Collective Biography and the Entangled Enlivening of Being

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Abstract In this paper we explore the very particular forms and productive possibilities of collaborative writing that are generated in collective biography workshops, focusing in particular on the collaborative generation of memory stories. Drawing on conceptual resources from Deleuze and Barad we work our way through the paradox of working with intensely felt evocative memories within the poststructural conceptual space of the deconstructed subject-of-thought. We analyze a story told in a collective biography workshop on writing, and work with it in relation to the concepts of being as emergent within the encounter, intra-action or the entanglement of agencies, the significance of matter, the movement from perception and affection to percept and affect, and diffraction as concept and practice.

Keywords: Memory, matter, entanglement, intra-action, diffraction

Collective biography workshops work in the interstices of a paradox created when researchers individually and collectively put the individual, liberal humanist subject under erasure. In collective biography workshops the memories of individual subjects are told in intimate embodied detail; each memory is vividly and materially brought to life in/on the body of each narrating subject. These memories are the “data” that we generate and work with. At the same time, collective biography is not interested in those individuals’ “autobiographical lives.” We are interested, rather, in the ways we can work with our memories to understand and extend the philosophical work that puts that individualized subject under erasure—deconstructing the concept of a subject whose stories might reveal a life. In this paper we set out to show how the collaborative work of generating and recording memories in collective biography works in this paradoxical space.

Drawing on the strategy of memory-work developed by Haug and her colleagues (1987), we began collaborative writing using collective biography around the turn of the century (Davies et al., 1997; Davies, 2000; Davies et al., 2001), and in 2006
we gathered together into a book a collection of collaborative papers we had participated in writing, introducing collective biography as a research methodology (Davies & Gannon, 2006).

Our main sources of conceptual inspiration in the beginning were Butler and Foucault. More recently we have turned to Deleuze (Davies & Gannon, 2009; Gannon & Davies, 2011; Wyatt et al., 2011), and now, with this paper, we also find ourselves drawing on Barad in interesting and productive ways (see also Zabrodska et al., 2011). It is to both Deleuze and Barad that we will turn in this paper. In what follows we will introduce some of the conceptual innovations that Deleuze and Barad make possible and illustrate them with a story told and written in a collective biography workshop on writing.

We begin our analysis of the paradoxical space of collective biography with the concepts of **being as emergent in the encounter; intra-action or the entanglement of agencies; and the significance of matter.** We will show how these concepts can be worked with to analyze the collaborative work that goes into writing memory stories in collective biography workshops. We then introduce further concepts, diffraction and affect/percept, with which we attempt to resolve the dilemma of working with the embodied being of the deconstructed subject.

**Being as Emergent Within the Encounter**

Individuals and their individual lives are both ontologically and epistemologically real. We will come back to ontology and bodies in later sections. Epistemologically speaking, a great deal of our daily (and nightly) life is about creating and sustaining the concepts and practices through which individual lives are made to make sense. Habitual, repetitive citations and explanations work to keep each of us (more or less) in place and in character. Haug et al. (1987) were particularly interested in those clichés and explanations that went to make up the fabric of women’s lives, lives which they had found to be absent in Marxist theory and the psycho-social theories available at that time. In making the constitutive force of gendered discourse visible and legible, Haug and her colleagues were interested in liberating themselves from its constitutive force. They were thus working to uncover and undermine the way discourse subordinated women. Becoming reflexively aware of the terms of one’s subordination, making the terms of subordination legible instead of illegible, was aimed at disrupting the continuity of the terms of subordination. Butler makes this same point when she argues that it is the very illegibility of the “conditions of
intelligibility” that secures their continuity:

The conditions of intelligibility are themselves formulated in and by power, and this normative exercise of power is rarely acknowledged as an operation of power at all. Indeed we may classify it among the most implicit forms of power, one that works through its illegibility: it escapes the terms of legibility that it occasions. That power continues to act in illegible ways is one source of its relative invulnerability. [Further, the] one who speaks according to the norms that govern speakability is not necessarily following a rule in a conscious way. One speaks according to a tacit set of norms that are not always explicitly coded as rules. (1997, p. 134)

Collective biography work, as it has evolved over the last decade, does not look for a uni-directional oppressive effect of discourse on individuals. Rather, the subject is conceived as emergent in each moment, moments that are simultaneously discursive, relational, and material. Each subject is one facet of a whole much greater than individual selves and much bigger than human lives alone (Davies & Gannon, 2009; Wyatt et al., 2011). Inspired by Deleuze, we have sought to document the ways that life continually evolves through the flows and intensities of encounters, encounters that “disrupt, dislodge, disconfirm our usual modes of being, our habitual sense of the way things are or ought to be, including our sense of ourselves” (Clarke/Keefe, 2010, p. xiii). Haug et al.’s work, in this sense, is also evolutionary, insofar as it creates a liberatory movement against normative, constitutive forces of discourse.

To some extent Haug et al. were also interested in deconstructing the individual subject of humanism. To this end they recommended writing the memories in the third person, and they did not attach the stories to individual members of the research team. But in that historical period since Haug et al.’s work appeared in English in the late 80s, a great deal of conceptual work has been done to take that evolutionary work much further. We hope in this paper to open up that conceptual space to see how it has enabled a more (r)evolutionary approach to the individual subject’s knowing and being.

In our workshops our instructions to ourselves when we write our memories we are specifically not to use clichés and explanations, to be aware of the language we use, and to choose words that are true to the remembered subject. We work collaboratively to find those words that express the embodied sensations that make up the memory. The assembled researchers listen intently to each other’s spoken and written memories in order to know them from inside themselves. They ask
questions, they point to the places in the text where the experience of the subject in the story is unclear or incredible, they suggest other words, they tell related stories. The original holder of the memory writes and rewrites the memory in light of this collaborative attention to the detail until, with a collective sigh, or with tears, the assembled memory-workers say—yes, that is it exactly—we know this moment from inside itself. That is, the memory begins to register and resonate affectively in the bodies of the listeners. The memory-story is, in this moment, both intensely real and de-individualised.

The story telling and writing and re-writing thus take the form of an encounter, not so much between individual subjects and discourse, though it is also that, but working with the intensities and flows that, collectively, move us. Through this process of story-telling and writing, and the subsequent conceptual analysis based on those stories, we seek an experimental, emergent engagement with thought, where thought and being are not separate. Deleuze and Guattari (1994, p. 111) say of thought: “To think is to experiment, but experimentation is always that which is in the process of coming about—the new, remarkable, and interesting that replace the appearance of truth and are more demanding than it is.” This thinking being is not the liberal humanist subject-of-will, but the subject-of-thought. As Bronwyn has written elsewhere, the subject-of-thought is not a bounded self but immanent within life itself:

Poststructuralist theory suggests that agency, rather than being a product of the individual will, lies in the conditions of possibility that provoke new thought.... It is in this sense that I take up the concept of the subject-of-thought, as responsive to those conditions of possibility. One of those conditions, according to Deleuze, is the move from the moralistic judgement made against the imagined ideal, toward an ethics based on immanence, where immanence means to remain within. In a Deleuzian philosophy this does not mean within the bounded self, but within life; not just human life, but all life, organic and inorganic, which Deleuze refers to as Being. It is here that the subject-of-thought is located, not as a bounded self but as life itself. (Davies, 2010, p. 55, italics in original)

Integral to this concept of the emergent subject immanent within the encounter is that agency is not the property of singular beings in isolation. We extend this idea in what follows.
Intra-action: The Entanglement of Agencies

Barad introduces the concept of intra-action in order to further dislodge the concept of the individual subject-as-entity whose agency is a matter of individual will. Whereas interaction, she suggests, is about the meeting of two preexisting entities, intra-action refers to the movement generated in an encounter, in which two or more bodies are in a process of becoming different. Intra-action extends Deleuze’s (1994) concept of differenciation or continuous difference and multiplicity, and it enables Barad to elaborate on the emergent possibilities of entangled agencies:

The neologism “intra-action” signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the “distinct” agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements. (2007, p. 33, italics in original)

This is an important conceptual innovation, bringing together distinct entities (subjects, concepts, landscapes, and so forth) and the fact that their distinctiveness emerges in an entanglement of agencies—their own and others’.

As memory-workers we intra-act with each other’s memories of being and with the language in which they might be written. We are, in Barad’s sense, not absolute, distinct agencies who exist as entities outside the encounter, but becoming-distinct-subjects in the relational, mutual entanglement of the work, where what is entangled is much more than a small group of agentic subjects-of-will. In attending to the ‘much more’ in which we are entangled, Barad nevertheless emphasizes the importance of attending to the minute details of specific entities. Those documented details, she demonstrates, do not reveal fixed entities, but entities that are always entangled and always becoming something other than they were. Barad illustrates this complex point in her description of herself as writer:

Writing is not a unidirectional practice of creation that flows from author to page, but rather the practice of writing is an iterative and mutually constitutive working out, and reworking, of “book” and “author.”... Furthermore, entanglements are not isolated binary co-productions as the example of the author-book pair might suggest. (2007, p. x)
In writing even a sole-authored book, she says, others were entangled in the process of writing; in her case:

Friends, colleagues, students, family members, multiple academic institutions, departments, and disciplines, the forests, streams, and beaches of the eastern and western coasts, the awesome peace and clarity of early morning hours, and much more were a part of what helped to constitute both this “book” and its “author.” (2007, p. x)

In Barad’s terms, the collective biography workshops can be said to explore the entanglements of matter and meaning through which we are co-implicated in the generation and evolution of knowing and being (Davies, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2009). The always-emergent entities include, among other things, ourselves; the research question and readings we have assembled; the triggers for memory that we have generated out of those readings; past selves as we remember them; the physical, relational, and discursive space of the memories; the physical, relational, and discursive space inside of which the memory work is done. The memory stories are not told in order to fix “this is who I am.” Rather, through the processes of telling, listening, writing, reading, and re-writing, we explore the entangled encounters through which we are made and go on making ourselves human, not in isolation, but in intra-action, and not in a generic sense, but in our particularities.

This idea of the entanglement of agencies allows self-as-entity (the subject), but insists that it is emergent in relation to other agencies and that its conditions of possibility are necessarily its entanglement with those other agencies. In the next section we extend this thought through Barad’s focus on matter.

**The Significance of Matter**

A major concern of Barad’s (2007) philosophy is the persistent tendency in post-structural philosophies and social sciences to emphasize discourse at the expense of matter. In her philosophy, ontology and epistemology are co-implicated, and, further, the ways in which matter is made to matter necessarily raises ethical questions:

Matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder.... Mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance, most evidently perhaps when it is the nature of matter that is in question, when the smallest parts of matter are found to be capable of exploding deeply
entrenched ideas and large cities. Perhaps this is why contemporary physics makes the inescapable entanglement of matters of being, knowing, and doing, of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, of fact and value, so tangible, so poignant. (2007, p. 3)

Barad does not draw back from the constitutive force of discourse, but she insists that we equally take account of matter, both its agency and our capacity to understand its agency, where agency is not to be found in pre-existing human entities, or in discourse, but in emergent and multiple encounters, in “dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations of the world” (2007, p. 141).

The asymmetrical faith we place in our access to representations over things is a historically and culturally contingent belief that is part of Western philosophy’s legacy and not a logical necessity; that is, it is simply a Cartesian habit of mind.... A performative understanding of scientific practices, for example, does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a direct material engagement with the world. (Barad, 2007, p. 49, italics in original)

As a physicist it is perhaps inevitable that Barad would find peculiar the way poststructuralist philosophy and social science grant agency to discourse but not to matter. As social scientists we have confidently seen and documented discourse doing its constitutive work, and we have hesitated to see or document the constitutive force of bodies. As feminists, too, we have been wary of the essentialism and subsequent determinism that taking account of bodies seemed to get us into. But Barad brings insights from the study of matter in Physics to argue that

matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still—an ongoing reconfiguring that exceeds any linear conception of dynamics in which effect follows cause end-on-end, and in which the global is a straightforward emanation outward of the local. Matter’s dynamicism is generative not merely in the sense of bringing new things into the world but in the sense of bringing forth new worlds, of engaging in an ongoing reconfiguring of the world. (2007, p. 170)

The entangled agencies in relation to which we are emergent include matter, our own and others, both human and not-human—matter that is dynamic and actively engaged in re-configuring the world.

So far we have introduced three concepts with which to make sense of our work. (This is, by the way, not a reflexive sense, but an entangled, diffractive sense. “What
we do” necessarily shifts, intra-actively, as it engages with the conceptual apparatus that we bring to bear on it. We come back to this idea in a later section of the paper). Those three concepts that we have so far elaborated are: being as emergent in the encounter; intra-action or the entanglement of agencies; and the significance of matter. Before proceeding to yet more complex concepts with which to enter and make sense of the paradox of being subjects and subjects, we will work through a story told in a workshop on writing, seeing how these concepts might entangle themselves in the work with memory.

Example from an Exploration of Writing as Pleasure and as Alienation

The collective biography workshop from which we take our story was convened as an extension of work Susanne had done with students in an English-teaching course (Gannon & Davies, 2007). We wanted to experiment with the surprising themes that had emerged from the students’ memories of writing (as ‘pleasure,’ as ‘threat,’ and as ‘alienation’). At first we were nonplussed by the students’ description of writing as threat and alienation. Surely writing was pleasurable, especially for students intent on becoming teachers of English? The participants in this particular collective biography workshop, as it happened, were also engaged in extended investigations of worker subjectivities in neoliberal contexts, including universities, and it did not take long to remember the ways in which our workplaces routinely caught us up in writing practices that were both threatening and alienating. Our collaborative research question in the workshop resolved itself into: What are the impacts of audit culture on the work of academics?

In what follows we take a small story told and written and read in that workshop. We had begun by triggering earliest memories of writing as pleasure and of alienation. We each in turn told stories triggered by the prompts, and, after each session of story telling and discussion, chose which story to work into written form. It is one of those early memories that we will work with here. The story chosen is about a moment in primary school, in fourth or fifth grade, when the story-teller discovered the effect of onomatopoeia, and the intense pleasure of words that evoked familiar Australian landscapes that she could visualize. This evocation of familiar landscapes was in marked contrast with the books she had grown up with, whose landscapes were almost always elsewhere, in England, or Canada, or the United States. The discovery of words written about the Australian landscape opened up a remembered pleasure that worked in sharp contrast to the alienation that some of Susanne’s students had expressed.
The entangled agencies intra-acting with each other in the moment of re-mem-
bering in this story include the emerging research question, the story-teller, the
story, Susanne’s students’ stories of alienation, a history of Australian children
given literature written in and about landscapes they had never seen, the material
presence of assembled researchers, the neoliberalisation of universities, a history
of working together as collaborating researcher/writers and as research students/
supervisors, and the physical space of Bronwyn’s apartment in the inner city where
we met over the three days of the workshop. The list of entangled agencies is poten-
tially endless.

But now to the story. This version of the story appeared in one of our note-
books. We include the lines that were crossed out, and words added in subsequent
re-writings [in square brackets]:

She took her story out to the teacher to mark, a little nervous. She had taken
two words from the geography book that she really loved: undulating plains.

This sentence was written and then immediately rejected. When the story-teller
imagined reading these words to the others she could see that they could not pos-
sibly evoke the particular pleasure she remembered. She decided to go back to the
moment of first hearing the words when the teacher read them, to see if the pleasure
that she remembered could be evoked through that particular moment:

The teacher read out to them from the new geography book. She was struck
The girl’s attention was caught by the phrase ‘undulating plains’. The teacher’s voice
when she read, was like that—undulating plains—casting you free into a dream
space where you drifted in and out of the words being read [and the images
and feelings they invoked that came with them]. She repeated the words to her-
self, feeling the pleasurable sound, seeing the soft folds of grey-green and the
expanses of the plain expanding away from her, and a, in a brown grey-green, a
haze on the skyline, She felt intense pleasure in the image [and the feeling] and
the sound coming together rolling and lapping into and over each other.

The words exist in the geography book, on the teacher’s lips and tongue, in the
sound of her voice, and on the girl’s lips and tongue as she repeats the words silently
to herself. The constitutive force of the discourse to name the landscape “undu-
lating plains” is materially present in the entangled agencies of book, teacher, girl,
plains, past books in alien landscapes, and so on. The agency of the small girl, now
a woman, is present in the writing, and in the crossing out and amendments, as
are the imagined listeners who are also scribbling away in their notebooks, writing
about the pleasure of writing. The story-teller has crossed out clichés (“she was struck,” “she felt intense pleasure”) and also words that the small girl would not have used (“they invoked”), and she has struggled to find the music, the poetry of the words that might bring the sight and sound of the undulating plains to life. But still her memory-story it is not yet about writing. Hastily, because time is running out, she adds the next sentence, and then crosses it out, not pleased with it because it has been written too hastily. It is clichéd, and she has not yet found the just-thisness of the moment, or indeed, not yet got to the remembered act of writing:

She managed in the next few days to find a chance to tell the teacher, quietly, so the others didn’t hear, how she loved those words in the text-book “undulating plains”. The teacher was very surprised that she’s noticed the words and very pleased. She couldn’t wait to write a story with undulating plains, entering into the space the words opened up.

When she reads the story to the group she tentatively adds the last sentence, and the others tell her they like it and she should keep it as part of the story. So the story that is submitted to the corpus of material out of which the paper will emerge includes this last sentence—the tremulous girl wanting to tell her teacher about the experience, afraid of the reaction of the other students, and the anticipated pleasure of taking these words up as her own in her writing.

In the discussions that followed the reading of this and other stories of pleasure and of alienation in writing, a theme emerged in the very gap opened up in this story between pleasurable anticipation of writing and the requirement of shaping oneself as the appropriate subject-of-writing that the teacher desires. The girl, as we see in the first crossed out sentence, is nervous about the teacher’s judgment. Is it really going to be acceptable for her to make these words her own? If we think about the “dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/ relationalities/(re)articulations of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 141), then what is partially invisible here in the story is the force of the classroom and the teacher (however benign and approving) to shape this girl up as the right kind of girl, the right kind of student. The subsequent stories of alienation worked to make these forces more legible. The authority for whom we make ourselves into the desiring and appropriate(d) subject-of-writing in the collaboratively authored paper that emerged from this workshop were the practices of audit in academic culture, including grant writing, reviewing, publication, and workload allocation.

We wrote in that paper: “We are interested here in that doubled action, as it is manifested in acts of writing, of both active submission (forming oneself as an
appropriate subject) and excess” (Bansel et al., 2008, pp. 673–674, italics in original). While the central moment in the story is about the excessive pleasure, and the unexpected opening up of something new, the deleted parts of the story are all about the active submission entailed in forming oneself as an appropriate subject through writing. The thought that emerged in the writing of the paper dwelt on this particular entanglement:

In this article we will examine the multi-layered acts of writing and reading through which we are regulated, and in which we are routinely caught up … [in] simultaneous submission and excess.… In turning our attention to writing as governmentality we are interested in the way academic writing may both contain and constrain and lead to the not yet known—to that which exceeds that which constrains it. Writing may take us to the not-yet-known, but it is also, and at the same time, an inscription and performance of ourselves through available repertoires of meaning-making, through which we ‘make sense’ … or fail to make sense. (Bansel et al., 2008, p. 674, italics in original)

We observed in the paper that discourse works on us to “construct us not only as particular kinds of subjects, but also to construct the actions we engage in, and the emotions we experience, as reflections of our selves rather than of the discourses through which they are made to seem real” (p. 675, italics in original).

What working with Barad does, now, is to open up this space further to enable us to see that it is not self or discourse that has constitutive force, but self and discourse, entangled with other multiple agencies. We can begin to make legible the diffractive relations between the physically present small girl, the teacher’s voice, the words the small girl learned and repeated, and her anxious desire for approval as they intra-act with each other. The small girl is matter and she matters, but not as we might usually imagine:

Matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity.… Or, rather, matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that is implicated and enfolded in its iterative becoming. Matter(ing) is a dynamic articulation/configuration of the world. (Barad, 2007, p. 151, italics in original)

Two further concepts will now be brought into play to further flesh out the paradoxical space we are working in. These are Deleuze’s affect and percept, and Barad’s diffraction.
The Movement from Affection and Perception to Affect and Percept

With some of our stories, written and re-written, there is sometimes a fleshy moment of tears in the collective apprehension of the just-thisness of the moment. The surge of tears is associated with the transformation, in Deleuzian terms, of affection into affect, and of perception into percept. The just-thisness, or haecceity, where assemblages of bodies and elements align temporarily along “dimensions of multiplicities,” create a moment in which the already known (of thinking and being) is abandoned, and a space of knowing and being differently opens up (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. 290). Affect moves through voice, language, and text in the collective biography workshop as each memory evokes other memories within the group and as each member of the group comes to know him- or herself differently through the collaborative work on his or her own and others’ stories.

In this section we compare this work that we engage in with the work of some writers and artists who use syntax, lines, and colours to “raise lived perceptions to percepts and lived affections to affect” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 170). Rather than syntax, lines, and colours, we use molecular memories, working on them and with them, collectively, in order to generate this same movement. This collaborative investigation through language, matter, and memory dissolves the illusion of pre-existing, separate individualized selves. It makes legible the intensities and flows of Being, where Being is intensely experienced through material bodies as they come to know themselves in connection with the agency of other bodies both human and non-human, organic and inorganic. Deleuze and Guattari describe this as a shift from affection to affect, and take their examples from novels and art. Of novels they write:

The novel has often risen to the percept—not perception of the moor in Hardy but the moor as percept; oceanic percepts in Melville; urban percepts, or those of the mirror, in Virginia Woolf. The landscape sees… Characters can only exist, and the author can only create them, because they do not perceive but have passed into the landscape and are themselves part of the compound of sensations. Ahab really does have perceptions of the sea, but only because he has entered into a relationship with Moby Dick that makes him a becoming-whale and forms a compound of sensations that no longer needs anyone: ocean. It is Mrs. Dalloway who perceives the town—but because she has passed into the town like “a knife through everything” and becomes imperceptible herself. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 168–169)
This movement from individuals’ perceptions and affections to the affective and perceptive life of the landscape accomplishes a different possibility. Yes, Ahab and Mrs. Dalloway are intensely present in the landscape, but only as the landscape, the ocean, and the city have come to life. The ocean is not only there in Ahab’s perception of it, or his affection for it; the city is not only there in Mrs. Dalloway’s perception and affection. The novelists, in working toward affects and percepts, show how individuals and landscapes are co-implicated in each other, as mutually entangled agencies.

In the collective biography workshops, you could say, we become each other’s stories. We become the girl hearing the particular landscape of the plains in the teacher’s words, become plains as she takes up the sight and sound of the words, but also become writer, entangled with the agencies of teacher, classroom, book, and pen.

The task in our collective biography workshops is not to find the truths of individual entities that pre-exist the collective work with memories, but precisely the process that is involved in escaping from the tedious repetitions of the clichés and explanations that go to make a story of “me” and “my life.” Like the novelists Deleuze and Guattari describe, memory-work aims to recapture precise details, often drawing them out from the key images, tableaus, fleeting glimpses, and scents through which memory first emerges (Haug et al., 1987, pp. 71–72). The intricate work of recalling material and sensory detail leads to the resurgence of affect in the participant and its transmission amongst the group through what Probyn calls “affect contagion.” Affects are neither internal to the discrete or bounded body, nor externally imposed on that body, but bodies themselves are defined by “dynamic relations” with all sorts of other bodies, including texts we read and write that are “integral to our capacities to affect and to be affected” (Probyn, 2010, p. 77).

This takes us to our final section, where we elaborate Barad’s work with the concept of diffraction, which is the final conceptual piece in our paradoxical puzzle. All of what we have done so far has, in effect, been illustrating the concept and practice of diffraction, as we hope to make clear now.

**From Reflexivity to Diffraction**

Reflexivity has become the new dogma of qualitative research. Through reflection and self-reflection we and our research subjects, we have come to assume, can discover the truth of ourselves. When we tried to capture the reflexive act through collective biography, however, we found a hall of mirrors in which the “original” endlessly receded from us (Davies et al., 2004). Barad suggests that we abandon reflexivity since it (mis)leads us into searching for origins even when the conceptual
work we are doing tells us there is no such thing as the original. Reflexivity evokes an original that is reflected as in a mirror, with our brains simply acting as the mirror that can pick up the original by gazing at it. She argues: “Reflection is insufficient; intervention is the key” (2007, p. 50). She works with diffraction instead:

Diffraction does not fix what is the object and what is the subject in advance, and so, unlike methods of reading one text or set of ideas against another where one set serves as a fixed frame of reference, diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter. (Barad, 2007, p. 30)

Working with the idea of diffractive methodology, we can say that our collective biography stories “highlight, exhibit, and make evident the entangled structure of the changing and contingent ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing” (Barad, 2007, p.73). Entanglement is in the substance of the memories, and also in the practices through which they are generated: “Diffraction not only brings the reality of entanglements to light; it is itself an entangled phenomenon” (Barad, 2007, p. 73).

Barad argues that the concept of reflexivity catches us up in representationalism—the belief that our task is the representation of individual entities. It is a fundamental tenet of representationalism, which poststructuralist philosophy abandons and poststructuralist social science has nevertheless tended to rely on, that “the world is composed of individual entities with separately determinate properties. Indeed most forms of realism presuppose a metaphysics that takes for granted the existence of individual entities, each of which [has] its own roster of nonrelational properties” (Barad, 2007, p. 55). Barad argues that what is real is not those entities capable of being represented as such, but the ongoing intra-active processes where matter is made to matter in one way or another.

She elaborates this idea by taking her point of departure from Butler’s concept of performativity. Butler argued that we do not perform already existing selves, or even produce mis-leading performances of non-existent selves. Performativity, for her, was the process through which that which is comes into existence through the performance of itself. Gender is not the expression of essential, binary, sexed selves, but the accomplishment, performatively and collectively, of something that comes to be recognized as gender difference. The performative “is not a singular act used by an already established subject, but one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated
into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations” (Butler, 1997, p. 160). Barad takes performativity further:

Performative accounts that social and political theorists have offered focus on the productive nature of social practices and human bodies. By contrast [my approach] takes account of the fact that the forces at work in the materialization of bodies are not only social, and the bodies produced are not all human.... I propose a new understanding of how discursive practices are related to the material world.... [My] reconceptualization of the nature of matter and discursive practices provides a means for taking account of the productive nature of the natural as well as cultural forces in the differential materialization of nonhuman as well as human bodies. It thereby avoids privileging discursive over material concerns and the reinscription of the nature-culture dualism that Butler’s account inadvertently enacts. (2007, pp. 33–34)

This configuration of matter as intra-actively becoming, where discursive practices and natural and cultural forces interfere with and change each other, enables us to examine the inter-play of forces in collective biography work in a new way. It draws our attention to the way in which we work with material presence—in the memory, in the workshop, and in the writing—and engage with memories not as if they are veridically stored in the brain, but working to re-enliven and re-configure the emotions as we experience them in heart, muscle, blood, breath, and body-posture with/in landscapes of sea/forest/schools/streetscapes (Davies, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2009). We do this work through speaking and writing to each other, listening to each other, and being heard, in a dynamic engagement with our research question and with the readings we have assembled. Each participant is not remembering and representing a self as it really was in some fixed state, but the mo(ve)ments encapsulated in particular memorable moments of being. These mo(ve)ments can be the repetitive citations through which an apparently fixed pattern is achieved and/or the line of flight—the moment when everything changed.

Collaborative writing as we have engaged in it in our collective biography work with memories is best analyzed, we suggest, not as reflexive work, but as diffractive work. It opens up lines of flight where new and surprising meanings intra-act with the matter(ing) of life. What has settled into an apparent fixity, a binary, a category, starts moving, not in repetitive iterations but in leaps and bounds toward the new. The work of collective biography, beginning with reading theory/philosophy, working with concepts to find how to know them through our bodily experiences, telling stories, expressing our stories through art and body work as well as written forms,
telling stories, and listening with an open mind—each opens up the possibility of a diffractive mo(ve)ment.

Diffraction abandons the individual subject as the fixed point of reference, or as the sole reflective agent, and instead focuses on “how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter” (Barad, 2007, p. 30). A diffractive reading brings one text or theory toward another to create “more promising interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies” (Haraway, 1997, in Barad, 2007, p. 71, our italics). These form an analytical “diffractive apparatus” that can be laboriously built and “tuned” (and re-tuned) to attend to particular details rather than others (Barad, 2007, p. 73). This re-tuning brings new details into sight that may not be initially apparent, including those that are not ‘visible’ or ‘legible’ in any conventional researcherly sense. Barad insists that diffraction is not a mere substitution of one optic analogy for another but a different attention to “specific material entanglements” (p. 88). Diffractive methodology is itself entangled and it “brings the reality of entanglements to light” (p. 73).

In our story, the ambivalent movement between the moment of presenting written work to the teacher and the intense and excessive pleasure of hearing/seeing/becoming the undulating plains is partially caught in the writing and crossings out and re-writing. The illegibility of the entanglement of subordination and excess becomes legible not simply in the written words, but in the complex entangling of bodies, ideas, flows, and intensities generated by the collaborating researchers in the space of the workshop, and later, writing their way into a paper for publication.

The use of diffraction rather than reflexivity, as concept and method, with its intra-action between meaning and matter, and its insistence that what we see is a consequence of our apparatus of investigation, brings a different emphasis to the “collective” of collective biography. This cannot be a collection of separate entities searching for what pre-exists that search, but matter (bodies, chairs, rooms, views, tables, paper, pencils, computers) entangled with stories, concepts, ideas, questions, voices, emotions, memories, all past and present. The memories are inserted into, and actively interfere with, matter, and the ways matter actively comes to matter.

In this way collective biography dislodges memory from the psychological and historical individual humanist subject and resituates it beyond the subject as a socio-discursive-material accomplishment that always takes place in particular material, affective, spatial and temporal contexts that themselves work on memory:

Memory does not reside in the folds of individual brains; rather, memory is the enfoldings of space-time-matter written into the universe, or better, the
enfolded articulations of the universe in its mattering. Memory is not a record of a fixed past that can ever be fully or simply erased, written over, or recovered (that is, taken away or taken back into one's possession, as if it were a thing that can be owned). And memory is not a replay of a string of moments, but an enlivening and reconfiguring of past and future that is larger than any individual. Re-membering and re-cognizing do not take care of, or satisfy, or in any other way reduce one's responsibilities; rather, like all intra-actions, they extend the entanglements and responsibilities of which one is part. The past is never finished. It cannot be wrapped up like a package, or a scrapbook...; we never leave it and it never leaves us behind. (Barad, 2007, p. ix, our emphasis)

Collective biography aims to open spaces for enlivening and reconfiguring memories, in Barad’s terms, for extending entanglements and responsibilities into the material spaces of the workshop and the screen and page. Data generation and analysis; past, present, and future; this body and that; the relational, cognitive, and affective flows amongst bodies and the very matter of the spaces and places we are in, intra-act and comingling in collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2009). The particular memories that are told and written in a collective biography workshop, and the particularities of their telling in that spatial, temporal, and material configuration, differ from memories that would have been assembled in a different workshop and writing configuration, or from memories as they might be generated and contested in other spaces and places. Each collective biography workshop is an opportunity for a “particular constructed cut” that “delineates an object from the agencies of observation,” and that marks something off from “a particular instance of wholeness” (Barad, 2007, p. 197). In the telling and the writing each memory is extracted, and its edges sharpened from the phenomenon of memory and the multiplicities of entangled memories and ideas and questions. What becomes knowable in this process is the entangled enlivening of being.

Where to from Here?

What we hope to have made legible here is the way in which any research methodology is an apparatus that is itself an effective agent working to constitute the world in particular ways. It is not an agency that works alone; it is an agency entangled with other agencies, and it has material and ethical effects that must always be examined. Collective biography is a diffractive apparatus particularly suited to the documentation of diffractive entanglements of the ontological, epistemological, and ethical
dimensions of life itself. In the take-up of concepts from Deleuze and Barad we have found ways to enable researchers to think beyond anxieties about what is real or most authentic, beyond the persistent authority of the originating author of the text as an anchor for the truth, and beyond the uni-directional force of discourse on matter. We have shown that human bodies are not storage sites for memory, but the “mobile-affective site of writing” (Gannon, Walsh, Byers, & Rajiva, forthcoming). We are the immanent entanglements of agencies, and as such, we attend to, and also engage in, the ongoing entangled enlivening of being, and Being (the organic and inorganic entanglements of life itself).

Bringing Deleuze and Barad together as we have done here opens up a path through the deep dilemmas that social scientists working with human subjects and with poststructuralist theory have been skirting around for the last two decades. Barad shows how bodies can, and should, be taken into account, and how agency can, and must, be revived, not as an individualistic or causal force, but as an emergent force within an entanglement of agencies (material, affective, and conceptual). Each of those agencies interferes with the course of events. There is no static, stable reality to be investigated, but a complex, intra-acting, emergent, and mobile set of forces (material, affective, and conceptual) that must be documented in fine, molecular detail if we are to make sense of ‘what is going on.’

We find ourselves inspired by this analysis to think of ways in which we can further experiment with the processes of collective biography, exploring new ways of documenting the detail of the emergent interferences that take place in the processes of collective biography and of life itself. We might, for example, generate additional stories written from the point of view of the others in the story—not just human others, the teachers and the other students, for example—but the inorganic others, the books and papers, the pens, the chairs and desks and windows... What agency do they bring to bear on the memories we work with? Occasionally we have worked with visual art and poetic forms of writing. We might pay more attention to the ways in which such artistic work intra-acts with the entangled agencies at play. In other words, we will further experiment with documenting the emergent and multiple encounters, in their “dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 141). We are also interested to explore how the insights in this paper might contribute to new ways of thinking about and practicing more traditional qualitative methodologies like interviews and observations. But that is a whole new story...
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