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Doctoral Thesis as Entangled Becomings: moments that tremble with potential

Helen Bowstead

“There is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.123)

“The minor gesture is ... a gesture that leads the field of experience to make felt the fissure and openings otherwise too imperceptible or backgrounded to ascertain. A minor gesture is a gesture that tweaks the experiential to make its qualitative operations felt, a gesture that opens experience to its limit.”

(Manning, 2016, p.65).

This paper attempts to exemplify an emergent doctoral research process that plugs into the political activism of Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘becoming minoritarian’ and the transformational potential of Erin Manning’s ‘minor gesture’. Re-visiting and re-responding to texts and images produced over the course of one month, the author attempts to demonstrate how an attentiveness and openness beyond the bounds of the traditional doctoral thesis can generate shiftings and shimmerings that have the potential to produce tangible impacts and affects. In a process of writing to the human and non-human matter she encounters on her everyday walkings and wanderings, the author senses a shift of herself in relation to the world, generating an imperative to act that can not be ignored. As a tentative exploration of a process that resists the constraints of an externally imposed methodology, this paper works to trouble the prescribed linearity of more normative approaches to doctoral research. This is done in the spirit of encouraging and promoting speculative enquiries with a social conscience for, as Brian Massumi argues, even tiny acts and interventions have the potential to make a difference in the world if they get “amplified across the web of connections” (Massumi, 2015, p.43).

becoming minoritarian; the minor gesture; vital materialism; posthumanism; social activism; affect.

Despite years of protest, resistance and activism, social justice has not been achieved. The humanist project has stumbled. Stuttered. Failed. Inequalities are greater than ever. Thousands upon thousands of human lives are deemed not to matter. Refugee boats are turned away from ports, asylum seekers forcibly repatriated, families separated at borders. Europe's 'delusion of grandeur' continues to cause those that are branded 'other' to be "reduced to the less-than-human status of disposable bodies" (Braidotti, 2013, p.2). In such troubling times, where do we as writers, researchers and social activists turn? Braidotti (2013) argues that we need great methodological creativity to face up to the challenges of the 21st century and to refuse what she terms a 'fascism of the soul'. But what does this work look like? Sound like? Feel like? And what can it *do*?

Inspired by Braidotti's politics, Bennett's vibrant matter, Barad's diffractive ontologies and Haraway's multispecies radicalism, this project seeks to illuminate and exemplify how research is not something we stand outside of 'looking in' (Massumi, 2015), but how it is an entangled embodiment of multiple becomings. Engaging with written texts, visual imagery and the spoken word, my work attempts to map the ebbs and flows and space-time-matterings (Barad, 2007) of everyday encounters with the world. Less concerned with the "I" of a humanist subject (but unable to completely shake it off), these texts instead trace the "attunements and accidents, hauntings and troublings" (Stewart, 2016, p.98) that can serve to "destabilise, reconstruct and deterritorialise existing theory and practice" (Gale & Wyatt, 2013, p.139).

It is September and I am reading Erin Manning's, *The Minor Gesture*. The window I have given myself to write this piece is closed. But still I write. I am moved and inspired by her work. I cannot help but respond to a tangible sense of '*agencement*', and this re-visiting of texts and images through the lens of the minor gesture is generating movements that glow and shift and beckon. The series of photographs begin to speak to Manning's notion of 'rituality', and the month of August is reframed as an 'enabling constraint'. The images are not artistic creations, but instead act as provocations, causing writings to bubble up, bidden and not. And, through this process of repetition and rituality and constraint, what is foregrounded is not what had been produced, but the 'becoming-with' (Manning, 2016): the practice of heeding the hauntings and troublings of the world as I pass through it, and it through me.

Manning (2016, p.42) argues for a “reaccounting of what writing can do in the process of thinking-doing”. At its best, Manning says, “writing is an act, alive with the rhythms of uncertainty and openings of a speculative pragmatism that engages with the forces of the milieu where transversality is most acute” (Manning, 2016, p.42). Like the fashion designer Rei Kawakubo, who works by trying to think and feel and see as if she isn’t making clothes (cited in Manning 2016, p.91), I know my own writings are at their most generative when I think and feel and see as if I am not doing a PhD. It is a wonderful, challenging and sometimes frustrating process and at each official hurdle, my project has guttered. Writing the proposal and completing the transfer process have proved to be sites of great tension and conflict as I struggle to explain and justify my work according to institutional constraints that disarm and disable me. But the time and trouble is worth it, for otherwise I feel my work will do little but shore up an education system that so often ends up stifling the spark of creativity and the thrilling possibility of the not-yet-known. As Manning notes, insisting on “positing the terms of the account before the exploration of what the account can do only results in stultifying its potential and relegating it to that which already fits pre-existing schemata of knowledge” (Manning, 2016, p.29).

My doctorate is just this way at just this time. Troubling notions of ethics, method and data, it is concerned with exploring the matter that matters to engender social activism. Elizabeth St. Pierre insists that we must all engage in risky research for the social good, and says that what is really important is not just what is done, but what is refused (St. Pierre, 2019). And so, in my writings I endeavour to refuse the majoritarian: the already known and the standard measure. It is difficult work for “[i]n the middling everything is at stake” (Manning, 2016, p.108) and I do not know by what criteria my thesis will be judged. Where is its value? Rigour? Integrity? Perhaps it will all be for nothing. Who knows? But at the heart of this project is just that; a creative, generative process of *not knowing* what the PhD can do. It emerges from an understanding that there is no way to say in advance “which subterranean stem is effectively going to make a rhizome, or enter a becoming, people your desert” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.293) and so its writing is an ongoing process of opening up to the “gesture of encounter” (Manning, 2016, p.ix). Refusing the majoritarian requires us to pay close attention to the most unexpected and the most insignificant things, the little detail “that starts to swell and carries you off” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.340). I have

been swept away by the detritus, the matter that I encounter every day. It has become the detail that compels me to act.

1. **August is a wicked month.**

I have a week. A slim and precious window of opportunity. Time to think. To read. To write. The things I like to do best in the world. Apart from swim. And I plan to squeeze a bit of that in too. Donna Haraway talks of the impossibility of writing when you are teaching. Teaching is all-consuming she says. She talks to the camera. She is mesmerising. Sounds can be heard in other rooms in her house. There are trees swaying through the window behind her. They are not always as they seem. The backdrop shifts and mutates. A jelly fish floats by. Donna talks in her neat shirt with its two breast pockets. We need to tell new stories, she says. Don't we just?

I have parked my car at Sutton Harbour, outside one of the university's flagship buildings. It is an old warehouse that looks out across the water. I walk towards the boats and wonder what the universe will offer up today. The swans are there. Seven. The tide is in and the water has a stillness about it, despite the wind rippling its surface. The air is cool, the summer is turning to autumn. The sky is clear and the sun is shining. I walk along the path, scanning the water. There is a traffic cone, fully submerged. Not the old algae-coated one, that is long gone. This one's stripes are still bright and clean.

[Insert illustration 1: Detritus]

A tangled mass of seaweed and debris floats on the water. I photograph it. Today it is mainly feathers. There is a plastic cup and an empty cider bottle. The usual entanglements of the man-made and the not so man-made. I photograph the elephant sculpture. One of 40 dotted across the city, each one bearing its own unique design. This one is called 'Zhou'. It has been decorated with Chinese motives and fish. The FAB bin cleaning van is parked in the narrow street that leads to the university. I say hello to the driver. I turn to photograph the van, but I see him watching me in the rear view mirror, so I walk on. There is a tree stump filled with dog-ends. Roadworks. Cars and buses. I look at people's faces as they slide by. The Business School is quiet. Desolate. I count eight empty offices before I find one that is

still be occupied. The university is in the process of stream-lining its offer. Hundreds of staff have left. The focus will be on premium courses, Marine and Maritime education and research. After all, we are Britain's Ocean City.

In the free English class on Friday, J told us that the Pilgrim Fathers didn't set off from Plymouth after all. They had sailed around the coast from East Anglia and took refuge in here when one of the ships sprang a leak. She tells us that the only reason they survived that first year in the Americas was because the indigenous population showed them what they needed to do to feed themselves and to keep warm.

Sailing across the ocean to build a new life. The men sat around the table know all about that. Eritrea, Uganda, Mali, Syria. They have all crossed the sea to find sanctuary. And now they are here with me, in a room, learning English, while the rain beats down outside. Mostly, they are well-educated. They cite books on history, philosophy and religion. I feel clumsy and ignorant in their company, but the conversations are fascinating. T always brings food. Bread sticks and marshmallows. Banana and ginger bread. A doesn't eat any. He is watching his weight. Last week he showed us a photo of himself a few months after he was rescued from the basement of a building in Aleppo. His arms and torso are covered in wounds. His face is turned away from the camera, but I can still see the deadened look in his eyes. Shock. I think. He doesn't join in the conversations about Darwin and the Descent of Man. But he listens. And listens. His eyes bright.

I stop writing. The office is cool. The weather has changed. More rain. I need a coffee to warm me up.

I skim through Gillian Rose. I need to find a way to articulate my process. If I have one. I circle and circle. Like the ribbons on a maypole, the bands weave and tighten. Methodology is the heart of the resistance. It is the site of the conflict. Where the battle is being waged. I am stifled and strangled. The words won't come, but the instinct to refuse is strong. Overwhelming. I am not sure how to go on. Rose talks of 'audiencing', I think there is something I can work with. But I am not sure how. K will like the 'ing' of it all. I am definitely trying to perform something. So there must be an audience in there somewhere. It's back to affect. Affecting. Effecting. What? A response? Change? Telling a different story? Just storying the world differently.

How do I move beyond this constant circling?

I feel weary. Worn out. What is the word? Diminished. Depleted. Is it the hormones leeching out of my middle-aged, post-menopausal body? When I pee in the sea am I poisoning the fish? J says I seem very determined. I suppose I am. The PhD means little to me. As a thing. But the potential to affect, the impact this engagement with matter, worlding, affect and vital materialisms has been huge. Putting theory to work. 'Qualitative Inquiry as Activism'. Yes. Yes. Yes.

It started with thing power. It has no end. I met the universe halfway and can never go back. Matter calls to me and insists I act. Walking with my eyes open. Walking with my ears open. Walking open. Open walking. Opening up. Pushing back. Touching lives. Making the stuff that matters matter more. Pushing myself to reach out to the world. To do more. Small things. Things packed with potential. Things that make a difference in the world. Massumi's butterfly effect (Massumi, 2015).

There is no space and time before movement (Manning, 2007, p.xiii). This is a thesis all about movement. I am moving through and with the world. Together with all its space-time-matterings the thesis is emerging. I embody it. No wonder I can not write it. And I can not not write it. It is the writing itself. Materialising within and without. I am it. It is me.

The thoughts have started their swirling. I wake in the night and forget in the morning. I get as far as the coffee shop and have to scribble. Back in front of the computer, I feel less articulate. It's like catching clouds. I have been thinking about hierarchies of scholarship. Always cite the primary source, the mantra goes. I have Rowena Murray's book, 'How to write a thesis' in my bedroom. I love and loathe it all at once. It describes every research and writing process I am trying to resist, and yet I turn to it frequently when preparing a class on postgraduate writing skills. What does it mean to research and write? These questions are so fundamental. So thorny. A wicked problem in a wicked month. A paper comes to mind, written by two of Elizabeth St. Pierre's doctoral students. They are arguing for the need for a "return to the philosophical origins of a theory" (Robinson and Kutner, 2019, p.111), and for writers and researchers to do the difficult and challenging work of reading Spinoza's dense original works in order to "produce new lines of thinking and inquiry" (ibid). Of course they are right. Nobody like a sloppy scholar. Half-baked references

to Spinoza's Ethics abound as academics skate across the barely scratched surfaces of affect theory, posthumanism and 'new' materialisms. As St. Pierre herself points out, how can you talk of 'new' materialism when you have no real understanding of the 'old' (St. Pierre, 2019)? But there is a lot of it about. Not sloppiness exactly. No, these academics are bright-eyed and astute. At the top of their game. Or perhaps, they have already peaked. The keynotes are slick and soulless. Sprinkled with the fairy dust of the posthuman, they garner applause and admiration and funding. I am presenting at the ECQI conference. A young psychologist shyly admits she doesn't feel like she's 'in the club'. There isn't one, I tell her. But of course there is. There always is. Two Norwegian students say that they feel like their own language is being left behind. They can't talk about these concepts in their mother tongue. The old hierarchies reassert themselves. White. Western. And English-speaking. There's the rub.

And yet I hear papers that delight me. Entrance me. Move me. Excite me. Death and dogs and hair and othering. It is easy to be cynical, but emotional integrity shines out. Like a beacon. Calling to me. Words and performances, silences and music. Friends and lovers. Wise women and queer folk. Donna Haraway's kith and kin (2015). I too am searching for that heady mix of integrity, authenticity and scholarship. The politics that touch. The activism that acts. The language that breaks free of itself.

Donna Haraway says a paper can (should?) be read through the lens of another, and that the same paper can (should?) be written again and again. Elizabeth St. Pierre circled the text and liberated us all by freely announcing she didn't need to understand to be able to 'plug into' Deleuze and Guattari. There is a tension here. Plugging in. Reading closely. Making meaning. Reading gives me a jump start. I need a jump start.

2. Foucault, kith, language, mould.

I have been thinking a lot this morning as I complete a few domestic chores before work. I wash up the bits and pieces left over from the previous evening's meal. I prise the seal from a plastic container and rub at the mould. Remnants of food that have been trapped for weeks. Maybe months. I look at my yellow Marigolds. I am a sloppy housewife.

I am thinking about Luce Irigaray, whose book I retreated into yesterday when I lost the ability to write. Her words seem strangely antiquated, couched in the language of a bygone era. But still I like them. They are a transcription. I can hear her voice in them. She says women experience the world differently to men because their bodies have an “irreducible relationship to the universe ... their relationship to fluids and solids, to matter and form, to the sense of touch through skin and mucous membrane, to symmetry, to repetition, and so on, are all different” (Irigaray, 1994, p.25). I wonder if that’s what draws women of a certain age back to the water? When I am out on the sea, battling with the swell and rowing hard against the currents of the Plymouth Sound, I like the fact that at 52, I am often the youngest woman in the quad.

I am thinking of kith and kin and how it is so crucial to keep challenging patriarchal structures and hierarchies. As Haraway tells us, new stories and connections will only emerge through different familial and filial relationships (Haraway, 2016).

And I am thinking about language and how it still conveys and constructs hierarchies of power and privilege: “If language does not give both sexes equivalent opportunities to speak and increase their self-esteem, it functions as a means of enabling one sex to subjugate the other” (Irigaray, 1994, p.xv). Language’s power moves in many insidious ways.

How to escape the I, I, I of the humanist subject? As Foucault (1980) so rightly said, we are complicit in our own bondage.

I drive to work quickly. Racing amber lights. Chanting ‘Foucault, kith, language, mould’. I want to write before I teach, before I forget, but already I can feel the thoughts I had as I stood at the sink beginning to slide across my mind. Like eels.

Coffee, I need coffee.

[Insert illustration 2: Coffee]

3. Friday.

I sit looking at the screen. I am done. My head feels heavy. Woolly. Donna Haraway is right, you can’t teach and write. I am handing the refugee class over today, just for a few weeks.

The numbers have dwindled. Perhaps it's the school holidays. Or the weather. Some don't come if it rains. Some don't come if it doesn't. There is Turkish delight today. It is delicious. Tiny cubes of sweetness. I try not to eat too many. A isn't feeling well, D leaves early. I feel the energy of the early days slipping away. It is probably me. My resources are low. Pulled in so many directions, I am losing the ability to write. Or teach. Or mother. Or wife.

I need to swim.

4. GCSE results day

It's GCSE result day. She nailed. She totally nailed it. 8s and 9s in all her sciences. And maths. I am so proud of her.

The other one is just as astonishing. A double Master's in Spatial and Ecological Modelling. I'm not even sure I know what that means. But she's going to save the world's trees. If she can.

Where have they come from? These women of the future. My kin.

We watch a documentary about a man who kept an octopus in a tank in his home. Donna Haraway has a plastic one on her desk. She knows who the real creatures of the future will be. Are. Were. The present is always slipping away.

5. Hierarchies of hair

My eldest daughter is home for the summer. The plughole in the bathroom is blocked with hair. Her hair. She has a mass of blonde curls, which she sheds all over the house. Carpets become matted with fair strands. I stick an old toothbrush into the drain and give it a half-hearted wiggle. A clump of hair attaches itself to the bristles. I pull it out along with the black and brown matter congealed around it. I rinse the bathtub, but the water still refuses to drain away. I run downstairs and search through the jumbled drawer of kitchen utensils. The dough mixer? Chopsticks? An ice-cream scoop? I take a bamboo skewer from its plastic

sheath. I have another go at the plughole. It feels like I am poking a small furry animal. I rinse again. The water sits determinedly in the tub. I run a bath anyway, knowing that the water will sit there for hours.

[Insert illustration 3: Hair]

I lie in the bath, contemplating my feet and my middle-aged spread. I shave my legs and armpits. My bikini line is a mess. I haven't got the strength to wax. Hair where I don't want it. Not enough where I do. I notice there is black mould around the rim of a tub of vegan hair food that sits on the side of the bath. I rub it off with my thumb. My younger daughter tells me boys don't like short hair. Or fringes. She is not sure how she feels about her hair. It is poker straight and streaked with gold and vanilla. I tell her we all cut ours off when we were young. In an act of defiance. Mine has been short ever since. Not quite a 'Queer Fade'. More a scrubby crop.

At the ECQI conference we are asked to stand. Sit down, the presenter says, if you have never been mistaken for a member of the opposite sex. I stay on my feet. People often think I am a man. I see the flash of confusion across a woman's face as she enters a public toilet. A quick flick of the eyes to make sure she hasn't accidentally entered through the wrong door. Sorry mate, says a bloke as he elbows me at a crowded bar.

I get out of the bath and release the plug. Miraculously the water begins to disappear. Perhaps the small animal, tired of my prodding, has decided to vacate its nest.

6. Listening to the radio

I haven't been able to write for days. I have felt physically and mentally drained. No energy. No spark. I have started dreaming about work. The usual. Late for a class. Mix ups and messes. Everything I can't stand. September is fast approaching. Teaching will start and I will be consumed once again. Perhaps I am depressed. Just worn out I think. Like an old nag. Fit only for the knackers' yard and the glue pot. I am listening to the radio. Lauren Laverne. I like Lauren Laverne. I see a text from my daughter. Sent at 12.30 am. Read this it says. I click on the link to the Guardian website. Boris Johnson has suspended parliament. I get that sinking, sick, Brexit feeling all over again. Tears well up in my eyes.

7. Home

[Insert illustration 4: Death]

I am sitting in my parents' double bed. It is many years since they slept in it. My mother moved into my youngest sister's room as soon as we had all left home. My dad eventually moved into the one I shared with my older sister. The same room that I gave birth to my first daughter in, almost exactly 25 years ago.

My dad died on August 2nd 2016. Three years have passed. There is little of him left in the house. Drawers have been emptied, his gnarled leather working shoes consigned to a bin. I open the wardrobe to hang a shirt. There are a few coats and jackets. And a tie. It is the tie that makes my heart contract for a second. I think I'd like to take it home with me. Before that too disappears.

I want to go into the garage and look over his carpentry tools once more. My sister thinks we should donate everything to charity. I don't mind. But I'd like a memento. One of the old, old planes or chisels. One of the ones that bear my grandfather's initials. HB. The same as mine.

Staying with the Trouble is on the bedside table. Next to the lamp. Its thick glass base filled with bubbles. There is only one left of what was once a pair. I open the book: "How to matter and not just want to matter?" is underlined in black biro. Well isn't that the question? On page 45 there is a photograph of burning forests in Alberta, Canada. That is where my tree-loving daughter is headed next. She studies the impacts of such 'disturbances'. She has shown me photos of acres and acres of dead trees. All killed by a single pathogen.

I write 1916 by mistake. Spell memento (momento) wrongly. Digital ghosts in the machine. Meme. I pick up the book again and I am drawn to a passage by Thom Van Dooren:

"Mourning is about dwelling with the loss and so coming to appreciate what it means, how the world has changed, and how we must ourselves change and renew our relationships if we are to move forward from here. In this context, genuine

mourning should open is into awareness of our dependence on and the relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction ... The reality, however, is that there is no avoiding the necessity of the difficult cultural work of reflection and mourning. This work is not opposed to practical action, rather it is the foundation of any sustainable and informed response.”

(cited in Haraway, 2016, p.38).

I still miss my dad.

8. Last swim at the lido

It's the 31st of August. I go for my last swim at the lido. It's empty. Well not quite. There are three of us. A woman, my age, maybe older. A man. I swim across the pool ten times. It's about 50 metres at the widest point. I have swum 500 metres. Not far. Perhaps just enough to save your life. If you are lucky. I float on my back, looking at the clouds. Such a joy to be weightless when so much is bearing down.

Seventy refugees have been saved off the coast of Spain. Another fifty detained in Kent. The calm weather increases the numbers prepared to risk everything to find sanctuary. Rescued, intercepted, detained.

[Insert illustration 5: Water]

September: Dead birds

The cat is miaowing loudly at the front door. I am trying to write so I ignore him. His miaows get louder, more insistent. I get up and open the door. He has killed a bird. A tiny body lies on the grey paving slab. Pink innards spew forth. Bad cat, I say. He always kills when my family are away. I think it's purposeful. I hate touching the tiny creatures he brings to the door. Some are still warm. Some not even dead. Just stunned.

I photograph the bird. What is it? A young sparrow? The beak is too narrow, it must be an insect eater. A dunnoek, perhaps? My dad would have known. He loved birds. Big and small. The world is coalescing. Everything is more intense, more present, more ... just more. I walk

back to my car along Sutton harbour. It is the end of September, but the weather has been glorious. The sun catches the water. The familiar detritus is there to greet me. A plastic bag. A polystyrene burger carton. A dead gull. The traffic cone stands proudly in the low tide. Swans circle it. There is a submerged blanket. The universe can sense that I am drawing to a close. A closing. My writing for this project is done. Now it is time to craft. To fashion and form this collection of the written, the heard and seen into something tangible. Affecting. Impactful.

[Insert illustration 6: Birds]

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