having courage to queer the privileging of the human mind in knowledge construction and a, moving away from talk; embracing awkward moments that threaten human boundary-making between human/nonhuman, nature/culture, mind/body, child/adult, fantasy/reality; caring differently and acknowledging our human vulnerabilities and limitations; committing oneself to human/more-than-human equality, including queering the binaries between researcher, researched and research participants; appreciating that the researcher is always already part of the apparatus that measures and has a specific geopolitical location; including the more-than-human as research participants (matter as active); putting one's *self* at risk and being curious about thinking and doing 'otherwise'; appreciating the entangled nature of the human and more-than-human (including cameras) in knowledge-production and the productive force of this entanglement (*distributed agency*); focusing on corporeal entanglements, embodied action and fleeting encounters, recording flows of intensities; regarding learning as direct material engagement with the world; dissolving the linear conception of time; embracing the role of educational technology in disrupting binaries between teacher/learner, animate/inanimate, , nature/culture; desiring to circumvent and resist becoming entrapped in humanist discourses and wanting to be in control; becoming sensitive to the always political and ethical nature of teaching and research; resisting asking research participants for lived experiences and describing them discursively, e.g. through coding....

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