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Babel at 35,000 Feet: Banality and Ineffability in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: In this article, I explore the banalities of qualitative work flirting with some of the premises of non-representation theories' (NRT) thinking style. More specifically, I interrogate the usefulness of thinking with the mundane to explore the kinds of opportunities that could be afforded to language and transcultural communication if we repositioned qualitative work as a more-than-human affair. Drawing from experiences while conducting fieldwork onboard transatlantic flights, I discuss the implications of accounting for banalities and their embodiment within a flat ontology perspective. I conclude with a few remarks on criticality and qualitative research striving to present —as opposed to represent—elements in the fieldwork otherwise discarded as irrelevant, but that might be particularly revealing of what shapes a researcher's logic and what the researcher brings to bear as social phenomena, particularly in language and (as) communication.

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1. Speaking of Departures

The scene is banal. A man attempts to fit a suitcase into the overhead compartment of a commercial aircraft. He wrestles with the luggage. He twists and turns it. His contortionism signals a supernatural feat, the attempt to bend space. The baggage refuses to budge, and the mundane suddenly turns into a spectacle. [1]

We tend to pay little attention to how such banalities shape the ways we think and act in the world. Yet, in the hermetic context of airplane spaces, we realize just how things big and small matter, how the struggle between one man and his suitcase becomes the struggle of many. These banalities sustain and breathe life into life itself. [2]

For the past three years, I have collected a series of observations of mundane occurrences during long-haul flights in an attempt to study the possible forms of transcultural communication nested within the "ordinary" semiotic economies of linguistically and culturally diverse spaces. I hoped to elevate contemplation in

qualitative work to a permanent status within research into human questions such as, e.g., kindness, interconnectedness, transcendence in communicative codes (BHATTACHARYA & COCHRANE, 2017). [3]

Although my study began with a definite purpose, soon things took an unexpected turn. I found myself delving into methodological issues that involved the difficulties of representing the conclusions of my attunement with the banal. The conventional cultural and linguistic concepts I carried in my "toolbox" no longer sufficed to express what I experienced when contemplating communicative gestures unraveling in front of me. How to capture transcultural communication phenomena's banalities if disciplinary discourse failed to convey what the ordinary signaled, that is, the flows and movements of languages and cultures emerging and dissolving in midair, defying common sense? [4]

The contemplation of what is dull, mundane, "crept up" in my fieldwork and opened a channel into the possibilities for "indirect and non-reflective forms of thinking" to emerge (THRIFT, 2007, p.175). The ebbs and flows of banalities shifted my thinking about qualitative inquiry's insistence in seeking the identification of patterns that can easily fool the scientifically disposed mind. In this process, we may readily dismiss the ordinary as an outlier. Yet, these outliers find their way into one's qualitative inquiries in ways we are not completely aware of. The disclosure of such "accidents" bears profound implications for the ethics of qualitative research. [5]

Cynics might dismiss as platitudes statements suggesting that all things in the universe are connected. However, if we gave serious thought to the little things that happen around us before, during, and after fieldwork, things we regard as too banal to count, in what ways would this attention to the banal reflect the immanent properties of life's phenomena? For instance, how would we interrogate settled categories such as race, gender, and ethnicity if we testified to their existence through the banalities that change how we perceive "systems'" coming into being? Arguably, the banalities qualitative researchers encounter in fieldwork—which often end up on the floor of the editing room—are not surpluses of life ready to be disposed of. They are an integral part of our inquiries into how and why things become what they do as we observe them. Accommodating the research of banalities that take place before, during, and after fieldwork can teach us a thing or two about the extraordinary ways humans and nonhumans conspire to produce meaning. [6]

This article is an interrogation of those banalities we encounter in fieldwork. Here, I am interested in exploring how attuning to the banal might challenge persisting issues of efficacy, trajectory, and causality that we have come to expect in certain strands of qualitative praxis, which have historically tended to privilege words and peoples over places, textures, and inanimate bodies. I should make it clear from the offset that my goal is not to deny others' words and actions a place of prominence in qualitative research. Instead, I want to examine how humanly and nonhumanly-produced banalities can reorient our ideas about data "worth counting." For as NAIPAUL (2011, p.119-120) remarks: "When men cannot

observe, they don't have ideas; they have obsessions. When people live instinctive lives, something like a collective amnesia steadily blurs the past." Which is to say, empirical evidence matters to any research enterprise. [7]

Because modern philosophy has held observation in such high regard, qualitative research has far too often fallen prey to either/or considerations that compartmentalize and classify human phenomena under explanatory paradigms. In other words, one frequently deals either with humans or nonhumans in research, nature or society, facts or values, science or politics, and so on (DE VRIES, 2018). Yet, what kinds of opportunities would be afforded to us if we explored new sets of "what-if" propositions repositioning qualitative work as a more-than-human affair? What if we have indeed exhausted the debate on the nature of language, discourse, and culture to the detriment of how matter prefigures in the production of meaning (BARAD, 2007)? What would the tracing of the activities and products of things, places, and people gift us with? [8]

The realization of "agency in everything" I am hinting at, as enticing as it appears, admittedly, leaves us in a predicament. Qualitative inquiries cannot easily escape representation. For example, the arguments advanced during the "linguistic-turn" divided philosophers with regards to how they deployed words to analyze other words (RORTY, 1992). Consequently, everything we do to build a holistic and complex picture before, after, and during fieldwork cannot avoid a level of subjectivity inherent to phenomenological reflexivity and, ultimately, representational thinking (VAN MANEN, 2016). [9]

In realist strands of qualitative work, researchers have operated under the assumption that what they portray is a world in which words stand for the actions and intentions of their subjects (VANNINI, 2015a). Even in less conventional, more experimental forms of qualitative research, difference and interferences are frequently overlooked in favor of patterns of recognition (GOODALL, 2000). The "right" methodological choice within the qualitative tradition continues to be honored as something that affords researchers an opportunity to build a more ethical and accurate picture of the phenomena under their scrutiny. That is to say, the notion that people and things reciprocally bring one another into existence provokes much skepticism and even outright dismissal from scholars biased to Enlightenment's representational premises (e.g., BOGHOSSIAN & LINDSAY, 2018). Logical positivism's stronghold over the social sciences endures, and we remain influenced by a thinking style that affects our modes of data collection and analysis following a Western logocentric perspective. The overall sentiment among scholars remains that methods are paramount for the validation of the truthfulness of what qualitative research produces. [10]

Here, however, I seek a modest intervention in debates about the epistemological assumptions and methodological techniques we have inherited from the social science tradition. I argue that to a lesser or greater degree, qualitative research has overlooked a range of potentially crucial phenomena that merit attention, namely the banalities of field or archival work. Specifically, I refer to the roles that non-humans play in the background of human understandings of language and

communication, the quasi-automatic unfolding of familiar patterns of action (what one might conveniently understand as "social scripts"), and non-human elements favored in research narratives through the representational mobilization of language. Such analysis of human and non-human performances requires the dissolution of conventional Wittgensteinian distinctions between the speakable and the unspeakable, therefore erasing "distinctions among pictures, models, displays or depictions and reality" (FENDLER & SMEYERS, 2015, p.692). [11]

How might a researcher accomplish such a task, then? In what follows, I want to give serious thought to the banalities of fieldwork to explore the limits of qualitative research's representational impetus and, more importantly, its inherent practices related to categorical thinking. My examples refer specifically to matters of language and transculturality, but the same thinking style could apply to any subject under investigation. I cannot say for sure whether theorizing languaging acts and transcultural phenomena "in the fold" will serve any purpose beyond capturing the immanence of language and communication in the dissolution of linguistic borders and emergent categories of culture. My claim, nevertheless, will remain rather straightforward throughout this article: banalities are irresistibly pedagogical. Still, I find it significant to stress that I do not want to elevate fieldwork banalities to a place of higher distinction in this inquiry. Instead, my goal is to flatten the hierarchies between things we discard conveniently in the analysis of language and communication before, during, and after fieldwork. I have chosen long-haul flights as the backdrop of my inquiry because these spaces are both diverse and self-contained, affording us a keen opportunity to examine how ordinary human and nonhuman synergies affect the fate of languages and cultures yet to be, the ideas we hold and perpetuate about "proper" grammar and communication, and the certainties we hold about the cultural categories we devise to study comprehensibility and competence. [12]

Many are the ways one could accomplish the task of interrogating whether thinking representationally is the best we can do for qualitative research in a moment marked by the spirit of the "posts" (LATHER & ST. PIERRE, 2013). As GERGEN and JONES (2008) remind us, science is an inherently creative endeavor. Yet, while artists live in a world of fantasy and fiction responding to the norms operating in their specific group, scientists' creativity is limited by the confines of an established discipline bound by stricter rules, laws, and protocols of behavior accrued with time and shaped by ubiquitous forms of power. [13]

Disputes concerning qualitative research's literary prowess and the politics involved in its institutionalism as a valid and reliable instrument are far from being settled matters. These disputes continue to exert a significant influence in the politics and economics of socially-oriented scholarship. Researchers operating across strands of qualitative research have highlighted that the disregard for the product of methods as literary inventions distances one from acknowledging the artistry and love for aesthetics that lies at the core of their truths (BOCHNER, 2018; DENZIN, 2013; JACKSON & MAZZEI, 2013). Many have also defended a more "middle-of-the-road approach. LAW (2004, p.4), argued that socially-oriented researchers need to adopt "broader, looser, more generous, and, in

certain respects, quite different" approaches to what methods mean. Likewise, critical scholars have underscored the need to consider who defines what methods are, whom they serve, and for what purposes they are mobilized (LATHER, 2012). [14]

Such calls for attending to the different meanings of methods have implications for establishing what qualitative research can ultimately do for us. After all, different understandings about methods either limit or expand what the very notion of "method" means. Still, the acknowledgment of methods as interested cultural constructs brings us back to a problematic reality: academic discourses are embedded in complex webs of power dynamics. Methodological discussions always implicate research in ontological and epistemological dilemmas: what can be researched? Who should be researched? [15]

In the midst of contentious debates about the self-interested nature of qualitative research, "non-representational" (THRIFT, 2007) or "more-than-representational" (LORIMER, 2005) theories have emerged as a promising body of alternatives for dealing with the hierarchical dichotomizing of subject and object in research. In Section 2, I briefly address some of the theoretical insights of non-representational theories (NRT), which will help me with the argument of returning the banal to its "rightful" place in qualitative research praxes. I will not pursue a systematic overview of NRT's diverse scholarship, however. Others have done so more successfully than I possibly could (CADMAN, 2009; DEWSBURY, HARRISON, ROSE & WYLIE, 2002; LORIMER, 2005; THRIFT, 2007; VANNINI, 2015b). Instead, I will flirt with a few basic premises of this complex theoretical corpus to help me think through and with banalities languaged in communication research in their immanence. Indeed, as MacKENZIE observes, searching for truth and for validity in strictly representational terms "limits our ability to connect, to be present to meaning(s) with/in experience as it is evolves becoming a part of the living dialogue" (2008, §8). [16]

Following a short incursion into NRT in Section 2, I turn my attention to the banalities of fieldwork as a way to consider the emergent properties of language acts in relation to affect and in the context of the afterlife of qualitative inquiry's "post-moment" (DOLPHIJN & VAN DER TUIN, 2012; LATHER & ST. PIERRE, 2013). In Section 3, I deal with the mundanities of field work through an ontologically-flat perspective through which I call attention to banal forces' influence on the composition of researchers' observations. In Section 4, I address the agentic nature of space in the performance of ethnographic-based work. In Section 5 and Section 6, I discuss what AHMED (2014, p.74) refers to as "the stickiness of affect;" how our emotions attach to material and immaterial objects functioning as a lingua Franca. In Section 7, I highlight the implications of attuning with the banalities of fieldwork to better understand the undisclosed forces that partake in the phenomenality of human-oriented research. [17]

2. Speaking of NRT and Thinking Styles

When we enter into the speculative universe of "what-if" abstractions, the research enterprise can take us through unexpected detours. To surrender to instinct and affect in the pursuit of such what-ifs, nonetheless, leads us to play a politically dangerous game that can subject us to certain forms of disciplinary ostracism. In matters of social research, reality is what we are after, not fiction, critics would say. We can't have both. While this is a valid interjection, it is impossible to speak of life outside creativity, given the nature of language. For if languaging is about repetition, this repetition encounters contingencies that will likely bring differences to the fore. DELEUZE (1994 [1968], p.1) explains the issue thusly:

> "To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent. And perhaps this repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound internal repetition within the singular." [18]

To a lesser or greater degree, the disciplinary methods we employ to conduct research respond to institutional regulations and governmentalities reaffirming a representational logic. As we tell and retell stories about theories, experiments, categories, and conclusions, we do so from the safety of what we understand the past to be. While our disciplinary training is not sovereign, it is an example of power in exercise that cannot be bypassed. This trust in the order of things comes with the territory of the epoch in which we live, and it serves us as a roadmap. Whether this roadmap is embedded in our practices or expressed more or less vocally in theory, it is always there, a trap anticipating its prey, the indication of how poorly equipped we are to handle randomness. Our brains pursue patterns relentlessly. [19]

As we continue to look at the present through a rearview mirror, we also resign ourselves to the fate of marching backward into the future (McLUHAN & FIORI, 1967). Looking backward is, of course, unavoidable. We rely on experience, ours and especially others', to make decisions about the complex problems we face. However, attending to the fictionality of research and the thinking systems that have conditioned our modes of academic knowledge constitute an opportunity to jolt the imagination and think otherwise about ideas that trap the mind to what appears commonsensical. Recognizing this aspect of inquiry processes is an intellectual and a sociopolitical problem not only for qualitative research but all fields of intellectual activity, especially as young researchers caught in the predicament of "having to craft a career path for themselves quickly and effectively in the context of often conservative dominant intellectual models that govern any field" (LIAN, 2016, p.285) resist any idea associated with invention in scientific domains. [20]

It may seem that I have lost the thread of my argument here, but I have not. My contention relates, precisely, to how the exploration of the banal can lead us to the question of what is representational in qualitative work and the disciplined

impulse to regard words and life in a one-to-one relationship. Likewise, considering the role of what we regard as banal in fieldwork invites us to reevaluate what we take for granted in the systematic categorization of what we cohere in research as data. Qualitative research has undergone a remarkable transformation at the hands of a significant number of scholars who have been more invested in zeroing in on what actors do, attempt to do, or fail to accomplish than making claims about the reliability of their representations. In certain strands of qualitative research, the obsession over data variables and what is predictable or unpredictable about human action has taken a back seat in favor of discussions on the humane dimensions of actors' decisions and their consequences (BOCHNER, 2018; DENZIN, 2017). This "backseat" stance, however, has not been exclusive to the domain of the social sciences. As early as the 1960s, scholars across various fields grew increasingly aware of the limitations that the scientific method imposed to the cartography of uncertain events portraying the complexity of life as we witness it (BRUNER, 1990; FEYERABEND, 1970; KUHN, 2012 [1962]; RORTY, 1982). Methodological linearity became increasingly argued as inadequate to account for how small causes produced large effect-phenomena. The same was said about larger causes having limited influence in the natural world (CAPRA, 1997; MATURANA & VARELA, 1991 [1980]; NICOLESCU, 2002). [21]

The many "turns" associated with postmodern ideas challenged scientific production's representational power, which cast doubts on the limits of reflexivity, validity, and reproducibility in qualitative traditions (DENZIN, 2017). Techniques such as ethnography and interviews became subject to two particular lines of criticism. The first highlighted how ethnographic methods reify a disembodied form of knowledge production that rejects as noteworthy those interactions among human and nonhuman bodies informing the very knowledge about the phenomena under our scrutiny. The second highlighted the often-displayed neglect of affect as a productive force of social, cultural, and subjectivity categories (THOMAS, 2013). [22]

Heeding such criticisms, scholars engaged in ethnographic and interview-based practices began operationalizing these techniques to explore what they viewed as the "non-representational" (THRIFT, 2007) or "more-than-representational" (LORIMER, 2005) potentialities of indiscriminate bodies. Initially emerging in the field of cultural geography and later extending to other disciplines, NRT appeared as an umbrella term describing thinking styles that reoriented methodological, epistemological, and ontological features of qualitative research to account for the embodiment of social practices' affective dimensions. In so doing, NRT scholars emphasized the need to consider matter and matters in the world through the witnessing of what bodies actively express vis-à-vis their unrepresentable relationalities within social spaces (SALDANHA, 2005). Accordingly, NRT researchers uphold that meaning does not originate in the pre-given structure of a particular symbolic order. [23]

As NRT scholars think with images, words, and texts, they implicate the sign as the signal. Distinctions between objects and subjects are erased, and human and

nonhuman elements treated as bodies with "desire" that make things happen in the world. Thus, NRT-oriented scholarship focuses on the tracing of "happenings" that would otherwise be discarded by conventional methodological emphases on discourse and the exclusive agency of humans (LATOUR & WOOLGAR, 2013 [1979]). As signs are no longer regarded as immutably representing concepts or realities—though they ultimately do when they reach audiences—and because distinctions among pictures, models, and displays are employed to describe and present humans, people are no longer perceived as the exclusive agents responsible for the construction of meaning. [24]

Hence, NRT scholarship embodies a distinct aesthetic sensibility that sets it apart from conventional qualitative inquiries. Researchers give primacy to "shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions, and sensuous dispositions" (LORIMER, 2005, p.84) to underscore movement, transitivity, and sensations. The depiction of these actions is privileged over the static, discourse-based interpretations of meaning we observe in traditional segments of phenomenological inquiry (VAN MANEN, 2016). In this sense, NRT research coincides with phenomenologists in that one's registering of sensations constitute the most immediate form of accessing the essence of social phenomena. However, differently from phenomenologists, NRT researchers recognize the human body without necessarily attributing to it a centrality as the cause of phenomena under scrutiny. More radically even, NRT scholarship's orientation towards the technological unconscious—the effect of machines and non-human elements interacting—strives to counter an anthropocentric account of what human and non-human forces produce (KNORR CETINA, SCHATZKI & SAVIGNY, 2005 [2001]; TOATES, 2006). Put another way, NRT's flat ontology does not strive for a practice-based distributed or ecological account of cognition and consciousness. *A priori*, such a dichotomy—much like the mind-brain's—is avoided. [25]

NRT scholars' emphasis on sensuality suggests a significant departure from the established qualitative research habit of "striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgment, and ultimate representation" (LORIMER, 2005, p.84). Whereas the drive behind representational research has been to mimic the world through descriptions and reliable representations, NRT researchers acknowledge that life escapes human grasp in a matter of authentic reproduction. Thus, rather than representing life, NRT scholars seek to evoke as many impressions of it as they can. That means that from the offset interpretation is fundamentally acknowledged as an imaginative act. [26]

I suspect that such treatment of the mundane by NRT scholars can instantiate a meaningful occasion for researchers to reconsider how little things hold an important place in the study of the human. For like dark matter in the cosmos, banalities are plentiful, vastly uncharted regions replete with mysterious effects. NRT-inspired explorations into the banal, then, have the potential to open qualitative research to new players that our conventional methodological fetishism

readily discards out of convenience or trained rationality. In fact, a case could be made for what we regard as data already constituting a pre-selected product of our mental habits in fieldwork, arguably shaped by our disciplinary training and life story's trajectory. [27]

What kind of sensitivity, then, might serve to account for banalities we have been trained to disregard? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the examination of how we have come to regard qualitative research as a science. On this matter, BOCHNER (2018) asserts that the confusion regarding the treatment of qualitative research as a product of science arises from our thinking that what we produce as knowledge is a representation of "reality," not the creation of a new phenomenon (LATHER, 2012). In other words, the knowledge claims we make unavoidably lead us to worry too much about the justification of how our descriptions and explanations are accurate as opposed to how they are contingent and immanent. Consequently, as every new project we embark confirms our expectations, we become engrossed by accountability as an objective, often retrofitting data to match criteria of appropriateness, validity, and rigor that are not set by the phenomena we observe but by exterior forces. As BOCHNER (2018, p.359) laments:

> "Too bad the world can't speak for itself. But that's the rub, isn't it? When we say we're representing reality, we're claiming that we've arrived at the vocabulary reality would use if she were describing herself. The trouble is that she's not." [28]

What is at stake is not qualitative research as an established paradigm, but the way we look at research praxes altogether as actions setting parameters for what is possible to imagine as knowledge (FOUCAULT, 2002 [1970]). The trick is to know how and when to refuse to latch on to static definitions of qualitative research, and treat human inquiry, instead, as a multifaceted assemblage of ways to sense the world that launches us into questions more concerned with what it feels like to be with people, places, and things than what they mean. In the following section, this "being with" as an onto-epistemological stance will concern me more than any attempts at indexing meaning for those activities that always repeat but with a difference. [29]

3. Speaking of Shiny Little Objects

At 35,000 feet, our outer and inner texts assemble in ways we cannot quite explain without the recourse of imagination. The ideas we hold about what research ought to confront a myriad of issues that range from the denial of the suprasensorial, usually regarded as the purview of mystics, to the desire of finding meaning as if meaning was hidden in an "out there," somewhere, awaiting discovery. Nevertheless, the altered states of qualitative researchers' minds produce not only doubts about the nature of data but also doubts about who or what confers data their meaning (DENZIN, 2013). We conveniently hide our doubts, the intensities we experience in the process of research thereby dehumanizing our productions at a narrative level. The established paradigms we follow to report our findings withhold, unbeknownst to us, much information that

can be vital to the advancement of the subject of our inquiry and other accidental "discoveries." [30]

In the fuselage of a pressurized cabin altered states of mind produce experiences akin to what many strands of mysticism regard as an encounter with the Divine, what can't be either represented or languaged (HOLMAN JONES, 2016). The artificially pressurized airplane environment plays havoc with our senses, influencing how and what we think and feel. The lack of humidity and the engines' background noise interfere with the natural rhythms of our brain waves, therefore affecting the production of hormones in our bodies (SPENCE, 2017). Continents, textures, and new tastes develop as the result of what happens when we are confined to a metal capsule traveling at 500 mph. Moreover, the expression of exhaustion on the crewmembers' faces and the discomforts of an economy class seat, which shrinks in inverse proportion to the expanding waistlines of those occupying them, conspire to "wire" people, places, and things to each other's experiences. The discomforts mitigated through the occasional beverage service cannot distract one from the immanence of life's little things flashing in and out of existence like quantum particles under scientists' apparatuses. It is in these "in-between" moments that we perceive more clearly, perhaps, space, an otherwise non-agential force, pushing back on us, “speaking” to and through us. [31]

Much of these behind-the-scenes actions witnessed in qualitative research are either erased for the record or conveniently staged for the reportage's academic performance. The regulatory mechanisms associated with the scholarly tradition require foregrounding the research in the expectation of a noteworthy discovery, which arguably denies science its concept-making, inventive nature (MERLEAU-PONTY, 2013 [1945]). This is especially true in an age when scientists, striving to earn credit from their peers and funding agencies, are encouraged to publish exciting new findings at unprecedented rates. The publishing of failures from which others might learn is a rare feat (BERG & SEEBER, 2016; OLSSEN & PETERS, 2005; URCIUOLI, 2010). [32]

To be clear, I am not suggesting that scientific papers are a fraud. I am merely suggesting that we give pause to account for the banalities and affective intensities in fieldwork they disclose as a way to more fully realize qualitative research's potentialities. The winner of the 1960 Nobel Prize in Physiology, Peter MEDAWAR, went as far as asserting on record that the scientific paper constituted a fraud (DE VRIES, 2018). MEDAWAR was not suggesting that scientists deliberately mislead readers. Nor was he affirming that scientists necessarily—or even consciously—fiddled with facts. His point was that

> "scientific papers misrepresent the work and thoughts that led to the results described in them. Inspired by a naive and unsustainable empiricist philosophy of science, the formats of publication that contemporary scientific journals demand from contributors cover up the process of scientific discovery" (DE VRIES, 2018, p.37). [33]

Following MEDAWAR, I have argued that descriptions of the social world will always involve the translation of forms of knowing into forms of telling. Qualitative

research, being a product of this translational work, embodies accounts in its production that are saturated with gaps between experience and its expression. This point is also discussed succinctly by BOCHNER (2012), who asserts that the accurate representation of any social reality through language is problematic insofar as "the constitutive quality of language creates an experience and necessarily transforms the data that are being described" (p.157). [34]

I want to develop on this tension between the constitutive quality of language and the experience of social facts vis-à-vis a particular account from my fieldwork. In this account, surrendering to space led me to focus on how the primacy given to language as a matter of discourse can exclude banalities from shaping communicative processes beyond what is accounted for by more practical, representational perspectives. The scene unfolded during a long-haul flight destined to Frankfurt. Nothing was apparently out of the ordinary:

> "Chicken or beef?" the flight attendant asked the passenger. "Wait ... we are out of chicken," she corrects herself as she serves an older man in an aisle seat next to mine.
>
> "He doesn't understand you," his seatmate intervenes, assuming the role of a language broker.
>
> (Language brokers tend to appear even in instances when they do not speak the language they attempt to broker. This was the case here.)
>
> Smiles are soon introduced in the equation of this mundane interaction between a customer and a service provider. I watch as the flight attendant leave the scene to return, seconds later, with the good news:
>
> "Oh, we have chicken. You are in luck, sir!" she smiles and serves the passenger. To the best of my knowledge, it was not clear whether the passenger had ordered anything at all. He consented to the flight attendant's offer, which indicated some level of understanding (Field notes, April 11, 2017). [35]

"Little things" shaped this trivial exchange: the dinner ritual, already a known script in commercial flights, the language broker, the flight attendant's assumptions about the passenger's desire for chicken, and the absence of a cognizable language. In this case, a lingua Franca was no requirement. The choreography of the mundane managed to accomplish something akin to a flash mob performance as common sense was achieved through the interweaving of desires involving human and nonhuman ingredients. None of the participants had what the other needed to communicate except desire. But perhaps in matters of desire, "being" and "having" are inaccurate verbs to understand what goes on in the ways communication takes place. To be with and to touch someone else's senses, we do not rely exclusively on words. There are joint forces, one and the same, with everything around. We communicate with other human and nonhuman entities like opposite banks on a river whereby some kind of force:

> "passes from us to them, back to us and over to them again in this perpetual circuit where the chambers of the heart, like the trapdoors of desire, and the wormholes of time, and the false-bottomed drawer we call identity share a beguiling logic according

> to which the shortest distance between real life and the life unlived, between who we are and what we want, is a twisted staircase designed with the impish cruelty of M. C. Escher" (ACIMAN, 2008, p.68). [36]

ACIMAN's quote above captures quite heartfeltly the murky waters through which qualitative researchers navigate. Our disciplined desire is to translate into forms of knowing the impish cruelty of a world that we would rather see as an ESCHER painting, with easily distinguishable patterns, instead of what we really get: a series of ephemera, instances that are quickly engulfed in flames only to be devoured by Chimera's wrath at the moment when our notes from the field are organized and shaped into new meanings. Such is the web of life, which challenges us to find ways of making the conspiracy of the little things we observe more present to others and to ourselves. Thus, little things matter. They matter in literal and nonliteral ways because they expand on notions of desire. Not desire as the lack of something, but desire as a productive force that brings peoples, places, and things together in the ways the world is "worlded" beyond words. The banal overflows in life, constantly bringing knowledge back to its general presuppositions (DE CERTEAU, 1988 [1984]). This is to say, there is always more to language than what we recognize as signs—or can recognize at all. [37]

4. Speaking of Spaces That Story

At 35,000 feet, fieldnotes can make many a researcher painfully aware of the arbitrary lines separating the fantasies we concoct while interpreting our data and the facts present in the field that travel with us long after the end of our journey. As RUKEYSER (1968, p.110) reminds us, space is shaped by inquiries inasmuch as we are shaped by them:

> "I mind this room is space
> this drinking glass is space
> whose boundaries of glass
> lets me give you drink and space to drink
> ...
> I know I am space
> my words are air." [38]

At 35,000 feet, the reading of one's field notes invites questions related to what limits our ability to convey research beyond honest forms of storytelling. Signs signal no matter the context into which they are inserted. If this is true, then, what kind of vocabulary might afford us a new means of description, encouraging us towards different understandings or engagements with signs guiding us in and out of image prisons we have constructed under disciplinary experiences? In our pursuit of the truth about the stories we tell, a playful openness to possibility can sometimes reveal that the universe we hope to stabilize through knowledge,

practiced through established research paradigms, may have other plans for us. As THRIFT (2007, p.2) remarks,

> "the contours and content of what happens constantly change ... there is no stable 'human' experience because the human sensorium is constantly being re-invented as the body continually adds parts in to itself; therefore, how and what is experienced as experience is itself variable." [39]

Still, if capturing variations in the state of things is what we are after, arguably there is no use in making qualitative research a tool for achieving stability in matters of reproducibility and verification of meanings attributed to phenomena. As THRIFT's (2007) assertion above suggests, meaning ultimately resides beyond the noticeable senses, and, arguably, within the architecture of those banalities we conveniently neglected as part of the story, perhaps for fear of boredom or for sounding non-scientific. BOCHNER (2010) brings up a similar point to THRIFT's considering the general introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion format found in qualitative research's aesthetics. He contends that by avoiding the storied narrative structure within human-oriented research, we unduly mask what is inherently "experiential, participatory, emotional, performative, first- person, and dialogic" about our inquiry, therefore "enforcing institutional control over scholarly production" (p.663). Stopping short from addressing the person(al) in the research narrative, creates, he notes:

> "a chilly climate of fear in which storytellers are isolated, stigmatized, and set against story analysts, they may be able to reinscribe the once venerable modernist notions about knowledge and truth so thoroughly deconstructed and debunked by postmodernists. The result would be an affirmation of the legitimacy of the sociologist as expert—the analyst with a God's-eye view of the meaning and significance of a story" (ibid.). [40]

In the same vein, GOTTSCHALL (2012, p.1) remarks that human life is bound up in stories; yet, we are often desensitized to their "weird and witchy power" as we refuse to consider theory as an inevitable force of storying the world anew. On her part, HOLMAN JONES (2016, p.229) admits that theory and story cannot exist independently but rather in a mutually influential relationship. She argues: "we cannot write our stories and then begin the search for a theory to "fit" them, outside of cultures and politics and contexts. Instead, theory is a language for thinking with and through, asking questions about, and acting on—the experiences and happenings in our stories." HOLMAN JONES' assertion goes beyond the classificatory approach that BRUNER takes in "Acts of Meaning" (1990), where he concedes that storytelling serves as the foundation of human culture and sense of being in society. HOLMAN JONES' statement implicates storying as the autopoietic principle of all forms of understanding, which methodologically gives researchers the opportunity to embrace research as an art form. Like artists, researchers seek to explore what is astonishing about life. They/we make concessions for unusual data in their inquiry if they intuitively find a place for them in the whole of the story they are seeking to tell. They/we hang

on to the weirdness of categories, sometimes, out of sheer joy or to serve a purpose that is merely aesthetic. Researchers obsess over the fact that what has already been said may not be enough. A case in point is the display of knowledge through the performance of extensive literature reviews in search of gaps that may or may not be one's own creation. [41]

To exemplify what I mean here by the relationship between research, storytelling, and space, let me bring into the discussion two specific occurrences from my fieldwork onboard of long-haul transatlantic flights. The first instance relates to an article that a Belgian seatmate shared with me as we crossed the Atlantic en route to Australia. The article reported on the story of a computer programmer who devised an AI algorithm capable of auto-generating television scripts from episodes of the TV show *Friends*:

> Phoebe: Wow lady! You're just gonna come over to him jumpy! (They start to cry.)
>
> Chandler: So, Phoebe likes my pants.
>
> Monica: Chicken Bob!
>
> Chandler (in a muffin) (Runs to the girls to cry): Can I get some presents? (McFARLAND, 2016, §3) [42]

The second account comes from field notes I took during the same flight. A boy and a girl of approximately seven years old found a way to turn the boredom of a 12-hour trip into a nonstop parade of language games:

> Boy: And how will you do that?
>
> Girl: I don't know.
>
> Boy: Okay. Here, give me your hand. Now you have the bomboli.
>
> Girl: But I don't want it!
>
> (Both laugh)
>
> Boy: You poked bomboli!
>
> Girl: Now, you have it. Bomboli.
>
> Both laugh (Field notes, July 3, 2016). [43]

What could be so significant about these banal activities? Why should they merit any attention at all? In the first account, the product of a machine calls to mind language's materiality in a way that compels us to make sense out of what happens to meaning when filtered through the oddity of algorithmic work. In the second, imagined objects are conjured into life during an innocuous child's game, which moves participants and spectators in inquisitive ways. Despite the initial nonsensicality of these events, with little effort, one can arrive at a few realizations simply by asking "why" questions: Why is the lady so jumpy? Why does Phoebe like Chandler's pants? What is so special about them? Will Chandler ever get out of that muffin and, more importantly, how did he get into it in the first place? And what is *bomboli*? A disease? An amulet? [44]

There is a profound pedagogy emanating from the banalities found in these episodes. They are stories about spaces co-agentially storying reality to us as we can know it. Which is to say, *Friends* and *bomboli* are not easily given events in the field. Space frames them to us as alluring statements, regardless of how mundane we might judge them. These events submit to us, too, that linguistic choices about communication are not exclusively set in stone by human activity. There are affective energies at work that move us beyond reason. Comparable to the body's reaction to a virus, our language faculty responds creatively to what spaces "will" on us as if assuming the position of a defense mechanism against the intolerable nonsensicality of chance. Precisely because of space, and not in spite of it, meaning "happens" through actions that are not always logical or purposeful. Space contributes fundamentally to the development of our language capacities and sensibility, whether by happenstance we come across an AI-produced script or a childish game of *bomboli*. These phenomena teach us a thing or two about the immanence of language acts. Perhaps more poignantly, they are examples of the purest form of "Abracadabra," from the phrases in Hebrew meaning "I will create as I speak" or Aramaic, "I create like the word" (KUSHNER, 2011 [1993], p.11). [45]

5. Speaking of Fear as a Lingua Franca

At 35,000 feet, anxieties, discomforts, and doubts about flying acquire a scent of distinction. Fear is a particularly interesting emotional state because, quite often, it defies logic. Take, for example, the following facts. One is more likely to die from poisoning (15,206 deaths a year), at work (5,800) or even being electrocuted (410) than in a plane accident. Even for those unlucky enough to be involved in the small percentage of fatal air crashes, the odds of survival are excellent (90%) (FIELDS, 2014). Still, exchanges like these are a common happenstance in long-haul flights: [46]

"We can swim, we can walk, but we can't fly," a woman tells her travel companion sitting next to me. Until she uttered those words, I had forgotten about the possibility of death. While thanatophobia is healthy and helps our species to find ways to improve living conditions, it can, too, hinder the necessary trust in the unknown, which allows us to function to the best of our ability. Of course, the aforementioned numbers about the safety of flying mean very little unless we deny ourselves an awareness towards just how networked we become to other people, places, and things, particularly when traveling in a pressurized metal cage above the Atlantic. Allow me to explain. [47]

The flight I describe herein was unusually tense. As we lifted off, the wings of the plane touched the ground producing sparks.

> "I'm a pilot," my Belgian seatmate tells me, "and I didn't like this takeoff."
>
> "I'm no pilot either," I tell him, "and I'm terrified." I proceeded to close my eyes, thinking that this gesture would deny me the sight of other passengers sinking their fingernails into their seats. Once we reached the Atlantic, we encountered severe

> turbulence, which added to the general malaise passengers endured during the takeoff. Fear had communicated itself unambiguously (Field notes, May 7, 2017). [48]

As the aircraft shook up and down, and sideways, struggling against the winds as we struggled against despair, fear bound us to the anticipation of death. If not today, death would come for us sooner or later. A few of the passengers couldn't contain themselves and vocalized this fear that needed no language. Others resigned to trust the unknown. The banality of life became transmuted into the realization of death as the great equalizer. In the worst-case scenario, passengers, regardless of their class assignment, would likely endure the same fate as the others. [49]

The turbulence subsided and our flight returned to its routine "drinks, dinner, and watch out for your elbows." But the residues of the experience had magnified what was our return to the banal. For at 35,000 feet, space reveals itself as an orchestrator of emerging sensibilities limiting what community can mean. Life plays itself out in a notably different key. We become more sensitized, perhaps, to the modulations of affects' intensities and, even if for a brief moment, we come to realize how irrationally life unfolds. [50]

At 35,000 feet, much is "said" without words. The sudden contrasts between the calm and the storm make many a researcher keenly aware of the fact that what we don't see in the field is ultimately what we get. This realization about what space affects constitutes a powerful insight. For in the research endeavor, we always risk flying too close to the sun, only to watch our wings melt and our bodies fall into a silent abyss. We procure ways to attach meaning to phenomena that we arrogantly assume need classification. Through the process of sorting and categorizing, we manage to maintain some illusion that unlike Icarus, we are not falling. We dissimulate control through the conventional technologies of research, the endless citations, literature reviews, and those unique rhetorical ploys to which we are inducted upon entering the universe of academia's disciplinary technologies. We pay reverence to this tradition in hopes that it will ground us or at least hold us in midair. If down we must go, let it be with grace. [51]

A case could be made here concerning the value of what we register about ineffable experiences standing or falling not on the strength of their inherent veracity but on the potential of our ability to account for "the context or background against which particular things show up and take on significance: a mobile but more or less stable ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies, and affordances" (ANDERSON & HARRISON, 2010, p.8). As I organize this text from my field notes, recordings, and interviews, even writing parts of it during transatlantic flights, my neighborhood coffee shop, and my university's office, I cannot help but notice, in the back of my mind, a certain uneasiness related to how I should respond to the disciplined desire to find meaning in what the ineffability of a language spoken in turbulence communicated. This is not a matter of disregarding silence as a communicative gesture. What I mean to say is that silence denoting language's insufficiency

translates something more primitive about self and world in a phenomenological sense. [52]

The struggle to determine what language can and cannot produce about these changes in the intensities of fear experienced as a lingua Franca during the flight I have described—and the role that art plays in qualitative inquiries in general—brings to the fore how courageous a researcher must be to acknowledge what needs invention (BARONE & EISNER, 1997; JAGODZINSKI & WALLIN, 2013; LEAVY, 2015). No archive will restore our experiences past, only produce other. This is why I believe that it would be a worthy goal for researchers invested in qualitative research to interrogate whether bearing witness and producing new forms of experiences is all that we can ultimately accomplish. The answer to this query depends on how one understands research to be in relation to gazing and sensing. The gaze authorizes dispossession; it removes the moment from the moment itself (BARTHES, 1981 [1980]). This is to say, as we engineer artful forms of telling, we labor incessantly to occult the intensities of those experiences we endure at the various stages of the research process. Feelings (reflected) and sensations (unreflected) become, paradoxically enough, out of the question. [53]

Whether or not human-oriented scholars should extract any notions of "social" or "biological" from their vocabulary to avoid confusion with "scientific" work, in the traditional sense, seems a trivial question. Our biological selves "cannot be set to one side as though it somehow inhabited another background realm" (THRIFT, 2007, p.252). At the same time, what we characterize as biological corresponds to an invention, a performance in the *strict sense.* This is why even our notions of biology are fated to be contested as we adopt epistemological and ontological stances to pursue new forms of classification, categorization, and systematization of life (CAPRA, 1997; MATURANA & VARELA, 1991 [1980]). [54]

I summoned fear in this section to underline what the separation of art and science, cognition and consciousness, accomplishes in human-oriented inquiries —which is to say, very little. If we hope to move beyond our fixation with the sign-level order of things, I wonder whether we would do well to embrace affect in qualitative inquiries from a more vulnerable standpoint, acknowledging not only how we contribute to the products we bring into existence as knowledge, but also how this "science" is essentially an "emotional" product of desire (DAMASIO, 1994). This idea suggests a return to the Nietzschean belief that we don't feel attracted to *what* we desire; we feel attracted to desire itself (NIETZSCHE, 2002 [1886]). No positionality statement, in the traditional sense, could do justice to the reverberations such an idea provokes. [55]

6. Speaking of Empathy as a Lingua Franca

My flight completed its journey, a journey that would have been ordinary if it weren't for a transgression witnessed by the passengers seated in the economy class. A traveler, who had paid for a coach ticket, dared to usurp a first-class seat. Once his infraction was discovered by the crew members, he was led back to his rightful class. Properly put in his place, he was scolded by one of the crew members who saw it fit to publicly suppress the proletariat's uprising. The police would be called upon our arrival, we were told. The passenger's silence was emblematic of his shame; it served, too, as a contagion agent-of-sorts aggregated to our sympathy for the usurper. [56]

For the remainder of our journey, the accused (convicted?) claimed linguistic ignorance, which shielded him from further scolding. Twenty-five years of traveling overseas afforded me only two instances in which I witnessed the appropriation of an empty first-class seat. The first time invoked no threats. This second time, however, was noticeably more performative.

> "Oh, he's in trouble," my companion states, half drunk.
>
> "Yeah, but we've all thought about doing it," I tell him (Field notes, January 28, 2017). [57]

I quickly registered the incident in my notebook: "Claiming linguistic ignorance can shield and mitigate one's troubles with the law." But what frustrated me was not that this account was indescribable. What troubled me was what the account resisted. There wasn't an ethical ethnographic tale to spin out of this incident, rich with class analytics and a significant reflection on the decaying conditions of overseas flying in economy. Because the passenger appeared to speak no English, a language that the U.S.-based crew seemed to expect from him, his silence invited a series of misunderstandings. Evidence was procured confirming that he would pay for the difference in the ticket price between the first and the economy class. In instances like these, we see the worst angels of capitalism compressed into the pressurized fuselage of commercial airplanes. Comfort, as it turns out, "is reserved for the high-end customer, who enjoys fast-track security screening, opulent lounges, and excessive legroom; everyone else is cargo" (SALAITA, 2019). [58]

As the usurper scene unfolded before our eyes, my memory was jolted back to a similar case I had encountered in an academic journal, in which an asylum seeker, without any proof of country of origin, was forced to explain to a non-linguist government official that he was from a war-torn zone (BLOMMAERT, 2001). The asylum seeker's words were scrutinized; holes were punched in his accounts; the authenticity of his accent and linguistic performance was relentlessly interrogated. Yet, because he came from a multilingual region, proving any relationship to a "mother tongue" could not conform to Western nation-states' monolingual criteria. These criteria did not apply to his case, which ultimately prompted the asylum seeker's return to his devastated homeland. [59]

An extensive body of research has convincingly shown how the categories of accent and grammar, forged under the auspices and fantasies of nation-states' discourses, contain a myriad of contradictions related to the native-speaker identity (BONFIGLIO, 2010; DAVIES, 2003). Such categories cannot apply (if they ever could) to multilingual populations. Still, multilingual refugees are deported regularly to their countries of origin to suffer, perhaps less, but likely more, on account of their nonconformity to established linguistic paradigms (BLOMMAERT, 2010; EADES & ARENDS, 2007). In the case I am reporting here, language was not necessarily the issue, though the usurper's silence reverberated through the cabin and signaled something to bystanders that attached his sorrow to ours. [60]

To varying degrees, passengers displayed empathy towards the usurper's circumstance. I resigned myself to jot down the details of this account as accurately as I could, vainly thinking that my subsequent analyses would tell me a thing or two about native-speakership, lingua Franca politics, and so on. Like Gretchen at the spinning wheel awaiting her lover to return, I anticipated the story to "come" to me in a way it never did. Regardless, spinning and analyzing this account would be indicative of the researcher's competence and vanity, indeed, her performance of a righteous form of academic knowledge that convincingly asserts how banalities ensuing from a moment of human sorrow merit one's attention. Such performance would run the risk of falling prey to established rules in human-oriented research, which operate through a representational logic I am attempting to circumvent here. [61]

The usurper sat still for the remaining four hours of our flight. No handcuffs bound his wrists, but our bodies were handcuffed to his shame. Upon arrival, we discovered that the passenger spoke some English. We learned his name and nationality overhearing his conversation with a member of the crew, but that did not seem to matter anymore. If catharsis was what one would expect in situations like these, that was certainly the case. But catharsis, too, was indicative of the theatrical quality that the episode acquired through the public performance of our emotions, from our heads lowering during the usurper's scolding, to our eyes looking away or staring directly at the episode, to other bodily reactions and utterances. [62]

Catharsis disconnected us from the usurper's reality. "It happens all the time," the flight attendant told us as we prepared to leave the aircraft. The appropriation of empty first-class seats is a common happenstance in transatlantic flights, banal even, for the most part. Guilt, embarrassment, and resignation connected the usurper's embarrassment to ours. The fate of a single individual affirmed much about who we were and where we stood while the scolding took place. It was not the case that our shared negative feelings positioned the first-class usurper and us in a relationship of equivalence. Our "co-shame" was not about the individual but the suffering (AHMED, 2014). This "aboutness" was the connective tissue that wired the economy class passengers of a conventional transatlantic flight to the fate of a first-class seat expropriator. To risk an interpretation on what this "connective tissue" signifies would mean to venture into a territory of

speculations. Nevertheless, describing the behavior of the elements, connectivity, and what people, places, and things do to one another suggests a whole other realm of possibilities for materializing human-oriented inquiry. [63]

7. Speaking of Arrivals

CONQUERGOOD (1991) encourages qualitative researchers to challenge themselves to convey the physical experience of the "being there" in the field with the actual "being here" of the writing. His contention is that ethnographic fieldwork typically represses "bodily experience in favor of abstracted theory and analysis" (p.181). For example, we smooth the voices collected in the field for reportage. We flatly summarize detailed speeches and nuanced gestures, often to the detriment of the agency of non-human or trivial factors that participate in the phenomena we analyze. Yet if we accept CONQUERGOOD's challenge, we might ask ourselves crucial questions related to the literariness of qualitative inquiries. What rhetorical, communicative and affective strategies could possibly do justice to the resonance and relevance of "small stories research," with all the weight of the ethical responsibilities they imply (GEORGAKOPOULOU, 2018)? What does our present obsession over vocabulary for representation as opposed to evocation do to knowledge and common-sense? What are the risks involved in making qualitative research pleasurable? After all, the satisfaction one gets from reading qualitative work on grave social problems should already signal some kind of danger. Ethically speaking, learning about the other's suffering should not intimate catharsis returning us to the safety of our world. For researchers fly in and researchers fly out, and this is precisely the predicament in which we find ourselves: the moral and ethical responsibility to make claims about someone else's universe where we are merely guests—if even that. [64]

Ultimately, it is difficult to shake off the feeling that the major risk of qualitative work is the setting up of the researcher for success from the offset. Life is not about successes or failures if we admit that it is immanent. But if we submit to the autopoietic, immanent quality of life, we will inevitably realize that the scripts we write about it always play along with what is inaccessible to our knowledge. Change and openness constitute the sine qua non of any type of research that seeks to systematically answer a particular query. As FEYERABEND (1970) asserts, progress in research can only be attained if techniques are abandoned at the speed of light in pursuit of what there is in the world to be made more understandable. Likewise, LATHER (2012) cautions researchers to examine the limits of their inquiry practices and the kinds of knowledge these practices produce, enable, and disable. Thus, attending to the banalities of our research in more-than-representational ways affords us a unique opportunity to engage with methodological issues and thought dispositions, making viable to us the exploration of the banal as the fieldwork's dark matter. Even if this logic may initially challenge the conventional arrangements we have established to realize qualitative research of any kind, it is worth the risk, assuming, of course, that we are willing to let go of a representational logic which has traditionally characterized the nature of our inquiries into the unknown. [65]

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