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A Student and Postqualitative Inquiry Walk Into a Bar: Syncretistic Methodology and Practices of Becoming-Researcher

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Zachary T. Smith¹

Abstract

In this essay, I playfully engage the reflections of scholars pursuing postqualitative inquiry by presenting how I employed methodological syncretism as a practice of figuration. I show how I enacted a “groping experimentation” with postqualitative research in the leisure context of a brewery, combining the conventional humanistic qualitative method of ethnographic observation with the new materialist and posthumanist sensibilities of postqualitative inquiry. I share how I engaged my body to join in the affective sociomateriality of a drinking establishment, attending to the object materiality and performativity of beer as it sluiced its way through tap lines, synced up with the sonic waves of background music, and danced its way around the silicate of pint glasses before sliding down esophagi, into capillaries, and slipping between the cracks of conversation. Ruminating on this syncretistic practice, I grapple with the multiple subjectivities of the researcher-literature-field assemblage, the possibility of “observing” material actors, and the incommensurability of methodological syncretism. I speculate that (1) methodological syncretism, while ontologically and epistemologically unintelligible, may work as a strategy of researcher-becoming and (2) a fallibilistic attitude fosters freedom to play with methodological knowledge/practice, recognizing the possibility that such play might produce different ways of knowing, being, and doing (research).

Keywords

qualitative methods, postqualitative inquiry, methodological syncretism

What Is Already Known?

In a reflective essay on her scholarly career, St. Pierre (2016a) discussed the difficulty of conducting “post-qualitative” research. Part of this difficulty stems from attempts to pursue post-qualitative inquiry within the confines of conventional qualitative research. Post-qualitative inquiry refers (in part) to research conducted from a post-humanist paradigm, which intentionally de-emphasizes the significance of human subjectivity and emphasizes the agency and productive capacity of non-human actors (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011, 2013), such as animals (Nordstrom, Nordstrom, & Nordstrom, 2018; Pederson, 2013) or Xerox machines (Humphries & Smith, 2014). Literature coming from the post-qualitative paradigm is increasingly critical of “conventional humanist qualitative methodology” (St. Pierre, 2016a, p. 2) in which methodology—and thus ontology and epistemology—is reduced to method, and which tends to privilege human subjectivity and modes of action (St. Pierre, 2011, 2014, 2013, 2016a, 2016b). Framed in terms of the “paradigm wars”, post-qualitative inquiry applies the ontological insights of new materialism to the practice of theory and method in qualitative

research. Recognizing that a paradigm shift is a dramatic rupture with past or present paradigms, St. Pierre (2015, 2016a, 2016b) argued that combining conventional qualitative methods with post-qualitative inquiry is onto-epistemically incommensurable—just as Foucauldian genealogy would be at odds with a positivist paradigm. Yet, the ruminations of several authors pursuing post-qualitative work contain stories of researcher-becoming, stories filled with tales of methodological amalgamation and iteration, complication, and of growth through failure (Lather, 2006, 2012; Markula, 2006; St. Pierre, 2014, 2016a). Suggestively, each scholar tells of attempts to combine, complicate, or overcome the traditional qualitative research paradigm with what they are

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(now) calling postqualitative inquiry. Postqualitative inquiry thus signals a new paradigmatic break; it is an attempt to rethink qualitative inquiry on the basis of a reimaged ontology.¹

What This Paper Adds?

Adopting these researcher narratives as road maps, I deployed syncretistic methodology as a figuration and strategy for researcher-becoming in the context of an Introduction to Qualitative Research doctoral seminar. Classically, syncretism is a term used to describe the blending of two distinct religious traditions (if the dichotomy can be tolerated for the sake of metaphor). I use it to evoke the religious imagery of beliefs and practices, understanding the ontological and methodological commitments of the researcher as a kind of foundational belief and practice. The syncretism I am referring to intentionally blends the practices of conventional humanistic qualitative research (and its attending humanistic ontology) with the loose strategies of postqualitative inquiry (and its posthumanist ontological orientation).

Methodological syncretism is similar to what Denzin and Lincoln (2005) labelled “genre blurring” and what Stinson (2009) called “theoretical eclecticism.” Theoretical eclecticism features a grab bag approach, where the researcher brings different theoretical paradigms (e.g., critical theory and poststructuralism) together in order to develop a “meta-paradigm” for a particular project or problem (Cooksey, 2001, p. 78; Stinson, 2009). Somewhat similarly, Denzin and Lincoln described genre blurring primarily in terms of disciplinary crosspollination. Recounting the historical procession of qualitative methodology, they indicate that in the age of genre-blurring, researchers became bricoleurs “learning how to borrow from many different disciplines” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

While methodological syncretism involves blending and blurring, it does so as a strategy of dislocation. Genre blurring and theoretical eclecticism both developed as ways to offer more comprehensive accounts of empirical phenomena, and in this way are tied to the development of postpositivism in qualitative social science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Methodological syncretism is not a strategy for providing a more complete picture or representation. Instead, it is a strategy meant to provoke, disrupt, and destabilize through the force of combining that which is ontologically incompatible in the hope of creating fractures and fissures through which new ways of doing and being research/researcher might arise.

To accomplish this, I blended the humanistic practices of ethnographic observation and analyses with the “posthumanist performativity” (Barad, 2003) of postqualitative research by taking theory into the field of a local brewery. I hoped to observe how combining postqualitative inquiry with conventional qualitative methods might produce new research subjectivities, as well as explore how “theory . . . is practice” (Deleuze & Foucault, 1972/1977, p. 208; also cited in St. Pierre, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2016, p. 105). This study is significant for several reasons. First, it puts to work the ideas of critical post-qualitative scholars such as St. Pierre (2017b) to

enact a “groping experimentation” (p. 692) with post-qualitative research in the context of a doctoral seminar on qualitative research. In doing so, I illustrate how students might begin to engage the post-qualitative paradigm from within the context of “conventional humanist qualitative methodology” (St. Pierre, 2016a, p. 2). This is especially significant as qualitative methodology is often reduced to instruction on “methods” separate from discussions about the ontological foundations of a research paradigm (Lather, 2006; St. Pierre, 2014). Second, it offers a nuanced perspective on St. Pierre’s (2015, 2016a) critiques of researchers who practice the incommensurable syncretism of qualitative research and post-qualitative inquiry. This is accomplished by engaging Deleuze’s (1990) concept of “figuration”—a concept that that St. Pierre (1997; 2000) has found useful for exploring the ruins of the “posts” in qualitative research. I deploy figuration as a strategy of radical complication and use it to combine the ontologically discordant methodological moorings of post-qualitative inquiry and conventional qualitative methodology. I cast this methodological syncretism as a figuration, and suggest that as a figuration, this syncretism may serve as a technology of researcher-becoming.²

Literature as Subjectivity as Background

Each turn—cultural, postmodern, linguistic, and ontological—has wrought new vectors of my thinking. As I proceeded from reading Derrida (1976, 1981) as an undergraduate to Foucault (1977, 1978) as a master’s student, thinking these theorists alongside of my own work radically impacted the shape of my research. Without Rorty’s (1984) pragmatic conception of a rational reconstruction my senior thesis on Feuerbach’s (1967, 1989) interpretation of Luther’s *theologia crucis* would have been inconceivable (Smith, 2009).³ Without exposure to Foucault (1977), a later project on masculinity in the wrestling gyms of early modern Safavid Iran would have been unthinkable (Smith, 2016a). These projects would have been impossible not simply because of my lack of analytical tools for considering my phenomenon, but because without reading Rorty and Foucault alongside of Feuerbach and early modern travel diaries, I would not have been able to conceive of these texts as possible sites of inquiry. It was the productive collision (McCoy, 2012) of these texts with each other that made these inquiries possible.

These new vectors, or “lines of flight” as Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) called them, were made possible by the interaction of typewriter and paper, printing press, ocular nerves, and online course portals. We might name this compendium “education,” at least as it has accreted into similarly patterned collections of people, practices, materials, institutions, and networks. Through this process of education as accretion, and through my own (admittedly arbitrary) differentiation of myself as a learning subject separate from other actors in this field of accretion, new possibilities of thinking and inquiry emerged (Boughey, 2018). If being is really a constant becoming (Whitehead, 1929), then education is

processual. Already a new turn is becoming evident. References to Deleuze, nonhuman actors, and process theory have reterritorialized my thinking, creating a head-on collision with an ethnographic observation of a brewery and/as an assignment for an Introduction to Qualitative Research seminar.

Other Subjectivities and “Literature”

In beginning to write this essay, it occurred to me that my becoming researcher subjectivity is made possible by the becomings of other researchers. That is, I am realizing how plural and migratory my subjectivities really are. I do not merely stand on the shoulders of those who proceeded me; their work becomes grafted into my own (Gee, 2008). Ontologically, there is no *sui generis* “I.” Rather, there are many “Is” flitting in and out of existence, being made and remade, each moment bricolaged anew. Becoming is a process, after all (Whitehead, 1929). As these different subjectivities take up residence with me, maybe my theoretical-I (Peshkin, 1988) is really theoretical-we since “each of us was several” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 3). Maybe the process of my researcher-becoming is epistemological and subjective multiplication.

One text that has taken up residence with me is St. Pierre’s (2016a) story of her experience of the “incommensurability between postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthumanism . . . and ‘conventional humanist qualitative methodology’” (p. 2). In it, she outlined three “key periods” (St. Pierre, 2016a, p. 2) in her personal history as a qualitative researcher, which illustrated the complexity, and perhaps the impossibility, of conducting postqualitative research using conventional humanist qualitative methods. Elsewhere, she has admitted that it might be impossible for her, as a researcher so thoroughly trained in anthropocentrically oriented methodologies, to truly embrace and perform postqualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2015, 2016b). This is interesting because she has also critiqued qualitative scholars who have tried to combine postqualitative analysis with conventional methods like coding, which she labeled “a conceptual practice of logical empiricism” (St. Pierre, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, p. 121). Cutting to the point, she stated, “I don’t see how these confused projects can produce anything new” (St. Pierre, 2015, p. 85). In that same essay on “practices for the new,” she commends “refusing qualitative methodology” as the first practice (St. Pierre, 2015, p. 86). Later she concluded, “My strongest recommendation is that we not try to force our new empirical, new material, posthuman, post qualitative studies into the structure of conventional humanist qualitative methodology. I can’t imagine how it could fit” (St. Pierre, 2015, p. 92). At first, I couldn’t imagine how these might fit either. But through continued reading and writing, St. Pierre’s ideas crashed into (McCoy, 2012) the concept of figuration and my situation in an Introduction to Qualitative Research seminar.

Because of the manner in which this project was undertaken, my reading took place alongside of writing and my observation; my “review of the literature” was interactive and iterative. I brought these other scholars into the field with me. In many

ways, they took up residence with me. To offer a sense of how that happened, my write-up of this “literature review” is scattered throughout the article.⁴

Research Questions

As a doctoral student wrestling through the “posts,” I formulated two research questions to pursue this line of inquiry in the context of an ethnographic observation assignment. (Yes, in spite of the fact that, according to St. Pierre [2016a], research questions are a vestige of positivism. The assignment rubric called for research questions after all!) First, how might a beginning qualitative researcher take postqualitative inquiry into the field? Second, in taking it into the field, what might it do?

Research Practices and Methods

To answer the first research question, the Research Practices and Methods and Analysis sections illustrate how I blended a traditional qualitative observation with postqualitative inquiry in the context of an Introduction to Qualitative Research seminar observation project. In responding to the second question, I offer a preliminary analysis to gesture at what taking postqualitative inquiry to a bar “did.” This form conscientiously plays (Hofsess & Sonenberg, 2013) with the traditional manuscript style of the American Psychological Association (2010) and with the conventions of research reporting, blending traditional, and nontraditional elements to offer a smattering barrage of research intimations and implications with which the reader might productively collide (McCoy, 2012).

Preprocedural Practices

A number of recent papers on postqualitative methodology and method have documented different strategies for performing postqualitative research (e.g., St. Pierre, 2016a, 2016b, 2017b). Some of this work has included mapping strategies for enacting postqualitative research; St. Pierre (2016b) argued that these strategies should not be taken prescriptively, that they should “refuse a dogmatic image of thought” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 143). In light of the turn to processual ontologies (Barad, 2007), these strategies are not set. The maps change as the terrain constantly shifts under the weight of becoming (Hultman & Taguchi, 2010). St. Pierre (2016b) wrote, “What the ‘new’ ushers in, therefore, is a re-imagining of what method might *do*, rather than what it *is* or *how to do it*” (p. 105). Like Foucault, St. Pierre (2016b) suggested, “What I’ve written is never prescriptive either for me or for others—at most it’s instrumental and tentative” (p. 105; Foucault, 2000, p. 240). Though St. Pierre warned against taking these strategies prescriptively, I have used some of these authors’ suggestions to kick-start a new way of thinking. In this new way of thinking, I conceptualized them as research “practices” (Slack, 1996; Sloterdijk, 2013) or disciplines to sensitize, orient, guide, and habituate my researcher becoming. Minding Foucault’s (2000)

wisdom though, these strategic disciplines are subject to change. Each new text I read introduces new practices, suggesting new pathways of inquiry.

St. Pierre (2016a) problematized the notion of such stark stylistic distinctions between the various concepts of a research project such as the “literature review,” “methodology,” “data collection,” “analysis,” and “discussion.” Using her dissertation research experience as an example, she illustrated the ways that each of these research stages bled into the others. The clean labels between these practices and the clear articulation of each stage of research occludes the blurry boundaries that are buried beneath the rhetorical veneer of qualitative research that is “rigorous” and “valid”—as if the subjective context of any individual circumstance was perfectly “replicable.”

Acknowledging this, I present the following practices not as steps that can be formulaically followed, but as disciplines that I practice as a student and scholar, adopted, and adapted from others. They are scholarly exercises that I perform together, one with the other, and they change with me over time.⁵ The progression of practices that exists hereafter, if there is one, is one that has found its way into my bones as a researcher. And while I couch these as practices “before method,” I perform them all throughout the chronology of a research time line.

Practice #1: “Read and read and read”. St. Pierre et al. (2016, p. 106) and St. Pierre (2017a) advised new postqualitative researchers to start by immersive reading. Rather than “rush to a particular kind of application,” she echoed Lacan’s caution that “first it is necessary to read . . . avoid understanding too quickly” (p. 1081). Over the course of the semester of inquiry, I read numerous books and articles on new materialism (e.g., Clough, 2009), postqualitative research (e.g., MacLure, 2013), and related concepts like affect theory (e.g., Schaffer, 2015). According to my researcher journal, prior to heading into the field, I had read approximately 32 journal articles, 3 book chapters, and 11 monographs on these or related topics. As I read these, I took notes on them in my researcher journal. These notes often include questions, quotes, and my own reflections on how these readings interact with my own research and theoretical musings.

Practice #2: Writing to the bone. The practice of note-taking begins to bleed over into the second strategy, writing. Riffing on Deleuze’s (1986/1988) metaphor of conceptual “seepage” (p. 33), St. Pierre (2017a) wrote that “It is in writing that I begin to get ideas in my bones . . . in this way, *I become in language*” (p. 1081). By writing the concepts that I read about, these concepts start to terraform the terrain of my researcher being. They not only take root in my reflective researcher consciousness, they transform this consciousness *all the way down* as I write them into my body by writing them onto the page.

Writing, I have learned, is an intensely embodied practice. My vocation as a graduate student these last few years has required a significant output of written content. All this writing has coincided with a lot of sitting. It turns out that my body has become accustomed to writing while sitting over the 30-

something years I have been a student. So much so, in fact, that I have not been able to make the transition to a standing desk in spite of my knowledge of the health benefits. Writing is itself an embodied material research practice, “an empirical application” (St. Pierre, 2017a, p. 1081; 2017c) and “method of inquiry” in its own right (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

Practice #3: “Thinking with theory” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. vii). Like the practices of reading and writing, the third practice cannot be cleanly separated out as a distinct practice. As I read and wrote and swam in ideas, these ideas began to seep into my bones. Jackson and Mazzei (2012, 2013) called this “thinking with theory” and explained that it was “a way of thinking methodologically and philosophically together” (2012, p. vii). St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) noted that thinking with theory is difficult, and not something that can be scripted; rather, it is something that is “put to work in a particular project” (p. 717). I find that theories often collide with phenomena I am interested in or some piece of research I am trying to conduct. In this case, my posthumanist reading and writing crashed into a class assignment to conduct an ethnographic observation.

Practice #4: Concept as method. Taguchi (2016) proposed experimenting by using “the concept as method” recognizing the way that researchers, data, discourses, and institutionalized practices all “transverse each other” (p. 213). While I deviate from her practices of mapping and tracing, I take as productive the ability for concepts to perform ruptures of thought and practice “aiming to be creative of yet unknown potentialities” (p. 214).

As I read, wrote, and thought with theory, the concept of figuration kept arresting my attention. St. Pierre and Pillow (2000) cast figurations as the opposite of “graceful metaphors” (p. 14). Instead of offering clarity, figurations are “cartographic weapons” (St. Pierre, 1997b, p. 407) and “splitting analytics” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 14) which can be used to problematize prescriptive narratives “in favor of the unintelligible” (St. Pierre, 1997b, p. 281; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 15) for the purpose of imagining new realities. Figurations are conceptual tools that may induce the failure of neat academic categories (St. Pierre, 1997a). But as “practices of failure” (Visweswaren, 1994, p. 99; also cited in St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 15), they become useful for plotting new ways of thinking and being (St. Pierre, 1997a). Figurations are technologies of becoming.

As I considered figuration alongside of my observation assignment and my desire to be a postqualitative researcher, the possibility of methodological syncretism as figuration pierced the horizon of my imagination. Although methodological syncretism was unthinkable from a postqualitative perspective (St. Pierre, 2017a, 2017c), it occurred to me that this might make it a good candidate for a figurational concept. If figurations aim to disrupt and confuse, then the unintelligibility of methodological syncretism seemed like it would perform this function. Thus, I used the concept of figuration to productively combine conventional qualitative methods

with postqualitative insights, hoping to produce a rupture that would make possible new ways of thinking and doing qualitative research.

Practice #5: Living theory into the field of experimentation. Describing the process of her dissertation research and writing, St. Pierre (2017c) recounted a disconnect she experienced as she tried to apply poststructural theory in the write-up of her data. “At that point” she wrote, “I knew I was in trouble” (St. Pierre, 2017c, p. 2). These reflections on her experience lead her to conclude that ad hoc application of theory at the end of a study is grossly inadequate. Instead, what is required is that “the post qualitative researcher must *live* the theories . . . and will, then, live in a different world enabled by a different ethico-onto-epistemology” (Barad, 2007; St. Pierre, 2017c, p. 2).

Living theory is an “aleatory practice” that attunes the researcher to “the worlds we make as we live and do our research” (McCoy, 2012, p. 763). Deleuze and Parnett (1996) described an aleatory practice of “being on the lookout” for “jolts and disturbances by a thought or idea emerging from . . . various encounters” (McCoy, 2012, p. 763). As the researcher reads and writes and thinks and conceptualizes, she becomes capable of new modes of analysis because she lives in a world of new possibilities. Once living theory, the researcher is opened to the new possibilities that theory-living encounters might produce.

As I lived the theory of the “posts” that I was reading, writing, and attempting to conceptualize, I became a different researcher. I became open to new possibilities. The world around me changed with me. Not only was I able to think with theory, I was able to experiment with it—albeit in an ungainly and “groping” fashion (St. Pierre, 2017b). My observation project became my field of play and postqualitative inquiry my game.

Conventional qualitative methodology would likely “write this up” as a transition from theory to practice, as if these could be written separately (Deleuze & Foucault, 1972/1977; St. Pierre, 2016a). As if the ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007) foundations of a research paradigm were constitutive of only how the world is known, and not how it *is*. But in this new world, I cannot avoid writing theory as practice and practice as theory. Living theory demands experimentation. It cannot avoid experimentation because living theory produces new researchers and new worlds, subjectivities previously unknown, life yet to be lived, and worlds not yet experienced. By definition, the “new” is the always not yet.

Figurating Fieldwork

Practicing the concept of figuration, I combined the conventional humanist method of ethnographic observation with post-humanist and postsocial insights in a small craft brewery. I read St. Pierre’s (2017b) warnings to novice researchers that combining traditional qualitative methods with postqualitative concepts (what I am calling methodological syncretism) was ontologically and epistemologically nonsensical. But I had read

this alongside of her writings on figuration (St. Pierre, 1997b, 1999, 2015; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). Reading these together, I wondered if I might adopt methodological syncretism as a figuration—a strategy of “rigorous confusion” which might “propel [me] . . . into the turbulence masked by coherence” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 14). I understood the ontological incoherence of what I was proposing. I expected to fail. But I hoped that out of the ruins of this failure, I might begin to see new possibilities for qualitative research and new researcher subjectivities besides.

Ethnographic fieldwork. Preissle and Grant (2004) defined ethnographic fieldwork as “almost always . . . research on some aspect of human behavior and its everyday context” (p. 163). To conduct fieldwork, the researcher “enters the social world of the study, the field, to observe human interaction in that context” (Preissle & Grant, 2004, p. 163). Observing refers to the practice of using the senses to collect information about a phenomenon, which are often recorded via audio, video, notes, or another medium that would allow the researcher to reflect on the observation experience (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). In addition to adhering to the assignment guidelines, I chose covert ethnographic observation (Lugosi, 2006) in a brewery because it was a “conventional” qualitative method that could be figured by combining it with postqualitative concepts such as material performativity and sociomateriality.⁶

Research observers may take on a more involved role which engages the researcher as a participant or a more disengaged role, where the researcher is a passive observer (Lugosi, 2006) though researchers may assume a variety of positions along the participant/observer continuum (Lugosi, 2006; Simmons, 2007). I decided that locating myself toward the participant-observer end of the continuum would allow me to more easily blend into the observation context, since recording field notes would already set me apart from the “typical” brewery patron. Hoping to fit in, I ordered a flight of samples from the bartender and asked questions about the saison and one of the New England style India Pale Ale’s (IPA). She recommended the #trendyAF Orange Creamsicle IPA, so I ordered one of those as well.

“Conventional qualitative” ethnography. Spradley (1980) and Preissle and Grant’s (2004) characterizations of participant observation and ethnographic fieldwork are representative of the ways that ethnography is commonly depicted in literature on qualitative research methodologies (e.g., see also Flick, 2014; Wolcott, 1999). Both Spradley (1980) and Preissle and Grant (2004) discussed participant observation as a method for use in “social” situations with the assumption that human action and interaction was the object of observation. I contend that this is partially a result of the way culture is commonly conceptualized as a human enterprise. Presciently, Preissle and Grant (2004) posed the question, “What do you think the authors mean by culture? How would you define culture? How does the definition possibly shape field studies?” (p. 164).

Using Spradley (1980) and Preissle and Grant (2004) as further examples, neither of these authors explicitly defined

“culture.” Rather, their articles marked culture as the crucial component of a study that goes beyond observation to ethnography (Preissle & Grant, 2004; Spradley, 1980). Prasad (2005) similarly highlighted the importance of culture as she described ethnography as the study of human culture, a depiction that is in line with classical ethnographers such as Boas (1940) and Malinowski (1922). Wolcott (2010) extended these conceptualizations of ethnography to include not only culture but also the collective behaviors of a definable social group. Collectively, these scholars paint a picture of ethnographic observation as an anthropocentric method.

Postqualitative problems. Each of the notions of culture expressed above betrays the assumption of conventional ethnography that “culture” is primarily a social product of human action and interaction. Geertz’s (1973) famous definition of culture offers an instructive example. In his well-known essay “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” Geertz (1973) espouses a semiotic definition of culture, or the idea that culture is essentially symbolic and about “meaning.” As Geertz (1973) famously put it, “man [*sic*] is an animal suspended in webs of significance that he himself has spun, [and] I take culture to be those webs” (p. 5).

A postparadigm. The foregrounding of a human element of culture is evidence of an assumed anthropocentric ontology. Yet anthropocentrism in qualitative research has come under fire (Barad, 2007; Hein, 2016). Posthumanist scholars have challenged anthropocentrism by introducing philosophies referred to with various labels including “new materialism” (Barad, 2007) and “new empiricism” (Clough, 2009).⁷ Proponents of new materialism have advocated for an ontological flattening of the world that conceives of human and nonhuman actors on the same plane of existence (Barad, 2007; Hein, 2016). Drawing on work such as Latour’s (2005) provocative study of objects and his methodological “actor network theory,” postqualitative researchers have argued that it is appropriate to observe and interrogate nonhuman material actors as a way to pursue deeper understandings of phenomena (Broglio, 2010; Hein, 2016; Neimanis, 2014) with the additional goal of realizing more ethical visions of the world (Barad, 2007; Taguchi, 2016).

A posthumanist notion of culture is expansive. It does not fall into the representational essentialisms of classical definitions that perpetuate power differentials and colonizing research practices (Asad, 1993; Schilbrack, 2005). Indeed, as Mitchell (1995) argued, it recognizes “culture” as a particular material-discursive formation. This conception of culture regards it as an assemblage. In this sense, culture can be articulated as a regime of assembly including social entities like persons, organizations, and nation-states as well as material entities like oceans and skyscrapers, arranged “through very specific historical processes . . . in which language plays an important but not constitutive role” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 3). Thus, “[s]ocial behavior, and ergo culture, are not outside of the so-called natural world” (Gullion, 2018, p. 23). Leveling out the agentic capacity of humans and “things,” it becomes

possible to imagine the earth as organism (Naess, 1988), rights for animals (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2015; Pederson, 2013), and the material responsibilities of humans in this diverse world.

Site of the Study

Living in this new postqualitative world, I began playing. It was a Friday evening. As I do many Friday’s, I went out to a local bar with my partner. To play with these concepts, I conducted a 62-min observation in a public setting in accordance with the assignment guidelines. I conducted the observation on March 2, 2018, from 20:29 to 21:31.

As my field site, I chose a small craft beer bar and micro-brewery located in Knoxville, Tennessee’s Old City neighborhood. Using a criterion-based selection process (LeCompte & Preissle, 2003) I chose this site, and the topic of alcohol and drinking more broadly, because of my familiarity with past research and literature in the area of alcohol studies (Smith, 2016b) and because, after reading Latour (2005), I became able to think of alcohol as a material actor in its own right. I also intentionally chose an establishment that I did not regularly patronize so as to avoid entanglements with individuals with whom I may have had a preexisting relationship.

Interlude: A note about how postqualitative inquiry into alcohol became thinkable. From previous research, I knew that alcohol would provide an interesting subject of study (Smith, 2016b). Writing about the social-scientific study of alcohol, Dietler and Hayden (2001) stated that the significance of alcohol as a cultural artifact exists because of the place it occupies as an “embodied material culture” (p. 73). Like eating, drinking becomes more than mere cultural practice as it moves beyond bodily action to operate as a particular mode of bodily comportment (Wright, 2004). In this sense, alcohol operates as a “highly condensed social fact” within a complex web of social relations (Dietler & Herbich, 2006, p. 396). As Douglas (1987) demonstrated, what beverage is consumed, when, where, how, and with whom it is consumed, as well as the means of production, are all revealing parts of the social economy. Drinking, it seems, is an inherently social act layered with economic and political implications.

Despite the significant contributions of cultural studies of alcohol, much of this analysis “turns” upon a theoretical lynchpin that Latour (2005) vehemently despised: anthropocentric social construction. For example, historian Marni Davis (2012) stated that alcohol “represents something deep about their [a people’s] relation to other people, and to the culture in which they live” (p. 3). In Davis’s otherwise illuminating work, alcohol is investigated exclusively with respect to its relationship to people. Taking Latour’s (2005) critique of social constructionism to heart along with the ontological shift away from anthropocentric qualitative research (Humphries & Smith, 2014), I set out to interrupt my regular Friday night routine to think and play with theory in a field observation of a brewery by

performing a posthumanist observation of beer in a local drinking establishment.

Data Collection

Using a traditional ethnographic method of participant-observation (Spradley, 1980), I engaged my visual, audio, olfactory, kinesthetic, and gustatory (yes, even they!) senses to observe a drinking establishment as a way to figurate just what postqualitative inquiry might do. I recorded field notes in a researcher journal via pen and paper and later developed these into expanded field notes, which would become the basis for analysis in accordance with the course assignment instructions. This type of data collection makes use of the researcher the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In order to maximize my sensitivity to my field of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), I tried to consciously engage each of my senses in the observation and make notes about what my body–mind experienced as well as to how I perceived those experiences (Taguchi, 2012). In addition to recording “time stamps” for my notes, I kept a log of what, and how much, I drank in a column alongside of my field notes.

However, this was not straightforward “collection of the data.” As Hein (2016) noted, the ontology of new materialism is particularly “troubling [to] the methodological concept of ‘data’ and the researcher’s relationship to various kinds of data” (p. 132). While qualitative research conventionally treats data as discrete from the researcher (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014), data do not merely sit idly by. They impinge upon the researcher, sometimes making themselves understood, sometimes obscuring themselves from “analysis”—but always doing something to the researcher. “Data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us” (MacLure, 2013, p. 660).

Using my senses, I listened, tasted, watched, smelled, and felt my way around the brewery field drawing on Neimanis’s (2014) account of her body as a powerful site and implement of sociomateriality. I attended to what Humphries and Smith (2014) called object materiality and object practice to “highlight the significant, networks of forces, materials and people” acting in the field (Humphries & Smith, 2014, p. 477). By attuning my observation to the talking and dancing and bubbling objects of my field, I attempted to engage with the “affective sociomateriality” of a drinking establishment (Pederson, 2013, p. 718), understanding it as a collectivity of “complex, vibrant and interactive agents capable of influencing and shaping” my experience (Humphries & Smith, 2014, p. 482). Humans and objects exist as entanglements, participating together in the processes of material production and meaning making. Treating objects “as entities with the capacity to *do* something” (Latour, 2007, p. 53) deepens the possibilities of field observations.⁸ Objects think, act, and talk (Broglio, 2010; Humphries & Smith, 2014). These theoretical notes informed the practice of my observation as I sought to engage the fullness of becoming (Marcel, 1970) at the intersection of liquid, gas, sound, glass, and the metabolism of human inebriation.

Analysis

After conducting the observation and recording it via field notes, I immediately began actively reflecting on my notes (Merriam, 2014). During this process of reflection, I expanded my field notes from short statements to longer descriptions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). As I did so, I not only mentally replayed the observation scenes in my head, I also tried to refeel (Neimanis, 2014) the individual moments of the observation through my body.

After expanding my field notes, I analyzed these expanded field notes as qualitative data (Wolcott, 1994), acknowledging that conventional practices of “coding” are fundamentally at odds with postqualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2016). On my first reading, I specifically looked for affective “traces” (Latour, 2005) of the brewery in my field notes, paying special attention to words and phrases that triggered a “gut” (Neimanis, 2014) response and transported me back to the field. I highlighted these passages as sections to focus on in later readings. My second pass through the expanded field notes involved a more analytical reading process. This time I began to make analytical memos based on the field notes, and I underlined key words and phrases. While I read through all of the expanded field notes, I focused on the areas that I had previously highlighted, since these were the types of phenomena I was particularly interested in. Finally, I read through my expanded field notes a third time. On this pass-through, I collated similar words and phrases and attempted to make thematic connections between them.

Object Materiality

Previous research on alcohol has explored the gendering of alcohol and human behavior around alcohol (Douglas, 1987). My findings resonated with this, as several passages in my field notes documented the explicit gendering of alcohol. The conventional humanist mode of analysis would suggest that these are categories that humans affix to objects, like alcoholic beverages. Thinking about this in terms of object materiality (Humphries & Smith, 2014) though brings to the fore the material aspects of these objects which make these anthropocentric narratives about alcohol possible. For example, the bartender’s assumption about my partner was that she was a woman and that as a woman, she would prefer beer that was lighter in color, less bitter, and sweeter (Author, field notes, March 2, 2018). The values assigned to the color and taste of the liquid might be considered as socially constructed (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Taking Broglio’s (2010) approach to the social, however, allows us to look at beer as a member of the social order constituting these value assumptions.

In this way, we can see how human narratives about beer rely on and are constituted by the material properties of the beer itself, and of the materials and processes that render beer from water, grain, yeast, and hops. The lightness of color comes from the kilning of the grains (Daniels, 2000; Shellhammer & Bamforth, 2008); the sweetness from the amount of grain used in the recipe and the residual sugar left after the yeast is

done converting the grain sugars to ethanol (Daniels, 2000). In the ecology of alcohol, these physical processes and materials intersect with cultural values about taste and color, standards of beauty tied to the invented science of calorie counting, geographies of hop growing, and historically gendered means of production and discourses of power. These are the materialities that are called forth when my partner responds to the bartender, “I’m a hophead” (Author, field notes, March 2, 2018). At this intersection, it becomes possible to ask about things like feminist beers and brewing processes and how such things might be ethically rendered toward the becoming of a new world.

Object Performativity

Another theme arising from my initial analysis is the performativity of materiality (Barad, 2003). On two separate occasions, I noted how a combination of the smells of the brewery transported me to other times and places (Author, field notes, March 2, 2018). What happened in these moments was not the result of conscious reflection, where a self-aware subject drew a correspondence between two similar experiences. Rather, the carbon dioxide excreted by the active yeast impressed itself on me, infiltrated my olfactory sense, and became part of me. It struck a chord in my body, a chord that had been tuned over dozens of afternoons spent homebrewing, and dozens more spent visiting other breweries. In a moment, my drinking body became the latent brewer body that was always already there, wrung out from itself by a few milliliters of drifting gas.

Sociomateriality

Closely related to the notion of material performativity was the demonstration of a distinct sociomateriality of the ways that the material enacted itself in and on the brewery environment (Pederson, 2013). That is, the way in which various material bodies and elemental forces became together to produce an imbricated assemblage known as a “brewery.” The following passage illustrates this, showing beer and music to function as threads binding the heterogeneous masses of matter together. Indeed, at times, I felt as if the whole bar was a single organism.

The lights are dim, the music drones on “in the background,” though the driving bass and steady bumping of the percussion are active in this environment. These sonic waves reverberate not just with eardrums, but they shake the turbid golden liquid in the glasses sitting on the bar causing a gentle ripple back and forth. The music resonates through the space. Legs tapping, muscles twitching, faces smiling, beer rippling, torsos swaying. Everyone has a glass in hand. The room is alive, a patchwork of things dissolving in to each other—beer running down the sides of glass now running down esophagus—all combine to render this space “bar.” At this moment these “things” are rendered one, single subjectivities become heterogeneities and beget a multiform present. Beer in vats, beer in kegs, beer in tap lines, beer in glasses, beer on lips, and beer in bellies. This golden liquid, sloshing, foaming, bubbling, is both glue and lubricant. It is what sticks together all the different actor-machines to form that assemblage known as

“bar.” And, as lubricant, it is what makes the bar alive. It slips between the cracks of conversations, between the lips of mouths, sliding out of glasses and down throats. It sluices its way into the capillaries of bodies, diluting bloodstreams and making itself *felt*. A slurred word, a mistimed laugh. Slipping, again, into the cracks of conversation. Felt, even by the hand-blown silicate of the pint-glasses, carbon resonating with hydrogen and oxygen making a dance of ripples. (Author, field notes, March 2, 2018)

Feuerbach was headed in the right direction when he wrote, “man [*sic*] is what he eats” (Cherno, 1963).

Discussion and Conclusion

I embarked on this project with the knowledge that what I was trying to do involved a certain level of onto-epistemic incommensurability. Using the concept of figuration and following the example of other postqualitative scholars, I employed syncretistic methodology as a way of catalyzing a new researcher-becoming. The tentative and preliminary analysis offered above, while not likely to contribute to the fields of alcohol studies or food studies, demonstrates what introducing post-qualitative inquiry might do in the context of a conventional qualitative observation. It showed me how engagement with object materiality, performativity, and sociality might be possible, and it opened my researcher-being to new possibilities in my journey of becoming-researcher.

Throughout this research process, my researcher subjectivities multiplied and permuted. The literature that I read took up residence with me, and the practices of reading, writing, thinking, and drinking congealed into a discipline of living research. While my researcher body was enacting “observation,” the zoetic liquid in my glass animated this performance. It became part of my researcher body. And though it joined me in this observation, attuning my body to the workings of the brewery organism, it also rebelled against my researcher-intentions. As it made itself felt, my attention lurched and my focus scattered. My beered body challenged the conventional casting of the researcher’s body as the primary research instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). My body was no longer the only, or even the primary instrument of research. As the glasses emptied and my field notes wandered the literature infusing me bubbled forth. In this mixture of mind and malt, I became something other than—or perhaps in addition too—simply-researcher. I became. My researcher “of” became researcher “and.” I set out to syncretize methodology as a figuration and along the way found myself figured by the fusion of a homework assignment with postqualitative literature and a beer parlor. Indeed, as one anonymous reviewer noted, I became “hoist with [my] own petard” as humanist methods mixed with post-humanist and postsocial insights and practices of reading, writing, and thinking became figured by the materiality, performativity, and sociality of beer.

Certainly, there are legitimate onto-epistemic issues with blending traditional humanist methods with postqualitative sensibilities, as St. Pierre (2015) argued. Yet a strict insistence

that methodologies should not be mixed is a methodological dogmatism that obscures the potential of blending qualitative and postqualitative methodologies for producing new researcher-becomings. Hall (1980) referred to such stark breaks as “epistemological ruptures” and characterized them as “absolut[ist]” (p. 57). Suggestively, however, the scholarly narratives of St. Pierre (2014, 2016a) and Markula (2006) both describe how methodological syncretism was part of their journey into postqualitative inquiry. Similarly, Lather’s (2012) “Becoming Feminist” narrative tells a story of *mélange* as a process of intraaction and in-between. Based upon these scholarly narratives and my own experience of taking postqualitative inquiry into a bar, I advocate for an attitude of methodological fallibilism.

As an epistemic doctrine, fallibilism has wide purchase among epistemologists (Feldman, 1981; Reed, 2002) and has been used effectively in various fields such as ethics (Feezell, 2013), science education (Leiviskä, 2013), and organizational and management studies (Powell, 2001). According to Leiviskä (2013), fallibilism entails understanding that “knowledge is profoundly uncertain, corrigible, and at least to a certain degree dependent on contingent factors” (p. 517). An attitude of methodological fallibilism would allow one to recognize the incommensurability of blending methodologies, while holding methodological principles loosely. An attitude of fallibilism fosters the freedom to play with methodological knowledge, recognizing the contingency of this knowing and the possibility that such play might produce further different ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Postqualitative scholars such as St. Pierre (2016b) are careful to acknowledge that their strategies are not prescriptive and should not be treated dogmatically. However, by suggesting that conventional humanistic qualitative research is something that needs to be abandoned (e.g., St. Pierre, 2015), discussions about the incommensurability of combining traditional qualitative methods with postqualitative insights fail to acknowledge the important role that methodological syncretism may play in the journeys of different researchers—especially in an educational context in which the majority of qualitative scholars are trained according to the principles of conventional humanistic qualitative research. Allowing and even encouraging methodological syncretism marks a recognition that discursive literacy is more a product of acquisition than learning (Gee, 2008). Methodological syncretism can be an embodied practice of rupture, inducing the kinds of shifts that Gee (2008) and Boughey (2018) note are necessary for joining the discursive community of scholarship. At the same time, the practice of methodological syncretism disrupts the regnant discourses of qualitative methodology and the manner in which it is taught (e.g., where methodology is reduced to method). The mischievous vision of syncretism radically complicates qualitative methodology, as opposed to reducing it to a standardized protocol. It also encourages an attitude of methodological fallibilism, which can help researchers figurate their own scholarly journeys toward the end of realizing new researcher-becomings.

This strategy is not likely to result in stable researcher-subjectivities. I am unable to name a researcher-identity for myself—as if there could be (only) one. Instead, I am an amalgamated interpretation, an aggregated variation of those researchers before me. I am a religious studies-*cum*-sport studies researcher aspirant playing about the methodological borderlands. I am only just tracing where I’ve been, and am unsure where I am headed. After all, as Hall (1980) put it: “In serious, critical intellectual work, there are no ‘absolute beginnings’ and few unbroken continuities . . . What we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development” (p. 57). And that, I think, is a noble place to start a postqualitative inquiry.

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Notes

1. In this sense, postqualitative inquiry signals a new paradigm for qualitative research from a posthuman, postsocial, postconstructivist perspective. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify and link postqualitative inquiry to the unfolding narrative of “paradigms” on qualitative research.
2. Finally, I encourage an attitude of methodological fallibilism, as opposed to methodological dogmatism. While such dogmas may be warranted on the basis of onto-epistemic consistency, they may discourage the kind of methodological experimentation that can be generative for new researcher-becomings. Stinson (2009) suggests the usefulness of “theoretical eclecticism,” acknowledging the fundamental differences of ontology and epistemology that different theories assume. This position is similar to the methodological move that I make in this essay, but I think syncretism is a better way of casting methodological mixture because it infers the blending of underlying systems of belief.
3. This conception was equally indebted to Van A Harvey’s (1995) seminal text on Feuerbach, a rational reconstruction of Feuerbach in its own right.
4. See St. Pierre (2015) for a critique of the standard procedures and structures of qualitative research.
5. See Slack (1996) on theory and method as process and practice.
6. The guidelines stipulated that the observation needed to take place in a “public” forum. I deemed the brewery a “public enough” forum, granting that the notion of a public does not connote that “everyone is welcome.”

7. Barad (2007) provides an overview of the ethical implications of persisting with anthropocentrism.
8. Bogost (2012) and Broglio (2010) similarly pursue this line of thinking as an object phenomenology.

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