

Reinterpreting arts-based data through a posthumanist lens

Reinterpreting arts-based data through multiple theories

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Abstract

In 2015, the author published an autoethnographic study on the conflict between herself, a Deaf teacher, and sign-language interpreters working with adolescent students in a tutorial program in Saskatchewan, Canada. While the author advocated the use of American Sign Language native to the Deaf community, the interpreters preferred to use a manual code based on English grammar and syntax (Weber, 2015). Artwork produced by the author during this period of conflict and interpreted in the light of classic postcolonial theory (Mignolo, 2000; Pennycook, 1998; Said, 1979) allowed for a more nuanced and compassionate retelling of the conflict. The presence of continued binaries in the 2015 study, however, prompted the reinterpretation of the same data within a posthumanist frame, prompting the questions: What does the same arts-based data reveal when reinterpreted according to the material turn, specifically posthuman theorizing?

Bio

Joanne Weber is a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing, artistic director of a deaf theatre company, Deaf Crows Collective, and a PhD student at the University of Regina, in Saskatchewan, Canada, where she specializes in language and literacy education. Her books, *The Pear Orchard* (poetry) and *The Deaf House* (creative non-fiction) were finalists in the Saskatchewan Book Awards (2007, 2013). Joanne is also a leader in the Canadian Deaf community at provincial and national levels.

Introduction

Interpretation of data in arts-based autoethnography may change with the application of different theories as informing arts-based methodology. After using classic postcolonial theories (Fanon, 1963; Pennycook, 1998; Said, 1979) to interpret the art images in a previous study (Weber, 2015), I wondered how those same images might be reinterpreted according to posthumanist theory, namely the work of Barad (2007) and Braidotti (2013). In the previous study, an arts-based autoethnographic piece about a challenging experience of teaching with sign-language interpreters in a tutorial setting for deaf and hard of hearing adolescents examined arts-based data through a postcolonial lens (Weber, *Negotiating Deaf Identity in an Audist Educational Environment: An Arts-Based Inquiry*, 2015). I portrayed myself as a border crosser between deaf and hearing worlds, having to negotiate identities, languages and communities. After reading recent critiques of postcolonial theory (Braidotti, 2013; Spivak, 2013), I realized that my thinking was still dominated by multiple binaries, such as hearing versus deaf, oral English versus sign language, and American Sign Language (ASL) versus signed English.

This paper will refer to the previous study (Weber, *Negotiating Deaf Identity in an Audist Educational Environment: An Arts-Based Inquiry*, 2015) to compare the impact of postcolonial and posthuman theorizing (in this study) on the same art data. Binarized thinking is demonstrated mostly in the first study's conclusions (Weber, 2015): 1) the need for compassion for the interpreters who promoted one pedagogical choice concerning identity, language, and culture contrary to my own pedagogical beliefs; 2) the articulation of how all of us have been oppressed by the demands of the hearing world; 3) the rejection that I and the deaf students be "hearing" at all costs. Binaries were strewn everywhere. As a result of examining posthumanist theory (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013), which provides the possibility for different, more nuanced interpretations, I now believe that the continued presence of binaries in the previous study contributes to the stalled progress in the improvement of deaf-education services in Saskatchewan for 27 years (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2016).

In this paper, I consider a posthumanist framework that emphasizes the intra-actions of material realities with social, cultural, and political entities (Barad, 2007) to reinterpret this conflict with two hearing educational inter-

preters. Moreover, if I can understand how my cooperation and engagement with matter as agentic, then I am in the position to sidestep binarizing discourses while engaging in multiple worlds containing diverse intra-actions with sound, matter, languages, identities, and communities. Perhaps I am not border crossing in the binarized ways to which I was accustomed; rather, *posthumanist theory* has allowed me to reconceptualize border crossing, not only between humans of diverse ability, but also between humans, animals, and nonliving beings (including the earth and machines). A more nuanced conceptualization of border crossing can contribute to new approaches concerning the provision of educational services to deaf children and youth.

Personal context

I am a profoundly deaf teacher of the deaf with excellent speech and sign skills; I am the only Deaf teacher in province of Saskatchewan. I acquired fluency in ASL as a young adult. I am highly privileged in that I come from a White, middle-class family with parents who were educators. Moreover, as a teacher, I am a border crosser between the deaf and hearing worlds, negotiating identities, language, and communities.

Research questions

My previous research paper (Weber, 2015) used arts-based autoethnography to examine how I negotiated professional and personal identity as a culturally deaf teacher in an inclusive educational environment in light of postcolonial theory (Mignolo, 2000; Said, 1979). I used artwork in addition to personal journals as data to tell a more nuanced and compassionate version of an unresolved conflict that occurred between me and my interpreting staff. In this study, I consider the following question in the hope of eliminating binarization: “What do the same arts-based data reveal when the same narrative concerning border crossing between identities, languages, and communities is reinterpreted in the light of posthumanist theory, which considers matter to be intelligent and self-organizing and agential”? (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013)

Onto-epistemology

Barad (2007) proposes a posthumanist onto-epistemology that counters epistemological and ontological suppositions about the relationship between humans and their animal, plant, and mineral counterparts as binarized, hi-

erarchical, and dominated by Western hegemony. In reinterpreting the arts data generated during this conflicted period, I now attempt to articulate my own border-crossing interactions without resorting to binarized categories.

Methodology

The current autoethnographic study uses original artwork (six images) generated in the previous study. In this reinterpretation of the data collected for my study (Weber, 2015), I present the artwork as material-discursive phenomena (Barad, 2007) rather than as items with finite and discrete boundaries. Material-discursive phenomena consist of entanglements that are rhizomatic in nature, with no distinction between subject and object until one makes a cut and lifts out a section from the entanglement (Barad, 2007).

Prior to this cut, subject and object do not preexist (Barad, 2007); nothing, including me, is an exclusive entity, but, rather, all things are entangled in a web of relationships that are constantly evolving through open-ended processes in which every interaction is configured and reconfigured. Within this entanglement, I am not able to sharply differentiate between what is created or renewed, what has begun or is returned, or what is continuing and what has stopped, what is here or not here, and finally, what is the past and future (Barad, 2007). I intra-act with sound, vision, objects, bodies, and matter, and within this entanglement, I am not deaf or hearing, nor subject or object. Determinate boundaries defining who I am are specified through making a “cut” that lifts a material-discursive phenomena out and away from the entanglement for the purpose of study. Arts-based data are the material-discursive phenomena or the “cut” that I examine to reveal how I am entangled (Barad, 2007) as I cross borders.

The cut reveals the entangled rhizomatic crossings of borders between identities, languages, and communities (Valente & Boldt, 2015) complicated by interactions with sound, matter (living and nonliving), bodies, rules of engagement, uncharted territories, identities, cultures, and languages. An illustration is provided below:

Furthermore, the cut as artwork enables us to entertain new ways of relating to animals, the earth, and machines as it promotes nonhierarchical relationships between animal, earth, and machine (Braidotti, 2013). In this study, I use

Braidotti's posthumanist interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari's theorizing of becoming animal, earth, and machine (Braidotti, 2013) as a point of entry into material-discursive phenomena (i.e., the artwork).



Summary of conflict reported in previous study

In the early years of teaching in a small resource-room program, I worked with two interpreters who were mothers of adult deaf children. The mothers attributed their deaf children's success to the use of signed English (which is a sign system that attempts to replicate the structure of spoken English) and to participation in the hearing world to the exclusion of involvement in the local deaf community. The two mother interpreters actively resisted my attempts to introduce ASL and Deaf culture into the program. They interrupted my lessons to inform me that I was incorrect in my pedagogy and language usage, warned students not to adopt ASL signs, and made private complaints to the administration about my performance. Despite support from the administration, my conflict with the interpreters was never resolved, and we endured working together in this toxic environment until the mother interpreters moved to other positions within the school division or retired.

Findings

Becoming machine. I became distraught over the escalating conflict between the mother interpreters and myself, and in addition to keeping a daily journal, I made art to excavate my feelings. The image below, *Opera Glasses* (Weber, 2015) provides a material-discursive phenomenon (Barad, 2007) revealed through the use of paper, acrylic paints, crushed cereal, water colors, markers, and popcorn kernels.



Figure 1. *Opera Glasses*.

The image suggests a cyborgian existence where there is a seamless switching between two states dominated by the ear or the eye. The bar across the enlarged eye suggests a reliance more on hearing through technology, while the smaller unobstructed eye suggests the use of vision when accessing the world through an interpreter. Here, my eyes are equally integral to my body; therefore, they are partnered with my hearing through the use of lipreading, visual cues, lighting, facial expressions, and visible emotions.

Here, sound as matter is agentic in that it forces me to switch in and out of listening through obstruction of sight lines, poor lighting, foreign accents, muffled sounds, and speech. My access to sound is characterized by unpredictability, instability, and rapid reorganization of my relationship with matter. Rearranging the environment, moving to more suitable locations, switching to different programs within the hearing aid, waiting for the noise to pass, clearing sight lines of obstructions such as flowers, plants, paper, and microphones, planning to frequent environments without hard surfaces, staying out of direct sunlight and away from windows, and being aware of obstacles when walking and lip-reading all distinctly influence intra-actions with material, social, cultural, and political entities. My relationship with matter, living and nonliving, is, then, profoundly entangled rather than binarized. Returning to the narrative of the unresolved conflict, I could present myself as a “cyborg” (Brueggeman, 2009) navigating material shifts literally every second with speech, hearing, vision, and sign language.

The image below, *Two Trees* (Weber, 2015), is another material-discursive phenomena which further explicates the entanglement through which I zigzag between my body and technology.



Figure 2. *Two Trees*.

The white tree suggests the ghostly background of unseen machines facilitating hearing and electronic networks as found in the interface between the brain and hearing technologies. This ghostly tree touches a biological life form (the head) within a neural network, while the more realistic fruit tree (which suggests earth) provides the organic matter with which the hearing technology connects. Note that only small connections are made in the image in anticipation of greater connections in the future, for hearing technology is currently highly experimental and is prone to failure or limitations. The presence of blue in the lower half of the head (animal) suggests an amniotic-like environment indicating newer life forms.

Becoming animal. Braidotti (2013) suggests that shared ties of vulnerability with the animal and plant world place the human in nonhierarchical relationships in which emotion, rather than reason, becomes the bond between species (Braidotti, 2013). The sense of shared vulnerability heightens empathy needed for care and survival of all living matter (Braidotti, 2013). The material-discursive phenomena provided by the artwork below reveals the capacity

for empathy. Here, in *Swans in Flames* (Weber, 2015), I am the second swan accompanying the first swan.



Figure 3. *Swans in Flames*.

We are swimming in a roiling body of water, alight with flames. Here, I possess certain attributes of the swan, and the swan also possesses some of my attributes. I am mirrored by the swan, who is essentially a nomadic bird looking for nests, food, and water. Empathy for each other is revealed in a shared vulnerability of being “othered” either as being consumed or controlled for research and scientific processes as animals (Braidotti, 2013). This empathy inherent in becoming animal is more prescient in this second material-discursive phenomenon depicted below, entitled *Bird Woman* (Weber, 2015).

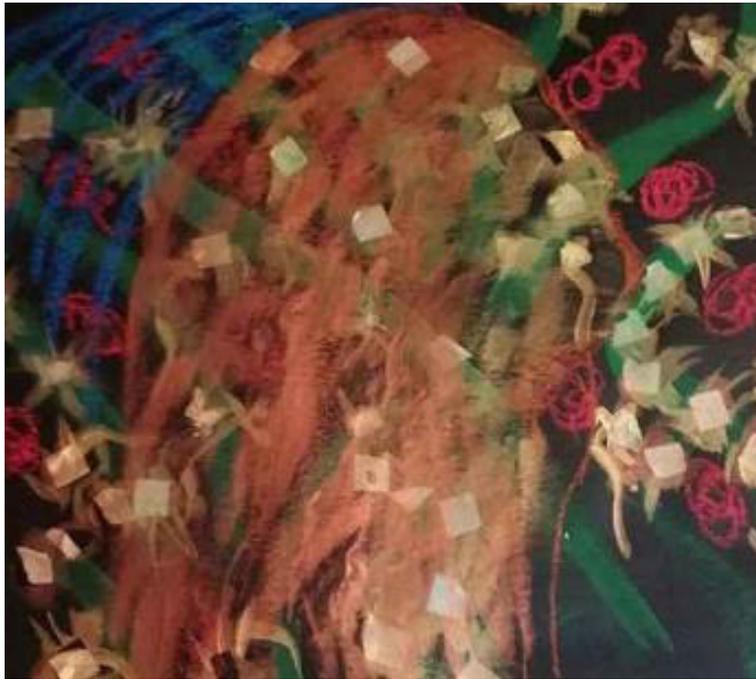


Figure 4. *Bird Woman*.

Here, the woman is becoming merged with animal as depicted by the blue bird feathers atop her head. The green stripes criss-crossing the woman's head suggest being encased inside a neural network (machine), while the yellow fragments and coils of red suggest a network of organic (earth) matter interspersed within the green technological matrix.

The image calls for empathy toward animals sacrificed to science. As animals are routinely used for laboratory testing concerning the cure of diseases, the cochlear implant emerged as an innovative laboratory experiment that quickly coalesced into wholesale implantation in deaf children and youth without initial widespread approval of medical authorities and governing bodies (Blume, 2010). Despite significant gaps in the research concerning the effect of implantation on school performance or psychosocial development (Blume, 2010), deaf children became guinea pigs for future testing and the development of subsequent generations of cochlear implants.

Rather than imposing the binary of the oppressed/oppressor on the mother interpreters and myself, I can examine the ways we have been marked through our dilemmas and choices pertaining to language and belonging to the Deaf community or the hearing world. Furthermore, I could have avoided “rational” arguments as I once did with the proffering of research papers, evidence, and resources supporting my pedagogical decisions to use ASL. Rather than

drawing from rational constructs concerning the legitimacy of ASL, I could have acknowledged their pain occasioned by historic policy decisions (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2016), which resulted in their being rejected by other educational professionals whose advice they had held in high esteem, for adopting signed English, an option grudgingly provided to their deaf children who failed to develop oral English skills. Relying on empathy rather than rational arguments would have mediated this difficult period of our working lives.

Becoming earth. If matter is intelligent, self-organizing, and agentic (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013), then matter is capable of intruding and facilitating key moments within material-discursive phenomena. Konturri (2013) proposed the notion of a “particle-sign” to describe an aspect of material-discursive relationships between matter, such as paint, paper, canvas, glue, and the artist (Barad, 2007; Konturri, 2013) that is unintentional on the part of the artist. In *Black Pond* (Weber, 2015), the particle sign emerges in the image below in the unintentionally overly thick application of black gesso on the banks of a fruit-tree orchard and the waters that run by it.

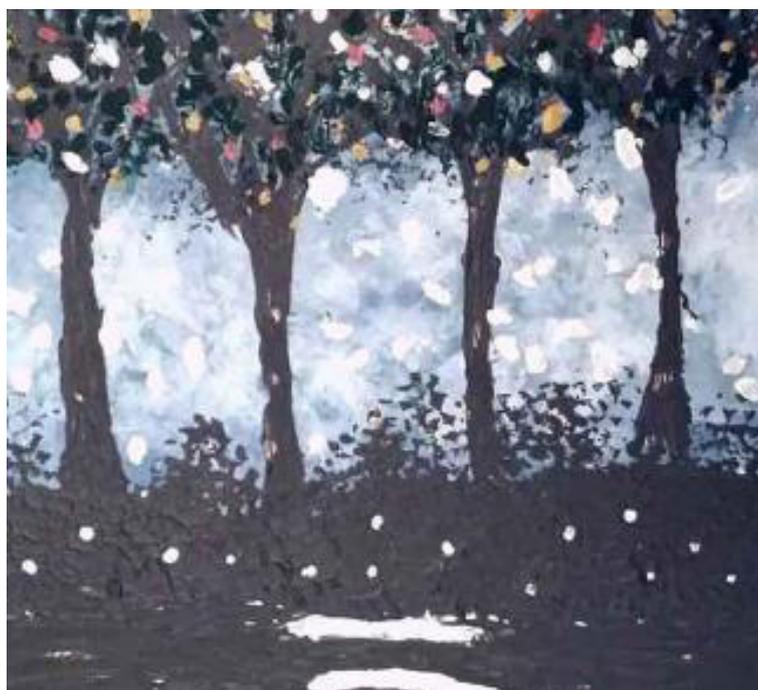


Figure 5. *Black Pond*.

The dark biological matter in the riverbank and the bushes suggests regenerative and relational activity, absorbing the fragmentation of the flashing mirrors. The “thickness” of the materiality of life is presented as an active

response within the entanglement of mirrors, trees, fruit, fading light, and moonlight. In the previous study (Weber, 2015), I interpreted the flashing lights reflected in the mirrors as portraying sound as broken and fragmentary. A diffractive reading of the particle sign concerning the thickness of the black gesso, however, suggests otherwise. George Veditz, the founder of the National Association of the Deaf and ardent activist once remarked in sign language that “[a]s long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs” (Veditz, 1913). The thickness of the human body in response to fragmentation in sound has resulted in the development of sign language, which is a remarkable attempt to reorganize sound, vision, bodies, and matter according to one’s vision. Sign language as a means of reorganizing in response to auditory fragmentation could have lead me to remind the mother interpreters of the ways in which animals, technology, and the earth miraculously conspire to accommodate, organize, and generate new forms of life and living.

Becoming earth requires a nomadism (Braidotti, 2013), which refers to traversing between specific paths, nodes, decisions, units of meaning, and directions, without beginning or end or without finite boundaries producing subject and objects (Barad, 2007). The image below, *Bird Hat* (Weber, 2015), depicts me becoming animal, which entails nesting grounds and flight paths as well as subjection to seasonal demands.



Figure 6. *Bird Hat*.

The hat suggests the neural pathways provided by the ability to switch between using sign language and using technology. The ability to fly high above geographical spaces and to nest upon the earth or in trees is paralleled by the

ability to see certain relationships between the self and matter as in animal, machine, and earth, and at the same time, remain inside the entanglement between animal, machine, and earth.

Implications of the Study

A posthumanist framework with a specific focus on artwork as material-discursive phenomena (Barad., 2007) and the interpretations of Deleuze and Guattari's becoming animal, machine, and earth proffered by Braidotti (2013) provide a way out of overly simplistic and polarized discourses dominating the education of deaf and hard of hearing children and youth (Mauldin, 2016). Artwork interpreted according to a posthumanist frame (Barad, 2007) can provide richer, more nuanced, and fine-grained analysis that seeks to overcome binarizing discourses concerning language choices, identity development, and community membership. Posthuman themes, such as becoming animal, machine, and earth (Braidotti, 2013), can be applied to diverse topics, such as the education of the deaf.

Specifically, in this study, the posthumanist frame of the material-discursive phenomena as made visible as a cutout from the entanglement and as artwork opens up new points for discussion and fresh approaches to difficult topics; it also lends itself to the reduction of polarizing debates. Most importantly, the posthumanist frame may allow for the elimination of binaries concerning language, identities, and communities and enable new directions in research.

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