

Erika Kruger

A Personal Account of a Chance Encounter with Postqualitative Inquiry at the Foot of a Mountain

Abstract

Postqualitative inquiry (PQI) compels us to think about educational studies in a different way. It requires ways of doing beyond regularised structures of humanist epistemology, ontology, and methodology. This article endeavours to describe my introduction to posthumanism and unplanned discovering of postqualitative inquiry through learning by doing. My (brief) journey with postqualitative inquiry has followed unexpected pathways, filtered through porous boundaries and discovered unheard voices in in-between spaces. This allows PQI to become more than knowledge-making. It is also a pedagogical and onto-epistemological venture and a rich, sensory and startling adventure of discovery into the entanglement of the social and the material.

Keywords: postqualitative inquiry, posthumanism, research methodology

Background

Postqualitative inquiry (PQI) compels us to think about educational studies in a different way. It requires ways of doing beyond regularised structures of humanist epistemology, ontology, and methodology (Adams St. Pierre, 2014a). More than just a critique of qualitative methodology and the ubiquitous *Cartesian-cogito* (Adams St. Pierre, 2014b), PQI veers towards poststructural and posthuman inquiry pushing.

This is not a conventional paper, rather a personal narrative of my introduction to PQI and my position as a researcher who has merely dipped a toe into ‘the posts’ (Adams St. Pierre, 2021) – postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthumanism. My first encounter with posthumanism and PQI was when I attended the 2018 *Pedagogies on a Damaged Planet* colloquium at the University of Cape Town School of Education (South African Education Research Association, 2018).

This exploration of PQI, draws on the post-event report of my impressions of the proceedings using reflections, reportage and photographs in a way that helped familiarise me with posthumanist concepts and theory. This paper does not present a sequential nor comprehensive record of the proceedings and presentations at the three-day colloquium. Rather the collage of personal impressions, interpretations, memories and images is employed to demonstrate the way PQI assisted me in discovering an alternative to qualitative research methodology. My speed-dating experience with posthumanism as well as my introduction to PQI, is best described by Braidotti’s (2017, p. 7) understanding of philosophy as:

embedded and embodied, partial, and hence accountable cartographies of complex intellectual and social phenomena. It is less of an intellectual autobiography than the account of a nomadic crossing, a journey across texts, teachers, and traditions.

Throughout, I present my reflections of the colloquium as it relates to posthuman and PQI thinking and concepts.

Beyond humanism

A posthumanist perspective considers humans as physically, chemically, and biologically entangled and dependent on their environment. We are part of a bigger and dynamic ecosystem on which we act but which also changes us.

Reflection on the keynote presentation by Prof Karen Malone, Western Sydney University

Anthropocene ... crime scene: The main reason for the present struggles on this planet, it is argued by posthumanists, is the human centeredness of this geological period (unofficially known as the Anthropocene epoch) and the ways in which we shape, and are shaped by our material and our environment. ... (I)t provides a lens to understand (1) the pace at which postindustrial humanity altered the planet and (2) how bodies are ethically and politically situated within material environments, according to Braidotti. (Kruger, 2018, p. 8)

This viewpoint demands a different way of doing inquiry (Le Grange, 2018). According to Adams St. Pierre (2019, p. 3), thanks to the recent “ontological, posthuman, affective, new material, and new empirical turns”, humanist social science research, can no longer adequately explain the complexity of the world. Nor can humans continue to be viewed through the lens of Descartes’s cogito (Adams St. Pierre, 2021).

Qualitative research has reached its limits and to continue “working the ruins” by incorporating PQI into qualitative research rather doing something different from the start, is pointless. “If something different is to develop, we have to take Derrida’s advice and overthrow the structure” (Adams St. Pierre, 2014b, p. 13). This does not mean humans are being jettisoned from research. Rather the focus on humans is de-emphasised and the presence of non-human elements acknowledged (Ulmer, 2017). This creates burgeoning possibilities for doing inquiry and “openings across academic fields regarding who and what has the capacity to know” (Ulmer, 2017, p. 1).

Adams St. Pierre admits it is not easy to do PQI. We battle to escape our training and the dominance of humanist epistemologies (Adams St. Pierre, 2014b). Also, the traditional silo approach to knowledge, despite being an epistemological project in itself, consigns ontology to the realm of philosophy and tends to disregard it in empirical research methodology. Another reason is the notion held that only two methodological alternatives are available to us – interpretive qualitative or positivist quantitative methodology. We cling to consecrated concepts like method and data even in everyday practices like talking with and observing people.

Yet, PQI is not methods driven, it re-formulates and re-assesses the entire research process from:

the objects of inquiry, methods used to produce ‘data’, what ‘data’ is, coding as a practice of meaning-making, and the formal conventions of academic article writing for journal publication. (Taylor, 2016, p. 1)

Adams St. Pierre (2014b, p. 12) therefore suggests that researchers start their studies, not with “the methodology machine”, but with an understanding of the onto-epistemologies that enable us to think such a thing as science, as well as the power

and politics embedded therein. More than knowledge-making, PQI is also a pedagogical, ontological, and ethical undertaking (Holt Daniels, 2017).

Moreover, PQI challenges the conventional and currently privileged humanistic epistemology and its corollaries, colonialism and nationalism, all considering humans the dominant source of agency. As a critical approach, PQI probes issues of power, coercion, marginalisation, and injustice but on a broader scale to include concerns about our planet (Ulmer, 2017).

Arriving on campus on Day 2 - Jammie and jars

We wind our way up to the foot of Table Mountain and park the car just below Jammie Steps and the Plaza in front of the memorial hall.

Is this neoclassical-style building baking in the early morning sun, still called the Jameson Hall, I wonder?

Originally it was named after Leander Starr Jameson, close friend of Cecil John Rhodes and to this day the symbol of anti-British sentiment to the Afrikaans speaking community - at least to those who still know of his existence and the history of the botched 1895 raid against the then Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek, which set off the Engelse-oorlog (or Anglo Boer war) of 1899 to 1902.

Or has the University of Cape Town's 2017 proposal to honour Sara Baartman instead, been accepted?

'Slave woman replacing the colonial warrior at the heart of UCT', wrote Philani Nombembe in Times Live in 2017; 'to enhance truth and reconciliation' said the official motivation letter.

I don't know the answer but as I look away over the plain towards the Hottentots-Holland mountain range from where my colleague and I had started our journey this morning, Sara's appalling 'stage name' pops into my head: Sara, the Hottentot Venus, the human exhibit for sightseers and scientists of Europe.

Earlier we had set off towards this mountain and later we shall trek back across the Cape Flats to go home, a journey in the same direction as the people of District Six who, after their forced removal to the outlying areas, continued to attend church and mosque in the wasteland which was now called Zonnebloem. (Kruger, 2018, p. 1)

The topic of District Six, a historically and emotionally significant suburb of Cape Town, is the focus of the first presentation of day two. In his paper *Potestas and Potentia in Geomatics Education*, Dr Siddique Motala of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's (CPUT) Civil Engineering and Surveying Department, draws on posthumanism to harness the power of memory. The fate of District Six looms large in the memory of former dwellers and their descendants. Established in 1867, it was located close to the city centre and Table Bay harbour and called home by freed slaves, merchants, artisans, labourers and immigrants. Despite being impoverished and overcrowded, the cosmopolitan community had a rich and varied religious and cultural life. In 1901 black residents were relocated to the Cape Flats, east of Cape Town. From 1966, after the government had adopted the Group Areas Act pronouncing District Six a 'whites only' area, about 60 000 people were forcibly removed and the buildings demolished. Decades long resistance resulted in the area remaining largely vacant (Miller, n.d.).

Memory mapping and potestas: *Motala investigates the twin manifestations of power — potestas and potentia — contained in the geomatics learning experience ...*

“In South Africa, geomatics education is an extension of the old land surveying education developed during the apartheid era”, he explained. It emphasises more formal and official power or potestas referring to notions of mastery, control, authority, administration, compliance, jurisdiction, jurisprudence and professionalism. ... Students research and produce their own stories about District Six using whatever medium/media and means (site visits, interviews etc.) they prefer before sharing their assemblages and journey with classmates. Storytelling and counter-mapping interventions help students join the dots to show new relationships, encourage creativity and practise micro-activism that show the impact of the profession on society. (Kruger, 2018, pp. 4-5)

Cavities meant to weaken: *Today, where District Six used to be located, it is mostly open space. A few structures like St Marks Anglican Church and the Muir Street Mosque were left standing and a few buildings have since been erected – townhouses and the first Cape Technikon building which is now CPUT.*

The original inhabitants were forcibly moved and scattered over the wide-open sand dunes known as The Flats, a political decision that eroded the matrix of the community and which led to severed ties, broken connections and wrecked relations among human and more-than-human, to time and place.

Spaces meant to weaken, destabilise, diminish, damage and reduce, to destroy the ecomorphology. (Kruger, 2018, p. 17)

Discovering postqualitative inquiry

The dominant image I have of the three-day event is finding myself in an abandoned zoo, lying on my back on the grass under a tree at the foot of Table Mountain talking, thinking, moving and feeling with nile lilies, binaries and entanglements. It is Sunday after lunch and we are tracing sensorial posthumanist assemblages with Prof. Karen Malone.

Flux, flow and in-betweens: *I collect data without speaking or writing a word. All I have is a piece of trace paper and an oil pastel to map my experience. Later I use my map as reference to report back to the group. Learning as worlding without boundaries between us and the environment. (Kruger, 2018, p. 11)*

A most unusual way of meaning-making and setting up a world without subject-environment boundaries. Certainly anathema for the proponents of neoliberalised education and research that set great store by productivity and efficiency.

It is not until a colleague describes my post-conference report as an example of PQI that I reassess my ponderings as a text that could constitute ‘inquiry’. My goal had been to show proof of attendance and help get my head around the topic. Now a cavity had opened up and I was compelled to add PQI theorists like Adams St. Pierre and Le Grange to my post-colloquium reading list.

Tubers versus taproots: *Yesterday, I learnt about Deleuze and rhizomatic mapping from Dr. Motala. Unlike a tree boring down with taproots and side roots, rhizomes, like that of an agapanthus or nile lily found growing prolifically along the roads bordering the campus, ... forms a subterranean network ... (In the same way), research cannot be isolated, neither in time nor space. All is always connected. Past, present and future, Here, there, anywhere and everywhere, visible/invisible, materiality/spectres. Things might be added, removed, erased, spoken about or kept secret. But all is always available to be excavated. ... These connections are there to be discovered, tracked and exposed like an archaeologist or a geologist would. And mapped ... like a land surveyor, (Kruger, 2018, p. 3)*

Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizomatic interweaving, alters how we conceptualise and theorise about inquiry. It tolerates multiple and non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation taking one into unexpected directions. It randomly creates a multiplicity of pathways including to the in-between spaces making it difficult to represent in a linear fashion (Kinchin & Gravett, 2020).

***Porosity:** On day three, as we leave the Neville Alexander Building where the colloquium is being held, we turn left and go up the stairs to Library Road and past the African Studies building. A tiny ficus sapling growing out of a crack on the concrete staircase, catches our attention. This we decide is our spot and we unpack the brown paper bag we had been given as part of Dr Theresa Giorza's pedagogical laboratory or Pedlab – charcoal, clay, string, photographs of rock art. For the next half hour we spend observing, interacting with and exploring the materiality of the location and the more-than-human elements we find there. ... As I move further up the stairs ..., I notice a complex yellowish pattern on the floor. My eyes follow the markings upwards along the concrete pillar towards the ceiling and notice tiny stalactites. Both structures have been formed by lime deposits leached from the concrete as water leaks through the cracks in the building.*

Porosity – the measure of space in between.

In-between spaces.

The patterns I had noticed are formed from the human-made material to create something completely new. In the process it has also permanently altered the materiality of the building itself, possibly even weakening the structure by creating more spaces in between the substrate.

But does the removal of material and an increase in porosity always lead to emptiness or a void?

Not in the case of spongy bone in mammals. It is exactly the circular lattice work consisting of dense and compact bone cells and lacuna that support the lines of stress and provides strength to the bone while at the same time keeping it light and ensure ease of movement.

The spaces in between soil particles are important too. Well-aerated soil stores groundwater and oxygen needed for plant growth.

Cavities house potential.

Fissures allow flow.

Cracks allow growth.

Absence as potential.

(Kruger, 2018, pp. 16-17)

PQI, being open-ended, always becoming, openly challenges and covertly creates, disrupts and gives voice to the unheard (Grellier, 2013), to indigenous perspectives and experiences through shared conceptualisations of the inextricable human-nonhuman world and the broader web of life (Le Grange, 2018).

***Ancestral home-coming:** Sara's journey started in the Gamtoos, Eastern Cape in 1789 as a member of the Gonaqua subgroup of the Khoikhoi and ended in France after years as a caged, half-naked human display and object of fascination in London and Paris. After her death in 1816 Sara ended up a science specimen for French naturalists and anatomists, zoologists and physiologists depicting the 'link' between animals and humans. Sara's body was dissected and her brain and genitals*

placed in jars and put on display at the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Man) until 1974. Only in 2002, on request of former president Nelson Mandela, did the French Government return her remains and Sara was laid to rest at Hankey near her ancestral home. Ironically now her name is or will again be associated with a symbol of this country's British and colonial past. Going/coming. All in motion. To and from. Life as a loop. (Kruger, 2018, p. 2)

The “post” systems of thought, according to Adams St. Pierre (2014b), does not share descriptions of reality nor of human beings with humanism. It thinks differently about agency, language, knowledge, power, reason, method and connections. Unlike the anthropocentric humanist thought of Kant, it applies a flattened ontology, think Braidotti's non-hierarchical nature-culture distinctions (Vivaldi, 2021) and the Heidegger-influenced Object Oriented Ontology (OOO). A flat ontology rejects favouring humans over non-human objects. Whereas Kant contrasts observable facts, events or products of our cognition (phenomena) with objects or event that exists independently of human sensory perception (*noumenon*), in a flat ontology, *noumena* are not defined by the interactions with or effects on other objects including humans.

Correlations:

Body

Minerals

Land

Sara Baartman's body-mind

Jameson's minerals

District Six's heritage

Human, nature, culture

Tracking our past through not-officially sanctioned (that is, not-potesta) stories and by being open to possibilities, we can uncover our secret, silent and censored relationships with one another and with more-than human ... even if we have labelled them 'the other' and 'less-than-human'. (Kruger, 2018, p. 10)

As I reflect on my reflections of my chance encounter with PQI via the colloquium on posthumanism, and as I learn more about it, I am increasingly drawn to this manner of inquiry for its suppleness, its sensorial richness, its tolerance of creative, daring and experimental ways to survey and for its potential to surprise. Approaching inquiry without following a particular method leaves me unencumbered to discover connections related to my study in everyday encounters with ideas, people and materiality shaping kinship in the now, in the past and in the future. I can relinquish my role as protagonist, and stand on equal footing with the physical, social, intellectual environment – always becoming, always embodied.

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Ms Erika Kruger, University of the Free State, South Africa