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Chapter 10

A Diffractive Reading



Mel Engman , Johanna Ennser-Kananen , and Taina Saarinen 

Abstract Towards the end of the editing process, we started to see the book as something more than a collection of chapters around a theme: as an assemblage, which included, of course, the community of authors. When we put out the first call for contributions in May 2018, most authors volunteered a contribution rather quickly, others joined a bit later, and some dropped out for different reasons, underlining the dynamic nature of our assemblage. In pre-pandemic times, we met on and off campus, introduced some of our ideas at conferences, and had a workshop day to brainstorm, plan chapters, and reflect on the process and the purpose of the book. We were connected by common meals, jokes, writing, thinking, and by annoying and challenging each other as colleagues and collaborators. Sometimes, we managed to give space to the other lives we lead: our families, homes, and hobbies. We are thankful that these were invited into our work and being-together. This chapter provides a concluding diffraction, not only as a metaphor of a prism that collects and reconfigures our varied ideas, but as a socio-material view into the book process itself.

Keywords Diffraction · Ontological variation · Relationality · Agential realism · Entangled ethics

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Diffractions

As we were finalizing the book that this chapter concludes, a special issue on *Materials Use Across Diverse Contexts of Language Learning and Teaching*, edited by Guerretaz et al. (2021), came out in the *Modern Language Journal*. Mel's joining us for this chapter changed it (and us). She brought a fresh pair of eyes to this volume, her experience of writing and reviewing work on socio-materiality and new materialism, and, maybe most importantly, a sense of possibility – the idea that within our limitations, doing the work with sincerity and (self-)criticality matters. Mel listened to us talk about the process of editing this volume, our original ideas, and the latest developments, and suggested that we use *diffractions* as a lens. This immediately made sense to us, first as a metaphor for the book as a thing that collects and reconfigures our varied ideas, much like rays of light meeting an obstacle and fanning out, and then as a socio-material view into the book process itself.

Diffraction offered us a theory (Barad, 2007, 2014; Haraway, 1997) for thinking together about what is visible (and recognizable) and under what conditions. It also became an invitation to consider what has perhaps stayed out of sight and the relationships these in/visible phenomena hold with us, as human editors and authors, and with the book, as an entanglement of social and material elements. Barad (2007) explains:

One important aspect that I discuss is that diffraction does not fix what is the object and what is the subject in advance, and so, unlike methods of reading one text or set of ideas against another where one set serves as a fixed frame of reference, diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter. (p. 30)

Rather than co-authoring a re-iteration of the chapters, displaced into a chapter of its own, we rely on diffraction here to help us understand both the phenomenon being diffracted (i.e., language education research) and the instrument or intervention that does the actual diffracting (i.e., book focused on new materialist approaches to research). Diffraction draws us in. Our experiences, learnings, studies, theories, and also our networks, group belongings and collegial and personal relationships are all entangled with this book and its making. The idea of diffraction invites us to read ourselves, with our worlds, into this book: We are not outside observers (“reflectors”) of this product and its production, but bound up in it and always changing with it. In this sense, the book is not an outcome of us and our work, but we are just as much an outcome of the book.

Conducting research and especially writing a collection of chapters like this is often discussed as a linear process, as if we decided to have an idea and fulfil it following particular steps and procedures of proposing, writing, editing and resubmitting with a purposeful plan. What happens however, as anyone who has been involved in this kind of an effort knows, is much more arbitrary. This reflects a larger contrast between Enlightenment-linear thinking and distributed agency (Barad, 2007). The process, rather than the end product, is the material outcome.

Here, we embrace diffraction and contingency, we see this book as the prism that diffused our work and work process and made different parts of it visible: expectations, doubts, and identities, things we did and didn't do, our relations and connections. As we allow this book to be a diffraction, we are inspired by Haraway (1997), who explains:

[D]iffraction can be a metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness ... one committed to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of the Same ... diffraction is a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings. (Haraway, 1997: 16, cited by Jenkins et al., 2021)

In Haraway's sense, diffraction refuses reproduction of the same, refuses to be our mirror (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019, p. 1056) and instead helps us understand the narrative of ourselves in this book as well the device doing the diffracting – an edited volume on new materialism and its making. What is it then, that became visible to us in the diffraction? How do we account for the difference in what was visible during the production of the book compared to what is now visible through this attempt at diffractive thinking?

Some Things Come Easy, Others Are Hard

(T)heories are not accepted because they are true. They are accepted because they are accepted by the authority figures in each field. (Deloria, 2012, p. 6)

Trying to grasp some of what theories subsumed under “new materialism” has challenged our thinking in more than intellectual ways. Having your ontologies and epistemologies questioned was uncomfortable and exhausting. Even when co-writing our own chapters, we kept being pulled back into familiar territories of social constructionism, humanism, and traditional distributions of agency. Our wrestling with new ideas also surfaced in a public debate, a community event (Enns-Kananen, 2019), during which we put many questions on the (bar) table: How do we know what we think we know? What are our own concepts based on? Trying to deeply understand a new ontology was difficult work and forced ourselves to question a lot of internalized education and socialization that had become part of our identity. Breaking, or even putting cracks into these ways of being and thinking (Lather & St Pierre, 2013), was something Taina described in very physical terms as “gearing my brain into another direction”.

Other things came easy to us, for instance, how we editors, Johanna and Taina, first came to understand materiality, and the intersections of the material and the social, in the way we did. Almost effortlessly, we (were) steered towards particular books, ideas, and names, but not others. So, while the process of engaging with new ontologies and epistemologies of new materialism at times felt like a great, sometimes impossible, effort, a still ongoing process, at the same time we were – without much effort or awareness of it – drawn to the literature and knowledge that seemed available, accessible and trustworthy to us. We followed the path that “Western”

scholars are trained to take when they first happen upon ideas that are unfamiliar and, perhaps, full of potential. We read seemingly foundational texts (e.g., Barad, 2007) and we read the texts that attempted to apply these ideas to queries about the nature of the world in general or language education in particular (e.g., Toohey, 2018). The book represents this path quite well, with similar citational genealogies across the chapters. Yet, a diffractive view of the book also reveals important epistemological and ontological gaps, omissions, and erasures.

While the *labor* of “learning new materialism,” was challenging, stretching our thinking at the expense of family time and rest; the work of identifying and recognizing what that labor should look like came easy. The path we followed appeared to cross disciplinary boundaries (i.e., quantum physics, feminism, critical language studies), and in so doing we failed to recognize another longstanding path of scholarly thought that is concerned with similar relational ontologies: Indigenous work on materiality. In this sense, Rosiek et al.’s (2020) description of new materialist scholarship applies also to us (p. 2):

As a consequence, new materialist scholars’ enthusiasm for agential realism could, by failing to acknowledge and seriously engage the Indigenous scholars already working with parallel concepts, end up reinforcing ongoing practices of erasure of Indigenous cultures and thought (Ahmed, 2017; Deloria, 1999; Todd, 2016; Tuck, 2014; Weheliye, 2014)

This was not an oversight. Wrestling with posthumanist and new materialist ideas, at the time and in the place where we first became receptive to them, oftentimes meant going against our inner (Enlightenment-inspired) critic that insisted that these ideas were unscientific, irrational, and a little immature. Mel directed our gaze to Indigenous thought to help us bridge that, to understand that theories do not have to follow the binaries and divides of Cartesian logic and Enlightenment ideologies – something we were doing intuitively but without the theoretical apparatus. This reading of theory that centers the material as immature highlights important conceptual contrasts – differences between the onto-epistemologies of the traditional academy (i.e., Enlightenment thinking) and the ones that this book’s contributors attempt to take up. Agential realism, for instance, flies in the face of anthropocentrism and, apparently, requires the disciplinary vocabulary of quantum physics to legitimate its use as a theoretical framework in ‘serious’ social science scholarship. Yet, the idea of non-human agency is not unique to new materialism nor is it novel, even within the socioconstructivist paradigm (see Ahmed, 2008 on the misguided criticism of feminism as “anti-material” or “anti-biological”). The importance of agent ontologies to the relational nature of the universe has long been fundamental to many Indigenous thought traditions (Rosiek et al., 2020) and is well developed in Indigenous studies literature (e.g., Coulthard, 2014; Deloria, 1999; Marker, 2018; Vizenor, 2008). Is it really more comfortable for non-Indigenous scholars to sit in *discomfort* with NM scholarship than it is to engage with Indigenous takes on similar principles of distributed agency and space-time-matter relationality? The perceived challenges associated with explorations of agential socio-material relations are rooted in an ontological difference that shapes how we recognize and investigate phenomena. Related to this, the conceptual tools we recognize as legitimate for

these explorations are determined by difference as well – difference that is ideological and political.

Our writing about the challenges associated with taking up new materialism (as an approach that is new to us) identifies the work as ‘hard’, yet our view of the book as a diffraction pattern of sorts also shows how ‘easy’ it is for white, Western/Northern/European scholarship to misrecognize ways of knowing. We turn to Ahmed (2006) for help in considering issues related to recognition and orientation, with her description of how the European philosopher Husserl might understand his own writing table. “What he sees is shaped by a direction he has already taken, a direction that shapes what is available to him, in the sense of what he faces and what he can reach” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 550). Ahmed goes on to describe how our orientations to the world are shaped by various straightening devices, making some phenomena more visible than others. Academia is undoubtedly a powerful straightening device and, in thinking diffractively about this book, the recognizable scholarly path for understanding new materialism was, at least for us, clearly oriented toward a colonial version of “interdisciplinary” scholarship.

We are products of power relations (Foucault, 1980), and many of the recognizable ‘things’ in this world (i.e., objects, ideas, discourses) are as well. For instance, we all know what English is. It is recognizable to us when we hear it, read it, or use it, yet this idea of English as a single ‘thing’ is preposterous (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007); and any user of a non-prestige variety of English will tell you that its recognizability is negotiable. Our ability to recognize English *as English* is shaped by our relations to its users and its uses – our ‘orientations’ (Ahmed, 2006) to language – in the social and material world. Similarly, our recognition of academic ‘things’ like theory, data, and findings are constituted by relations of power in institutions of higher education – the archival wing of empire (Richards, 1993).

It is important to note that the academy *can* serve as a point of entry into Indigenous and decolonizing knowledges. As la paperson (2017) points out, in the all-encompassing accumulating work of the imperial archive “the decolonial is always already amid the colonial” (p. xvi). The absence of decolonizing theory and method in the book-as-a-diffraction-pattern tells us something about the dominant orientations of new materialism in the academy (i.e., they are not inherently anti-imperialist). Importantly, these orientations

...also point us toward the future. The hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 554)

In this final chapter, we highlight theoretical and ontological pathways that were not recognized, not taken or followed, so that we might push for a change of direction. For instance, Deloria (1999) describes an understanding of the universe in terms of particular relations among particular phenomena rather than generalizing theories or laws. This emphasis on relations in the immediate environment, on *place* (Marker, 2018), provides a path for examining distributed agency in a specific, localized way that can construct new, nuanced understandings of socio-material relations. Marker’s

characterisation of place grows from an Indigenous ontology and refers to the livingness or “ensouled” nature of land as far more than a static component of the physical, natural environment. In essence “(a)ll inquiry, in this cosmology, must begin with an awareness of the interconnectedness of plants, animals, and humans, geologic forms along with the stories that tune and shape cognition of a landscape that is also conscious of human beings” (p. 454). We note that *place* is a potential commonality across this book’s contributors (a bit of an oddity for academic publishing); and though researcher relations in and with this place were not explored in the book, diffraction helps us recognise the need for more attention to how our relations with place are entangled with other relations holding us. This is a potential strength of our RECLAS initiative as a local attempt at community sense-making, and the kind that rarely gets recognized in academic incentive initiatives.

We originally took up the challenge of the research profiling initiative RECLAS to “develop the field” in two ways. First, we felt the need to look in, i.e. to shift our perspective to look at our work in new material ways that extend beyond anthropocentric, Eurocentric, or otherwise dominant perspectives. Second, we wanted to look out, or (re)ground our work in societal needs and issues that understand society in not just more inclusive, but also ethically material ways, acknowledging the complex relations between the animate and the inanimate. While we began our journey in the RECLAS community by looking at the empirical, methodological and theoretical role of language in what we assumed to be a changing society, we are now moving on to unsettling our earlier understandings of our work. Thus, we are reinterpreting the name of our profiling initiative (“research collegium for language in changing society”) to mean “change for applied language studies in society” and even “social change through applied language studies”, referring to an attempt and an invitation to rethink our work and reposition ourselves as researchers in ways that lure us out of our intellectual and academic comfort zones and at the same time respond to calls for research that is socially relevant and scientifically sound.

Towards an Entangled Ethics

Diffraction is a useful lens for this final chapter because it provides a dynamic alternative to reflection, but it also has ethical implications for our work. As Thiele (2014) reminds us, “(d)iffraction is an ethico-onto-epistemological matter” (p. 206). If our nature is fundamentally one that is made *in relation*, then we are accountable to this relationality and its intra-actions. This “urge of ethical accountability” (De Line, 2016, n.p.) echoes longstanding Indigenous thought traditions that take relationality as fundamental to understanding the universe (e.g., Coulthard, 2014; Deloria, 1999; Simpson, 2014; Wildcat, 2005). In this sense, we aim for diffraction rather than reflection to chart the ‘how’ of the relations instantiated by and with this project.

Although efforts exist to ground our field more deeply in approaches that highlight ethics and social change (see for instance Pennycook, 2001 and Critical applied

linguistics; Bigelow & Ennser-Kananen, 2014 and the advocacy turn in educational/applied linguistics), they tend to be morally anchored in the field rather than ontologically anchored in the research. A view of ethics as foundational ontological premise, which precedes research and extends beyond it, and in which the research process is embedded, makes it impossible to separate ethics from the research process or the researcher. This aligns with Bennett's (2010, p. 37) call on humans to take responsibility for their choices, particularly when making decisions about whether and how to participate in activities that have the potential to cause harm. In this sense, new materialism could be an approach that understands ethics as ontologically and epistemologically rooted in research.

We read Bennett's (2010) call as an invitation to understanding ethics and research as intertwined practice. This implies a departure from an approach to ethics as a technical fix, legal obligation, or afterthought; an approach prevalent in professional and academic fields (see for instance BERA, 2018). This *agential realism* or *ethico-onto-epistemology* (Barad, 2007, p. 381; Barad in Kleinman, 2012, p. 77) means that rather than be situated in the world, we are entangled in the ongoing articulation of it. As such, ethics encompasses not merely socially negotiated constructs, but is materially and inseparably entangled in our research (see Coole & Frost, 2010 for a discussion of ethics) and us as researchers. Our research cannot be conceptualised in terms of the researcher, participants and context as separate entities, where the researcher is the subject, but rather we as researchers are part of the intra-action of enacting the phenomena we study. In Barad's paradigm, a researcher, then, would not minimize or mitigate their presence in the research process, but acknowledge their participation in it as unavoidable: "I am part of (but not central to) the assemblage of the classroom, and we push each other into existence, me and all the material and immaterial parts of this assemblage. We do not exist outside of each other but only in intra-action." Thus, rather than understanding researcher agency in terms of "*observer's paradox*" (originating with Labov, 1972; i.e. the investigator unwittingly influencing the phenomenon), agential realism understands the researcher as part of the assemblage where the phenomenon under investigation emerges in the first place. This challenges us to question our usual framings of how we know what we know. The ethical challenge for us as researchers is, then, to acknowledge our entanglement, and take on the responsibility it entails. A humility and empathy that derives from this understanding can be a motor for newly (re) gained attention to social justice and equity issues.

We believe that this kind of entangled ethics can help us carve out new spaces for understanding humans in an ethical relationship with the material environment (rather than as removed from or superior to it). This goes hand in hand with a process of increasing equity among humans. Defining society as an ethical interrelationship between humans and material, and thus understanding ourselves as deeply embedded in our environment, fosters an understanding of our own contingency, dependence, and responsibility for this environment that includes our fellow humans as well as the non-human reality.

Critical posthumanist realism can be seen as an anti-oppressive frame in that it both encourages and enables researchers to commit to ethically grounded relations

in their research. When we challenge humanist approaches to research, we challenge a particular image of the human. As Pennycook says, humanism “was never a category that included everyone” (p. 3), but rather one where particular humans have dominated ways of thinking and knowing, i.e. the white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, cisgender, industrialized, neurotypical, socioeconomically advantaged, European ways of being researchers and doing research. Opening up academic and scientific spaces by decentering this particular type of humans has been at the heart of many applied linguists’ scholarship for a while (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Canagarajah, 2012; Yosso, 2013; Flores & Rosa, 2015; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Motha, 2014; Anya, 2016; Piller, 2016; García et al., 2017, 2021; Rosa & Flores, 2017; Phipps, 2019; Rosa, 2019) and can be supported and receive new momentum from a theoretical basis that challenges a humanism of the privileged and replaces it with an understanding of the ethical relationality of humans and matter.

We can see this book as holding generations of migration, settlement, dispossession (past and future), and the spaces occupied and traversed along the way(s). It holds our relations with humans, non-humans, and place. As Deloria (1986) says, “the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner” (n.p.). We lean into these relationships, and into Indigenous conceptions of relationality that imply an inherent morality.

We Are Supposed to Be Here

We have affectionately referred to this book as a ‘snapshot’ of one community of critical language scholars during a specific period of time, noting how it reveals the objects of each scholar’s attention at the time along with the questions they investigated with shared conceptual tools (i.e., new materialism, agential realism). In this sense, the book is an assemblage of bodies, curiosities, anxieties, tensions, and labors caught and compiled for the purpose of generating knowledge or, at least, for some increased collective understanding. This metaphor of the snapshot is convenient for reflecting *a posteriori* because it is reductive – it condenses and simplifies all of the book’s elements to a flat image that can be taken in all at once. However, it is also possible that our consideration of the book as a snapshot need not have such a minimizing effect. Barad (2016) tells us “there’s this sense in which time and being have this thickness to it – the thick now – this particular moment has all times in it.”

Our membership in this community, which got thrown together by our involvement with the academy and then again by our investment in this book, has shaped what we do and how we do it. It has enabled us to see further, think deeper, and step outside of our trodden paths. The notion of this book as a snapshot, as a “thick moment” that has all of the times, all our spaces and all our relations in it, offers a new way of understanding academic publishing. In addition to thinking of this compilation as either a finished product (and thus failing to see the process nature of it) or permanently incomplete (and thus faulty), we see it as one that has “all of it”, and, in this sense, is very much complete.

Diffractions of this book helped us see the role of different academic conventions and genres for our work. A lot of things influence what we do – whether or not they align with some academic quality standards cannot always be our main concern. Having internalized “evaluating” and “reflecting” as major ways of being academics, we sometimes lose sight of what the process itself does to us while we engage in it. Diffractions can be helpful in seeing and naming what we did, which in turn can reveal what is not intended for an academic audience, and thus cause irritation, disbelief, relief, and a spark for new fires all at the same time. Diffractions helped us understand that we are not merely autonomous rational choice-makers but entangled in the academic and personal, a realization that may change not just us as academics, but the academic world around us.

We are seeing and naming pieces in this diffraction without trying to put them together into a neat picture, but instead being in the presence and engaged with the things we did and did not do, the things that happened and did not happen. This sparked a memory from Taina’s vacation, as she and her wife got a piece of advice from fellow travellers: “Remember, if you get lost, tell yourselves that this is where you were supposed to be.” We are not lost. This is the book we had to make, because this is the book we made and the book that made us.

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