

## Review: Jonathan Wyatt (2018). *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry*

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Review:

*Nini Fang*

**Jonathan Wyatt (2018). Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry.** Routledge: Abingdon; 214 pages; ISBN 9781138897625 (hardcover), £105; ISBN 9781138897700 (paperback), £35.99

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**Abstract:** The book under review gains a rare scholarly vitality by persisting through the challenging tasks of juxtaposing two seemingly polarized fields of activities—stand-up performance and therapeutic encounters. The unfolding of the narrative coherently centers on WYATT's vision and hope to create new ways of thinking about and doing qualitative research in the humanities and social sciences through, what he comes to formulate and term, "creative-relational inquiry." The book transports its reader into the richly-textured, aesthetically-conjured moments of materialities in which the author gropes feels, breathes, thinks, and perceives amongst relational others. It disorientates our inclination towards the familiar and the graspable, towards tapping into the awareness of how affective subtlety is the current of life, of relational sensitivity, of creative forces with which we, as qualitative researchers, cannot do without.

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### 1. The New Old

I decided that the book, "Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry," would be *the* book for the train journey, crossing the border from England to get to Edinburgh following a change of hosting institution. It takes only the intuition of a psychoanalytic thinker to trust that "discovering the new is sometimes best achieved by going back to one's origin" (CROCIANI-WINDLAND, 2009, p.59). In this case, for me, an intellectual origin. I am coming back to my intellectual origin via "Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing" whose author I know, but whose work I know less about. The book for me was a passage, a transition of some kind, in coming back anew to an old place. [1]

Two years ago, on a Saturday in April 2017, at a colleague's book launch, I regretted asking Jonathan what this book he had been working on was about. "Therapy" and "stand-up" each makes sense in its own right, but to put them together, or rather, in relation to each other? He spared me the "creative-relational" part, possibly because my feeling of confusion was seeping through

the limit of sincerity on my face, perhaps he could tell I was not too "sold." How could I? Everything he has said so far was far from common-sensical, graspable, almost a bit absurd. Or rather, my loose ends were all a bit tangled up that day so I could not be taken on this unusual detour without eventually hitting the intellectual dead ends. [2]

Now with four and a half hours to "kill" on this train journey—seeking to do violence to the time, as I fret and fidget that time somehow would not transport me forward, but backward, or worse even had me trapped in a time loop like *Groundhog Day*. The book is opened. No going back. [3]

## 2. Entering the Opening Scene

"Time to stop," I say.

"It always comes around so fast, doesn't it?" Karl replies.

"No, that's not quite true." He pauses for a moment.

"Sometimes it's like we stand still. Like this all stands still" (WYATT, p.3).

In this tension here between the perceivers and the perceived (time), the words, no voices, stir something. Hope then—how we may persist through time if we dare to intervene with its flow and that indeed we can. Walking down the corridor. Now with my hand on the armrest, impelled to freeze, couched, staring ahead, as I see Karl does. No one has noticed my being there—has asked "who's there?." Ghost-like, lingering in their joint reality, feeling forces of life by partaking in their lived time. Crossing the border of the page, there, time feels to be moving. [4]

Without some of self-identified "Deleuzian's" excessive stylistic over-packaging to the extent that it resists being read, this is a book that wants to be read, *longs to be read*, and one that is not afraid of being read. Although this is also one that requires a reader who is willing to work intimately with the text and not read from a distance—never from a distance. "Texts cannot influence the world by themselves," as Rita FELSKI (2015) reminds us, "but only via the intercession of those who read them, digest them, reflect on them, rail against them, use them as points of orientation, and pass them on" (p.172). The book invites the kind of reading as a relational practice that deepens through the co-constructive play between reader and text. "if reading is a journey, a reader would be better rewarded with what an author can offer to read with a traveler's curiosity and not a tourist's anticipation—to open the mind to the unexpected and unfamiliar in the text" (FANG, forthcoming). "Step inside" (WYATT, p.17)—come and join—"Something might happen. Something might be possible" (ibid). [5]

The book seeks to re-conceptualize qualitative research and, fundamentally, what counts as knowledge in the humanities and social sciences. The author's prose provides exemplification of how deeper attunement to our day to day settings, surroundings and ongoing happenings have the power to open us up to new perspectives into our experiences that we may not have ventured before. Comprised of four parts and an epilogue: "openings," "refrains," "reframings," and "reframings (continued): shame," the book carries the reader through the circuit

of enigmatic unfolding of movements, contingencies, dialogues, and sensations; it leads us to see how each moment gives rise to the possibilities of another, evoking and nurturing the writing as a method of inquiry. At the heart of the book is the author's deep hope and meditation in creating new ways of thinking about and doing qualitative research in humanities and social sciences through what the author comes to formulate and term—"creative-relational" inquiry. Each chapter, in its unfolding, unreservedly taps into the theoretical synergy between DELEUZE and GUATTARI, the new materialism and affect theory, creating entries of multiple encounters in which theory and reflexivity, the personal and the materialistic, writing and academic inquiry reaches towards, teases, flirts, evokes and engages with each other. The hyphen in-between the creative and relational invites a meditative pause that allows a slowing down, a deferral of arrival of the triumph of conclusive knowing. We find Jonathan, by persisting through the challenging tasks of putting in relation two seemingly polarized fields of activities—stand-up comedy and therapeutic encounters—demonstrates the power of hyphen. Hyphen as the force that disorientates our inclination towards the familiar and the graspable, that seeks to draw us, should we give it our hand, towards tapping into the awareness of how affective subtlety is the current of life, of relational sensitivity, of creativity with which we, as qualitative researchers, cannot do without. [6]

Indeed, the text will speak to those who seek to experiment with novel ways to write "into" and not just "about" the day to day moments of relational profundity. As a lively exploration of writing as inquiry, the book shows us what creative-relational inquiry is, what it can do and how to do it. It takes trouble with the ontological emphasis on the personal in qualitative research by demonstrating that the personal is also relational. Therefore the personal voice which emerges from the book never speaks the language as an individualized existence but presents themselves as a relatable and affectable presence that conjures what feels central yet alien in whoever opens up to falling into (relation with) the book. It was theoretically compelling; it was endearingly relatable. [7]

The further (and further!) I fall into the book, like Alice falling through the rabbit hole into the fantasy world of Wonderland, the more and more my intellectually-stimulated brain seeking for reasons come into relation with my affectively-sensitized body that cares to tune in more deeply to what is not said but nonetheless felt in the intimate moments the author evoked through writing of being at work, visiting his mother, mourning for his late father and so on. The unsettling suspicion of irrelevance that troubled me, between stand-up and therapy, between the writer's and the reader's lived experiences and lived domains dissolve into marveling appreciation of the curious encounters with the embodied strangeness that somehow speaks to the depth of the experiential knowing. With respect and playfulness, it throws into question the grip onto the narrative turn, by sparing itself the serious obligation towards making sense—not the "as you can see" kind of sense anyway, so the readers are asked to endure the unknowingness of what might unfold before her next and be "caught, taken by surprise" (WYATT, p.59)—the unexpectedness with the effect to provoke new experiments and conceptualizations of how things can be done differently. [8]

There is now a plethora of books on qualitative research methods; there is, however, a relative lack of work that is as inviting as this one—of nurturing and working on our sensitivities to perceive and engage with the complexities of processes of life, on saying "fuck yeah," to go beyond the familiarity in order to incarnate the most elusive aspects of our internal happenings into new forms of writing and creating. I, we, need this book. We see how Jonathan recreates moments of encounters and simultaneously trans-forms whatever has passed, existed, been felt, known, named, which in turn sharpen our attention to chances of glistening insights that fill the often-overlooked daily trivia—to find wonders in those familiar places and everydayness through "creative-relational" inquiry. I can almost hear Jonathan saying, "It is there, see!" [9]

### 3. See

Although at best we can only be seeing something—never *the thing*, or *a thing* itself (see also FOWLES, 2010). The book guides us to see that connectivity cannot be anchored in a linear design; it cannot answer for questions such as how I come to be in relation to you, what the relevance is between this and that, how one scene leads to another. Connectivity, at best, can only be presented through "a network of associations full of redundancies and exuberant non-linear relations" (CROCIANI-WOODLAND, 2009, p.73). We can try to expose it, the connectivity, but it may resist being found. Or instead, we may take the plunge and enter into the matrix of shits, immerse in the crap-laden worlds of "Three Shits"—and emerge soiled with a puzzling sensation that—but surely, nothing was actually being *said!* [10]

The text grows on me and some writings even "grow up" (CROCIANI-WOODLAND, 2009, p.59; WHYTE, 1955) in me so they now have lives of their own—some of what I have said so far are their lines, found a way out through me. (I told Jonathan that I am not a Deleuzian, yet, I am wary of categorical boxes. He reassured me that label/labeling does not matter.) Indeed, his text warrants against the temptation to settle on representation, by revealing the impossibility of representation, for *perception* is always partial and *meaning* insufficient. Read as a qualitative researcher, we are encouraged by the book to (try) engage experimentally changing ontological lens to be able to opt out of the habitual tendency of seeing, in order to perceive the dynamic nature of *things*, never *a thing*. And if we can give that a go, we may even come to see the self as signs and sites of fluid becoming, entangled in, as locked into, the multiple layers of voices<sup>1</sup>—voices which emerge from inquiring into the deep processes of connectivity, affective, and relational intricacies. We can come to forgive ourselves for not being coherent, for not making sense, for being so broken, unstable and fragmented and for wanting to put just that on the page. [11]

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1 Also, what I believe to be a helpful reminder here by Maggie MacLURE (2008, p.109): "Voices are idiomatic and capricious. Lodged in locality and specificity, and inclined to frivolity in the form of jokes, double meanings, pique and posturing, voices complicate their own transparency and authenticity."

Writing, as we are presented with by the book, can be a playful, reflexive act that opens up spaces in which experiencing and thinking teases and gives rise to each other. Nothing stands still here in this mutual interplay even when we can all feel "stuck" in our writing sometimes. Perhaps, just perhaps, the feeling of stuckness is what it takes to challenge us to stop reaching for the same cloth to put on an ever growing, changing, wriggly, breathing body that we may call the personal truth. Jonathan talks about how writing stalls when he is "trying too hard" to make writing works. How stuckness reminds him that he has lost faith "that it is important to think—and to allow writing to think, to allow writing to think towards what I am unable to imagine" (WYATT, p.51). We can't force the writing to fit as there's always more, more (than singular) perceptions, perspectives, versions of a story and so we will never be able to give a truthful account. What matters, as the book urges otherwise, "is never whether or not stories in therapy, stand-up and writing-as-inquiry are 'true' but how they allow us in and how they come to matter" (p.39). [12]

Let "writing-thinking" (WYATT, p.51) finds its way and so being lost can be a ticket to being found—or at least, to wandering more freely "[...] on the path which leads to that which is to be thought everything begins with sensibility" (DELEUZE, 1994 [1968], p.182). I am at a loss with this line—but if my reading of the book is not off the mark, it hopes that I'd consider how disorientation *can* be a gift, for it willingly and unreservedly jolts us out of the well-known, the well-articulated, and the well-rehearsed, so we find ourselves edging towards those dimensions of the not yet known. We are now approaching Edinburgh. Towards creative-relational inquiry one might add. [13]

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