

Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains.

Alfred North Whitehead, 1934, p. 96

For some years now I have been intermittently writing and wondering about wonder as an untapped potential in qualitative research. This special issue provides an occasion, or a pre text, to return to the subject, concentrating on the capacity for wonder that resides and radiates in data, or rather in the entangled relation of data-and-researcher. I think we need more wonder in qualitative research, and especially in our engagements with data, as a counterpart to the exercise of reason through interpretation, classification, and representation. These latter acts still constitute the staple repertoire of “conventional” inquiry (cf. St. Pierre, in press). I do not dismiss such acts as necessarily unworthy or invalid. But in line with recent Deleuzian theory (e.g., Deleuze, 1994; Massumi, 2002), I consider them to be second order operations performed on the flux and movement of the world. They make things stand still and separate out, so that meaning, structure, and order may coalesce. The problem with such “typological thinking” (DeLanda, 2002) is that it is obsessed with sameness and the establishment of fixed, hierarchical relations among entities. It can only conceive of difference in terms of opposition between already stabilized entities, rather than addressing the manifold movements of difference “in itself” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 174) and therefore cannot open onto the new or the unanticipated. From this standpoint, data have no status other than that of

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Wonder is also preeminently material: it insists in bodies as well as minds. Daston and Park (2001) describe it as a “cognitive passion, [emphasis added] as much about knowing as about feeling” (p. 14), and they suggest that its history is “tightly bound up with other cognitive passions such as curiosity and horror” (p. 15). We may feel the wonder of data in the gut, or the quickening heartbeat, as well as in the cerebral disappointment of failing to find the right code or category in which to park a particular piece of (what now presents itself as) data. Wonder is not necessarily a safe, comforting, or uncomplicatedly positive affect. It shades into curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity. And the particular hue or tenor that it will assume is never entirely within our control. But the price paid for the ruin caused—to epistemic certainty and the “sedentary” achievement of a well-wrought coding scheme or an “arborescent” analytic framework—is, according to Massumi (2002, p. 19), the privilege of a headache. Not the answer to a question, but the astute crafting of a problem and a challenge: what next?

Wonder is relational. It is not clear where it originates and to whom it belongs. It seems to be “out there,” emanating from a particular object, image, or fragment of text; but it is also “in” the person that is affected. A passion: the capacity to affect and to be affected. When I feel wonder, I have chosen something that has chosen me, and it is that mutual “affection” that constitutes “us” as, respectively, data and researcher. In contemporary-materialist terminology, wonder can be thought of as entanglement or “intra-action” (e.g., Barad, 2007), or the movements of desire and intensity that connect bodies—human and nonhuman, animate or inanimate, virtual and actual, including bodies of knowledge—in/as an assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). We, and the data, do not preexist one another.

I first got interested in wonder through some chance encounters with images of the “cabinets of curiosities,” or wunderkammern that were assembled by princes, merchants, and clerics across Europe from the 16th to the 18th century. These collections were themselves liminal

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fragments and relics painstakingly slotted and fitted into the Learning.⁴ We are currently planning work involving elected space, heavy with meaning, of a secret room babies and objects in museums and galleries. (Mauriès, 2002, p. 12)

Conclusion

We cannot force objects, nor any other kind of data, to collaborate in the production of wonder. But a characteristic of wonder that its effects, and affects, may issue unexpectedly, if we are lucky. A couple of years ago, a few days after a brief and unplanned conversation about our research with a colleague who is also a poet, an e-mail arrived out of the blue. It contained a poem.

Object
for Maggie and Rachel
How a thing becomes itself,
wide awake as anyone
and faceless. How it is born
from matted feathers,
shreds of paper, red
rubber bands and a small
four-eyed bone button. It is not
a doll or a body. Not a god.
Something tiny there shining
is the thin flight
of its name, the way of a warrior.
Or a miniature pleasure
machine mixed from the dirt
under her nails, her own
scat and spit. It will sit and mourn
with her for days,
days when she's breaking and
tearing. Like a flower
it is burning a hole in the room
and someone has seen.
It will be confiscated. How her
confiscation begins.

Lesley Saunders

The wonder of objects has continued to take us to new places. In addition to prompting further research publications, including this one, it led to an art exhibition, "Curiosity and Classification: Objects as Incitements to Theory," to accompany the 2011 Summer Institute in Qualitative Research. Sinead's collection was exhibited alongside the work of six other artists, and one of the eight cabinets was filled by objects made by conference delegates. There was a joint video seminar with colleagues and graduate students at Deakin University, Australia, on "Objects, Spaces and

Ultimately, we cannot know where wonder resides—not simply "in" the data; but not only "in" us either. As noted at the outset, it is both material (resonating in bodies; indissociably attached to the materiality and the singularity of objects) and virtual—a matter of potentialities and thresholds. Perhaps the best way to think the wonder of data then, in their capacity to enter into relation with researchers, is as an event. "To the extent that events are actualized within us, they wait for us and invite us in," Deleuze writes (2004, p. 169). But we need to be attentive and open to surprise to recognize the invitation; and once invited in, our task is to experiment and see where that takes us.

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Notes

1. On the transformative potential of the threshold, see Mazzei and Jackson (2011).
2. This account is based on a paper presented to the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Denver: cf. Allmer, MacLure, MacRae, Holmes, and Jones (2010).
3. <http://www.esri.mmu.ac.uk/sigr/ICACC%20Sheet.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2013).

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