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A voice without organs: interviewing in posthumanist research

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In keeping with the editor's call for this special issue, this paper discusses how a posthumanist stance has enabled me to materialize a different conception of the interview and interview data in postqualitative inquiry. More specifically, I am thinking with Deleuze and Guattari's concept, the *Body without Organs*, one they use to enact thinking without a subject and to liberate thought from overcoded images in order to confront a reliance on objects or material representations to understand and explain. Using this concept, I theorize a *Voice without Organs* (VwO) as a voice that does not emanate from a singular subject but is produced in an enactment among research-data-participants-theory-analysis. The article concludes with an analysis of data from a recent interview project that illustrates how VwO is both produced by and producing different knowledge and suggests implications for thinking interviewing and interview data differently.

Keywords: interviewing; posthumanism; voice; Deleuze and Guattari

In keeping with the editor's call for this special issue, this paper discusses how a posthumanist stance has enabled me to materialize a different conception of the interview and interview data in postqualitative inquiry. More specifically, I am thinking with Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) concept, the *Body without Organs* (BwO), one they use to enact thinking without a subject and to liberate "thought from its organizing images" (Colebrook, 2006, p. 121). Deleuze and Guattari are not interested in producing meaning but instead want to know how things work and what they produce.

In this paper, I first explain how qualitative researchers using humanist theories of the subject typically equate words spoken by participants in interviews and then transcribed into words in interview transcripts as data. In humanist qualitative inquiry, the assumption is that voice is produced by a unique, essentialist subject. I then explain that from a posthumanist stance, interview data, the voices of participants, cannot be thought as emanating from an essentialist subject nor can they be separated from the enactment in which they are produced, an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis – what I call here a *Voice without Organs* (VwO). Finally, I illustrate how the concept VwO can be used to analyze data from an interview project with first-generation women academics and discuss implications for doing interviewing in posthumanist research.

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Productive and insufficient voices

For some time, I have written about the ways in which qualitative researchers limit what counts as interview data. In an early research project with white teachers (Mazzei, 2004, 2007) I theorized that interview data (and/or voice) is not bound by speech but can be found in inhabited silence, both *purpose full* and *meaning full*. From that work, I learned that limiting interview data to spoken words and not attending to words that seemed present in their absence limits knowledge production. Voice in humanist qualitative inquiry must be present – spoken, heard, recorded, and transcribed into words in an interview transcript. A question for a posthumanist researcher would be what kind of voice, what kind of human being can be thought once voice no longer has to be present, emanating from a unique, essentialist subject conscious to itself? Using Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) concept of the BwO, I propose a VwO to describe a different kind of human being that enables one to think voice differently. For Deleuze and Guattari, that kind of human being is an assemblage, an entanglement, a knot of forces and intensities that operate on a plane of immanence and that produce a voice that does not emanate from a singular subject but is produced, as noted above, in an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis.

Appreciating the scope of the difference to which the concept of VwO refers requires different conceptions of human agency. Agency is described differently in different paradigmatic perspectives – e.g. humanism, poststructuralism, and posthumanism. In what follows, I begin by describing the humanist subject and its agency and then describe Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) BwO and extend that description to the concept I propose here, a VwO that enables a different conception of how both agency and voice are produced and distributed.

From a humanist perspective, agency is an innate characteristic of the essentialist, intentional, free subject that enables him to act on and in the world. To ascribe "agency" to someone is to imply that she is a voluntary actor making choices that are willed rather than determined. This description of agency presupposes subjects "who speak for themselves; subjects capable of knowing others; and subjects in charge of their desires and identifications" (Lather, 2009, p. 17), a position often assumed in earlier interpretivist and critical qualitative research. The agency of the subject in a poststructural paradigm "seems to lie in the subject's ability to decode and recode its identity within discursive formations and cultural practices" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504). This subject is not one with a unique essentialist core that stays the same through time, thereby possessing an innate agency; however, the humanist subject creeps back into methodological practices when researchers assert a reflexive stance that assumes a posture of knowing in an attempt at greater self-accounting and authenticity (Barad, 2007; Lather, 2009).

From a posthumanist perspective, agency is distributed in a way that avoids hanging on to the vestiges of a knowing humanist subject that lingers in some post-structuralist analysis. For example, Haraway (as cited in Barad, 2007) wrote, "Reflexivity has been recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up worries about ... the search for the authentic and really real" (p. 71). According to Barad, "Haraway focuses our attention on this figurative distinction to highlight important difficulties with the notion of reflection as a pervasive trope for knowing" (pp. 71–72). In a shift to posthumanist agency, intentionality is not attributable to

humans but, for example, is, “understood as attributable to a complex network of human and nonhuman agents, including historically specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of the individual” (p. 23). Agency then, is an enactment of an entanglement like the one I described earlier, an entanglement of researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis, as opposed to an innate attribute of an individual human being. In other words, agency to change the world and be changed by the world emerges within the intra-actions (pp. 139–141) of multiple people and things and does not pre-exist those encounters. In the posthuman, “material and human agencies are mutually and emergently productive [or constitutive] of one another” (Pickering, 1999, p. 373).

Since “voice” cannot be thought as existing separately from the milieu in which it exists, it cannot be thought as emanating “from” an individual person. There is no separate, individual person, no participant in an interview study to which a single voice can be linked – all are entangled. In Deleuzo-Guattarian ontology, there is no present, conscious, coherent individual who “knows who she is, says what she means and means what she says” (MacLure, 2009, p. 104). Thus, we decouple voice – words spoken and words written in transcripts – from an intentional, agentic humanist subject and move to VwO, voice thought as an assemblage, a complex network of human and nonhuman agents that exceeds the traditional notion of the individual.

A voice without a subject

Goodchild (1996) argued that the heart of Deleuze and Guattari’s combined thought lies in an exploration of the possibilities of human relation, and a “reconstruction of subjectivity, society, and environment” (p. 2). Deleuze and Guattari did not describe what life *is* but rather “what it does, the forces that are acting through it, along with [its] senses and values” (p. 29). This life or these forces are not that of a bounded organism or humanist subject, but “the life that is *not* [emphasis added] that of the bounded organism with its *own* life” (Colebrook, 2006, p. 2). In other words, we are no longer speaking of the bounded organism, the body, of the humanist subject, but a posthumanist body that exists in a complex network of human and nonhuman forces. As I will illustrate later in this paper, these forces can be in the form of cuts and entanglements that I introduce as the researcher (e.g. who to interview, where to interview, what questions to ask) and also entanglements that occur as I am enmeshed in this assemblage of researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) use the concept BwO to describe an organism that is an assemblage of forces, desires, and intensities.

Desiring machines, another concept introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), are referred to as *assemblage* in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The desiring machine is that which provides connections for plugging in forces, flows, and intensities. With no subjectivity or center, the machine is a hub of connections and productions, a BwO that deterritorializes and offers the possibility of transformation, proliferation, and becoming. The machine is not anthropocentric: there is no “subject” that lies behind becoming like the Wizard behind the curtain in Oz. Because this body or machine is not a subject, not an individual person with innate agency who speaks with a singular voice, interviewing practices must be thought as acting *on and through* this BwO that plugs into the assemblage that is the desiring machine. “Desire is the intense body without organs, the immanent plane of

abstract machines that are interposed as becomings and mutations in the relations between assemblages, giving them a consistency” (Goodchild, 1996, p. 203). In other words, all of the forces that act on and through the machine of research – for example, participants, researchers, interview questions, narrators, becomings, voice, transcripts, and data analysis – plug in to produce the assemblage that is a VwO.

In the interview data discussed below, for example, as a feminist researcher, I plug into the BwO a series of desires that resists the violence of essentializing discourses – about women, about small towns, gender norms. And at the same time I am *produced by and producing the material of the place of small towns and the discursive of the narratives of those places*: idealized notions of small town living, close-knit families, patriarchal marriages, the claustrophobic nature of small town living, fulfillment provided by having children (or not), regret, nostalgia, guilt. We – me, small towns, my participants, our families, friends lost but not forgotten, the space of the academy, negative and positive stereotypes – make and unmake each other.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology, all the things that have been understood as possessed by humans and products of their agency (e.g. ideas, language, speech, social relations) are entangled flows that are in a continual process of making and unmaking, of becoming. Thus, voice in postqualitative inquiry becomes an entanglement of desires, intensities, and flows, a VwO that is made and unmade in the process that we call research and analysis. If, as in posthumanism, agency is an entanglement of flows, as discussed above, then a VwO is becoming in the entangled flow of social relations, existing in the between-the-two of research-data-participants-theory-analysis.

How does it work?

Before moving to an example of how this VwO is produced, it is first important to acknowledge how interview methods in humanist qualitative inquiry oblige researchers to “center” the subject. We as researchers ask participants to be selective in (1) their telling, (2) their interpretation of experience, (3) their representation of themselves, and (4) the assumptions that they make about who that self is (during the telling). What emanates from such centering is a supposedly coherent narrative that represents truth about the person and their lived experiences.

What I have not discussed up to this point is what form(s) our research practices might take if we give up the humanist subject with its singular voice and instead think a VwO? First of all, the interview must be thought as assemblage as are the organism (BwO) and voice (VwO). In describing the assemblage as that which acts on “semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously,” Deleuze and Guattari (1987) further explained:

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders. (p. 25)

If the interview is also to be thought as an assemblage, there can no longer be a division between a field of reality (what we ask, what our participants tell us, and the places we inhabit), a field of representation (research narratives constructed after the interview), and a field of subjectivity (participants and researchers). Instead,

these are to be thought as acting on one another simultaneously. In interviewing the participants in my study, I developed interview questions and “talked” to the women but not to arrive at meaning but to map connectives, to think about how things worked together and how the VwO was being produced. The connectives in this instance may include geography, family, institutions, gender norms, aspirations, disappointments, and hopes that work together to produce a VwO as presented in the analysis that follows.

The data analyzed here is from an interview study that I conducted with Alecia Jackson (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) to generate data together for our book, *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives*. In this qualitative research study, we interviewed 10 first-generation women faculty and administrators in order to understand their educational, socio-cultural, and professional experiences. We entered the BwO of women in the academy, one of us a first-generation college student; the other, the daughter of parents from Appalachia whose father was the son of immigrants and who attended college on the GI Bill. We chose who to interview, and yet, as women in the academy with some shared entanglements with our participants, the BwO plugged into our own desires as we asked questions about pursuing graduate study, negotiating the academy, and articulating multiple identities.

In this study of first-generation women academics, there was no pure voice emanating from the women as subjects. Nor was there a set of experiences that we could claim they shared. The women had already “made meaning” of their experiences as they described them, in their selection of what they chose to say, what they emphasized, and what they chose not to reveal. And I was becoming – from the moment I decided to conduct interviews, to my choice of participants much like myself, in my encounters with them (then and still), in their stories, the data, and an analysis that is partial, incomplete, and always being re-told and remembered. Nothing is centered or stabilized in such an approach to interviewing: not voice, not the subject, not the interviewer or interviewee, not experience, not analysis.

In response to the Deleuzian question, “how does it work?,” I turn to a data excerpt from the above-mentioned research project with first-generation women faculty and administrators. In this project, we interviewed 10 women, one of whom was Fran, asking questions about their educational, socio-cultural, and professional experiences. In my interview with Fran, she responded as follows to the question, “What prompted you to first get your master’s degree and then your PhD?”

I had been through a really bad breakup – I was the girl’s basketball coach, who dated the boy’s basketball coach, ... everybody in the town assumed we were gonna get married and have these little basketball babies and be there forever. ... I had some friends living in Knoxville and decided I was gonna go to Knoxville for the summer and take some master’s classes just to get away for three months ... and never went back. Once I got back into school and realized, god, there’s so much more out there than living in this tiny town that I’m really pretty miserable in anyway ...

From a humanist perspective, I could read the above as Fran’s construction of herself as a conscious, rational subject – spoken, heard, recorded, and transcribed into words in an interview transcript. But, if I think those words as produced by a VwO, an assemblage, an entanglement, a knot of forces and intensities that operate on a plane of immanence, then I think of them as an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis. This assemblage would include what Foucault

called discourses of gender and professional class status but also economic forces, the particulars of personal histories, struggles and successes in the academy, theories producing questions and enactments, previous data and analysis, the other women in the study, and narratives of small town life.

Desire for Deleuze and Guattari (1983) is not something that an individual possesses nor is it a drive borne out of lack. It represents an “ontological level of relations resulting in an affirmative mode of acting, relating, and existing” (Goodchild, 1996, p. 33). In the BwO, desire operates by joining non-reactive parts together (p. 203). Fran’s words, her voice, do not exist apart from her or me but in the VwO, the knot of forces between the material and semiotic and the time of the interview and the time of our lives. Her words enable an encounter in which my own and others’ voices flow into and are entangled with other materialities, which, in humanism, we often call “lived experiences” but which I call here BwO in order to resist essentializing such experiences and voices. That VwO includes my own leaving of a small town that I continue to leave. It also includes my mother and grandmother and aunts and friends, some who left, some who did not, some who could not. It includes the becoming of my leaving as I always negotiate that leaving with students, nieces, geography, partner, parents, family, exes.

In analyzing that portion of the interview transcript with a Deleuzian ontology, I can no longer think of Fran’s voice as separate and individual but only within the entanglement it immediately becomes and continues to become as it joins other enactments, other assemblages. That portion of the interview transcript is no longer, for me, a story of Fran, but a collision of forces, a machinic assemblage of becomings of women from small towns who became women in the academy, unexpected becomings. I staged the interview – though I was not entirely in charge of the motivations that moved me to stage it as would be the case given a humanist ontology. My desires and those of my co-researcher produced a particular set of questions, for example. And while I was the interviewer, I was being produced in the making and doing of the interview. I made agential “cuts” (see Barad, 2011, p. 123) as an agent, but not as an agent in full control of outcomes and becomings. I set things in motion without knowing what might result, without any direct sense or intention of how my own becoming was and would be and might be produced.

In the *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze (1990) uses the character of Alice from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* to help us think about this different ontology: “It is not therefore a question of the adventures of Alice, but of Alice’s adventure: her climb to the surface, her disavowal of false depth and her discovery that everything happens at the border” (p. 9). If, as Deleuze asserts, everything happens at the border, then this liminal space of the border, what Jackson and I have named the threshold (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), is where we reside as researchers as we are made and unmade by data. Like Alice, we are “never at a point, at an instant called the ‘present’ ... Even in the present she [Alice] is a stretch forward and back in time” (Williams, 2008, p. 29). Williams wrote that Deleuze was not interested in meaning, but in the event that “sets off clashes, punctures and wounds” (p. 19).

The portion of the interview transcript presented above does not, then, represent Fran or her own, individual “lived experiences” but an assemblage of the human (Fran, me, other women like us) and the nonhuman (small towns, gender norms, babies we did not have, disappointments, dreams realized) triggered by an agentic clash on the surface with data. Agency is not attached to Fran, nor meaning to her

words or experience. This *Voice without Organs*, if allowed to exert its agential force, can produce a different set of questions and research practices that do not rely on a single source of knowledge, the knowing subject. Thus, we decouple voice – words spoken and words written in transcripts – from an intentional, agentic humanist subject and move to VwO, voice thought as an assemblage, a complex network of human and nonhuman agents that exceeds the traditional notion of the individual.

So what are these different questions? Returning again to Deleuze and Guattari, they are questions, not about what our participants mean, but about the forces of desire that are acting through and with our research participants – the BwO. With Fran, for instance, the forces of desire are those that act on Fran and that she acts on that produce her leaving her small town. They are questions about what results (or what is produced) from such interactions in not just completing a masters degree but going on to obtain her PhD. They are questions about how desire is functioning to keep/maintain/produce smooth social, familial, and professional relations. They are questions about the forces/drives/intensities that produce new dreams and desires. These are questions that prompt me to ask not what is happening but how our participants and our researcher selves are becoming.

But it is not sufficient to focus merely on the productive aspects of desire and on how a VwO produces a different set of questions in terms of analysis. It is also necessary to think about how interviewing practices become something else and how interviewing must be de-centered in the posthumanist research I have described.

Interview practices: *not* method but triggers to new assemblages

Deleuze and Guattari conceived an ontology of becoming believing that a different description of being would change being, doing, living. The challenge for posthumanist researchers using a Deleuzian ontology of entanglement and assemblage is to attend to how being, doing, and living are different so as not to reproduce the same methods with a different language. Instead of merely talking about how the assumptions of posthumanist research are producing different notions of the subject, of agency, and of voice, these practices must be enacted given this different set of assumptions. It does not mean we stop learning or producing knowledge, but it does mean we acknowledge a fundamental break in how those practices produce knowledge and new ontological entanglements.

What is to become of interviewing, or voice, or data, in posthumanist research? Are these relics of humanist qualitative inquiry, or can one still interview and analyze data if the subject is no more? Interviewing in posthumanist research requires a disruption of the centering compulsion of traditional qualitative research; cutting into the center (only ever assumed); opening it up to see what newness might be incited and entanglements produced. Theorizing with Deleuze and Guattari's concept BwO, and analyzing with VwO does not mean that interviewing must be abandoned as a method, although some might say that it should. However, it certainly demands a de-centering and a de-privileging of the interview in social science research. Thinking the practice of interviewing with a Deleuzian ontology requires that I produce practices that are entangled in order to allow the collision of forces to join other enactments and assemblages – colleagues, previous research, hometowns. It

means that I try to think of research as the machine that is a hub of connections and productions with interviewing being just one of those connections.

Interviewing then and interview data transcribed into transcripts would be only one agential force in the assemblage that one plugs into as one does something called “research.” Certainly, it would not be the only method nor the primary method of data collection. And in analysis one would need a way to account for the material and discursive simultaneously – the bodies of those whom we interview, our own bodies, and how they/we are constituted in the BwO. Perhaps more attention needs to be given to the *where* of the interview, and the *when* of the interview, and the *if* of the interview. If we are to make sense of these material and discursive material constructions and joining of forces, perhaps we must think practices that disavow an over-reliance on words as the primary source of meaning. Maybe I cannot visit Fran’s small town, but I can visit my small town, or other small towns, or reinsert myself into the data in a plugging into the assemblage of human and nonhuman forces. This would not be in an attempt to re-center a description of the small town as primary, but how the small town acts with an agential force and produces its own set of material and discursive constructions.

Barad wrote, “neither the discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior” (2007, p. 152). In the case of Fran, or me, or Fran and me, or the becomings of women from small towns, it is not that our sense of self as it has been produced in our tellings and leavings precedes us ontologically. “Neither can be explained in terms of the other. Neither is reducible to the other” (p. 152). They exist simultaneously and continuously collide to produce new becomings. How I connect to the BwO with Fran is in part because I am also part of this assemblage. Interview practices take me to a new assemblage and humanist assumptions about being give way to flows and new becomings ad infinitum. Research and data analysis then become not about explaining which forces are primary and which are secondary. Analysis (if we still call it that) is, as I noted earlier, triggered by an agentic clash on the surface with data.

In this article, I have illustrated how a posthumanist stance has enabled me to materialize different considerations of data in qualitative inquiry. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) concept, the *BwO*, I positioned participant voice in qualitative inquiry as a *VwO* – voice that is produced in an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis. I then illustrated with data from an interview transcript how this *VwO* is enacted and how I approached the process of data analysis given a posthumanist ontology. More specifically, I presented how data are constituted *and* constituting in posthumanist inquiry. Rather than analyzing data in a search for meaning or attaching data in the form of interview transcripts to a specific subject who can speak the essence of experience, this methodological approach positions data and voice as agents in their own right.

Located in this theoretical landscape, I illustrated enactments of data and what is produced by data and voice beyond its already constituted and repeated forms. Rather than representing participant voices through the presentation of a coherent narrative, thinking with Deleuze and Guattari enabled me to both theorize and present a voice that is not contained by a singular subject nor bounded by the binaries between the discursive and the material. What is made possible for qualitative researchers seeking to analyze this uncontainable voice is a reconsideration of how research texts thus conceived are constituting and

constituted as agential in our research practices that trigger new assemblages, ad infinitum.

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