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Research in the guts

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Research in the Guts

Review of: *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing* by Jonathan Wyatt. (Writing Lives: Ethnographic Narratives). Routledge 2019.

Tatiana Chemi
Aalborg University

Dear Jonathan,

I am in the process of reading your book *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing* and I feel the urge to reach out to you. We met twice, once at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry – ICQI – hosted by the University of Urbana/Illinois in 2017 and lately at the European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry – ECQI. This latter was hosted in February 2019 at Edinburgh University, the institution of your affiliation and where you lead your research centre: Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry – CCRI (yes, I am saying it aloud as “sea cry”). In this recent encounter you signed my newly purchased book “To Tatiana, I hope this does some work for you!” It did.

Now I sit here an early Saturday morning, alone at my desk, while family and visiting friends are still asleep and the lazy church-bells remind us that it’s time for waking up. My mind is tired and my academic muscles ache all over against the assault of neoliberal effectivity, new budget models, replacements, merges. I am tired of academia and still I belong to it. Strongly. Nothing to be done about it. Your words in this book are a wakeup call. Not like (*like*: “not identical but hinting at what is there and/but beyond”, p. 95) propaganda or the preacher’s talk, more like a slap on my face. And not a kind one.

You remind me that research is what moves us: “inquiry that surprises. Inquiry that gives us butterflies. Inquiry that gives us goose bumps. Inquiry that troubles” (p. 67). You remind me that there is a tribe out there that is navigating through the same dark waters. You name this tribe, not by a collective unimpersonal essentialistic name, but by its participants. A tribe that does not aim at being united in consensus but rather at inhabiting a flat rhizomatic space. You name its shamans and its participants. Shamans are the ones whose words touch us and stay with us long enough to promote change: alchemic power that transforms curiosity in agentic knowledge. Knowledge that is *savoir*, *sapere*, something we know because we can taste it like salt. These shamans you name – Laurel Richardson, Hélène Cixous, Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari – are not gods but medicine-men and women amongst us, the ones who read the signs of a complex society and whisper in our ears words of doubt. This tribe is made mainly of meaningful others, its participants: stand-up comedians, the client of psychotherapy sessions, family and friends, students, colleagues.

You build a text that is ambiguous, physical, performative and leaves me with a bunch of questions. Not because the text is cryptic, appertaining to the elitist academia, but because it is dense, thick, associative, poetic. I don't understand with my head, but I get it with my body. Pieces of what I am doing myself in my own research and in my life are coming together and are being extended in directions that I had not envisioned. I am excited and suspicious: where will this lead me? The writer in me is also a bit grudging: how does he do it? Like when I look at actors: how do they do *it*? I recognise the technicalities (the montage technique, or as you call it, *assemblage*, p. 182), but part of it escapes me. This is the reason I study them, the actors. And the reason I am now trying to steal the techniques of this writer who is deconstructing the text, and reconstructing it, filling its interstices with bodies, voices, sweat and affects.

Please don't feel flattered by me saying the following: your text reminds me of what James Joyce did to the novel. He took what Virginia Woolf bravely started – the challenge to the narrative structures of the novel – and made it explode. The Joycean explosion (or implosion) marked the death of Modernism. After Joyce, only silence could contain Western ontologies – something Beckett knew quite well and was able to perform. Without offending you with any unrealistic comparison to the Irish master, I believe that what you are doing to the academic text is more in the Joycean tradition than in any autoethnographic scholarly one. It is going to be interesting to see in which ways we will invite silence in our texts in the future. And how we will perform it.

If I should tell my colleagues what your book is about, or write a review about it (which I am not trying to do, clearly), I would say that this is a book about writing as inquiry and inquiry as transformational-dialogical event. It is about writing beyond text, through the inclusion of struggling bodies that can be poetic and funny as well. Cixous' gesture is enacted, performed, laughed at, in the awareness that it is no laughing matter. It is a book about making research that is in the guts and hits us in the guts. Gently. Mercilessly. We call it *soft* skill as opposed to the *hard* science, the one made of facts and number. We should call them the *warm* skills instead, because this is the way they feel on the body. On our hyphenated bodies.

The hyphen as connection and link
 The hyphen as vibrant, as catalytic, as engaged
 A line, not a point
 a hyphen-line that is "bifurcating, divergent and muddled"*
 indicating
 not singular direction
 but unfolding
 unpredictable
 possibility" (p. 159)

Your book leaves me with an obsession (one more!): to stretch my exploration of the embodied text, get into its silences, inquire the provocation and creativity it brings to academia and society. Even more, my obsession will be to find ways in which to involve students in these inquiries. As you teach us, there is more to it, but what are you – reader – going to do about it? In which direction are you going to develop this awareness? I wish I could pass on to my students the knowledge of other ways of inquiry, without telling the whole story, leaving them with a hunger for more, with the need for – more – *warm* dialogues and the promise of one more awful moment, "serious, private, and on a scale of 1 to 5, pretty close to fucking hilarious" (p. 110).

*Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 2002, viii.

By this time, I have finished reading your book and I share with you the urge to action. The need for escaping relief and embracing agency. Diffraction.

It's been Tatiana Chemi – researcher. Thank you for listening.

I look forward to our next encounter, Jonathan. Hopefully next time it will happen over a wee dram.

Slantie.

About the Author

Tatiana Chemi, Ph.D., is Associate Professor at Aalborg University, Denmark, Chair of Educational Innovation, where she works in the field of artistic learning and creative processes. She is the author of many published articles and reports, such as: *The Art of Arts Integration*, Aalborg University Press, 2014; with Jensen, J. B. & Hersted, L., *Behind the Scenes of Artistic Creativity*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2015. With Xiangyun Du she edited *Arts-based Methods and Organisational Learning: Higher Education Around the World*, Palgrave Studies in Business, Arts and Humanities (2018) and *Arts-based Methods in Education around the World*, River Publisher (2017). She is currently involved in research projects examining artistic creativity cross-culturally, arts-integrated educational designs in schools, theatre laboratory and acting as learning.