Volume 2, Issue 2 (Autumn, 2019)

Qualitative Method:  
An imaginary entanglement of research in a gallery space

Ruth Boycott-Garnett

Recommended Citation:  

Licensing  
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License
Qualitative Method: An imaginary entanglement of research in a gallery space

Ruth Boycott-Garnett

Abstract

This work is built around an imagined space where the messiness and constant movement of research in-the-world is contrasted with the intended neatness of outputs. The piece uses creative writing, curation and photography to outline complex elements of qualitative research.

Fore-word

This work is in two pieces. One holds the neatness of a completed output. The other is a slice of messiness, an entanglement of qualitative research in constant change and movement. Through the pieces we see the same space and subject through the humans and non-human lens.

Part 1 is an imaginary exhibition of images and poetry curated to outline complex elements of qualitative research. Part 2 is the story of a research encounter that could take place within this imaginary space. This story emphasises ‘The impossibility of being completely prepared or knowing precisely how the ethnography will be conducted before starting’¹, the need to engage in constant reflexive practice, the struggle of capturing experience and the difficulties of removing the research, researcher and researched from the world.

In this space I have created moments of dislocation that I could encounter in my research with children in galleries and current issues to address in practice with families.

This is an ethnography including participatory action research, arts-based methods and observation.

¹ Pink (2012:45)
QUALITATIVE METHOD

Part 1
AN IMAGINARY EXHIBITION
of Art and Poetry
CURATED BY
R Boycott-Garnett

Imaginary exhibition booklet
Manchester Art Gallery 2019

‘Art teaches in ways we are only beginning to see.’

2 Hickey-Moody (2016)
‘Philosophy begins in wonder. And at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains.’

3 North Whitehead (1934) cited in Maclure (2013:228):
**Glow⁴**

Here is ‘The invisibility of everyday life’⁵


Here is ‘a passion [that] register[s] the line between the known and the unknown’⁸

Here is ‘an intermediate, highly particular state akin to a sort of suspension of the mind between ignorance and enlightenment that marks the end of unknowing and the beginning of knowing.’⁹

Here is ‘curiosity, horror, fascination, disgust, and monstrosity’¹⁰

Here is a ‘cognitive passion’¹¹

Here is a ‘glow’¹²

---

4 MacLure (2013:228)
5 Mannay, 2010:94)
6 Todd (2016:4)
7 Todd (2016:4)
8 Todd (2016:4)
9 Todd (2016:4)
10 Todd (2016:4)
11 Todd (2016:4)
12 Daston and Park (2001) cited in MacLure (2013:228)
13 Lugli (1986) cited in MacLure (2013:228)
14 MacLure (2013:228)
15 Daston and Park (2001) cited in MacLure (2013:229)
16 MacLure (2013:228)
'At some point, we have to ask whether we have become so attached to our invention – qualitative research – that we have come to think it is real. Have we forgotten that we made it up?'

Mosaic

You are a ‘bricoleur’,
A jack of all trades,
You are a ‘quilt maker’,
Stitching together the squares,
You are a jeweller,
Choosing the cut on the ‘crystal’,

At what point do you stop and put down your tools?

---

17 Lather and St. Pierre (2013)
18 Clark and Moss (2001)
19 Denzin and Lincoln (2008:5)
20 Denzin and Lincoln (2008:5)
21 Richardson (2000b) cited in Ellingson (2009:3)
Is this the finest reflection of the world that you can create?

Just one more job...

Just one more stitch...

Just one more cut...

Before the time runs out.

‘the Enlightenment project is breaking down and a commitment to bringing forth a different kind of research out of those ruins’

22 MacLure (2011:997)
Working the Ruins

This crumbling wall has stood for centuries,
It stands for ‘reason and progress,
unmediated access to truth and the agency of the centered human self’.24
Now this wall is crumbling down,
And from the sediments,
Where sunlight has crept in and rain has dripped,
Where worms have chewed and churned,
In the ‘littleness that lies there’25
A lush green bud is pushing through the gaps.
But can a bud be stronger than stone?

24 MacLure (2011:997)
‘Parenting is an existential mode which is bound to live and create with the unknown and the other.’

26 Trafi-Prats (2019)
Data

Here is a box,27
A box of odd things,28
A ’cabinet of curiosities’,29
A box that you have carried with you every day,
placed delicate objects of beauty gently down,
tossed endless careless things in that might one day be useful.
You keep it under your bed so that it seeps into your dreams.
It is your ‘companion’,30 you can ‘leave [it]. Come back. Think about [it] while gone’31
Then what?
Do you create pretty labels with sticky tape, sort them into categories, code them into language?
Invent classifications and tidy them into groups of colour, size and shape?
Do you touch them, smell them, taste them?
Link them with a spider’s web of interconnections made of ‘sticky’ silver thread?
Do you take a bit out, isolate it from its others?
Make it ‘stand still and separate out’33
dissect it, shine a torch into its ribcage,
then lay it on a white plinth in low lights.
Or,
Take these pieces and squash them together;
fur, wood, bones and plastic squished in a ball of dough.
‘cutting-apart-together’34

27 Somerville (2007:231)
28 Holmes (2018)
29 MacLure (2013:229)
30 Rautio and Vladimirova (2017)
31 Rautio and Vladimirova (2017)
32 MacRae et al (2018)
33 MacLure (2013:228)
'By sitting with another person in their living room, in their chair, drinking their coffee from one of their mugs, one begins in some small way to occupy the world in a way that is similar to them.'

Armchair

If I ‘sit in [her] chair’[^36], do I know what she thinks?
If I drink from her cup do I know her tastes?
Or is this just me, again? Sat in someone else’s chair.
Where is the line where I trip and fall into the mire?[^37]

Does she want me to sit there, in her chair?
Or would she like to hold me, at arm’s length,
and tell me her story?
Her words, in her way,
without me listening for the ‘stutters’[^38] and ‘lies’[^39].

I sit in her chair,
I drink from her cup,
Not to find my reaction to polyester and porcelain,
But to see her words in the thread of the cushion,
Feel her words on my teeth.

[^36]: Pink (2009:86)
[^37]: Finlay (2002:212)
[^38]: Deleuze (1994b) cited in MacLure (2011:1000)
The only way you can know things – that is, from the very inside of one’s being – is through a process of self discovery.\textsuperscript{40}

‘Methodology of lemons’\textsuperscript{41} (Somerville’s Words)

‘And the air and light is stitched into the words and very simple story.’\textsuperscript{42}

‘the story of lemons’\textsuperscript{43}

‘a bowl full of lemons freshly picked from the tree’\textsuperscript{44}

‘The lemons are all free and they are so of this place, golden lights in winter grey’\textsuperscript{45}

‘it is only then, that I can know, through the lemons’\textsuperscript{46}

She said

\textsuperscript{40} Ingold (2013)
\textsuperscript{41} Somerville (2013:60)
\textsuperscript{42} Somerville (2013:60)
\textsuperscript{43} Somerville (2013:60)
\textsuperscript{44} Somerville (2013:58)
\textsuperscript{45} Somerville (2013:59)
\textsuperscript{46} Somerville (2013:60)
And in this practice
‘body/place memories were created’

QUALITATIVE METHOD
Part 2
A story of entanglements

Amy Researcher

Amy is crawling along the floor of the gallery. On her hands and knees, she spreads a blanket of paper across the floor, not too close to the art work. She stops, realises with a ‘jolt’ she is eye level with the gilded frame. She has spent years in this space and never noticed the carved rosebuds in the wood. Is she finally managing to ‘make the familiar strange’? How many toddlers have seen these rosebuds? Ingold flits through her mind. She enjoys this feeling of a miniature ‘reflexive realisation’ spurred by the ‘disorientation’ and lets the excitement wash over her. She has finally made it here, to the beginning.

47 Hackett et al (2017:65)
48 Stolow (1981)
49 Pink (2012: 46)
50 ‘Creativity is also seen as a method of making the familiar strange’ (Mannay 2010:95)
51 ‘to establish the contexts or situations in which we can discover for ourselves much of what they already know...’ Ingold (2013)
52 Pink (2012: 46)
53 Pink (2012: 46)
She has worked in galleries for so long, will she ever see it new? Can she ever imagine a life without exhibitions, curators, gallery walls? She pictures herself as a fish on dry land. She fastens the edges down carefully with tape aware of tiny tripping feet.

She opens a new packet of chubby, easy grip pencils and lines them neatly at the edge. Stands up. Surveys. Picks up the pencils again and scatters them across the paper.

Then she waits. Should she wait by the door, welcome people as they come in? Is that too confrontational? She stands in the corner, where a tripod is set with a video camera. She can see the whole space from there. Is she lurking? she feels uneasy, like the colonial observer of ‘the other’ using her findings to enable control. She stops, checks herself, colonialism is not a metaphor. Still, are there not parallels with the inequalities of class and race in the urban city? She feels a pull on her heart, a physical desire:

We must produce ‘knowledge and action directly useful to those being studied’

This must have ‘catalytic validity’

‘We must empower those researched’

Her mantra repeats inside her head, ‘We want a social science that is committed up front to issues of social justice, equity, non-violence, peace, and universal human rights.’

She will wait on the bench. Beside her are three new, bright and chunky cameras. She picks one up, fiddles with it. She thinks of ‘Photo-voice’ and the words of Pink.

She imagines all the photos this camera will take over the next year, how the photos will become data. How some of the data will become so known to her it will become a part of her. She presses the big button and a flash momentarily blinds her eyes.

She quickly puts it back, turns instead to her trusty folder leaning at the foot of the bench. On the front, a white sticker declares:

Art as a language: how do young children communicate their experience of space?

Behind you can see the outline of the previous sticker and the one before that. Each title reminding her of the changing lens, methods and ontologies before the practical had even begun. The specificity of her original, the overly broadness of the second. She wonders how many more title stickers she will use before the words are finally printed, cemented into place.

---

54 Street and Heath (2008)
55 Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (2017:29)
56 Denzin and Lincoln (2008:1)
57 Tuck and Ree, (2013:647)
59 Tillmann-Healy (2003:733)
60 Tillmann-Healy (2003:733)
61 Tillmann-Healy (2003:733)
62 Denzin and Lincoln (2008:18)
63 Mannay, 2010:97
64 ‘the potential of photographic images to evoke emphatic understanding of the ways in which other people experience their worlds’ (Pink 2004, cited in Mannay 2010:97)
She flicks through the research design, reading notes, ethics proposals, freshly printed permission forms. She feels a flicker of panic as she flips past the discarded questionnaire. Was it really no use? Could it have created new knowledge? But how could it capture the experience of being-in-the-world?

It could have been so neat, she feels a pang for simplicity and the possibility of hiding behind a false trust in numbers, a claim to objectivity, something that could give her a clear authoritative voice in all of this, is she not, after all these years, an expert? Right now, she could be curled up in the cosiness of her study, pouring over statements and numbers, rather than sitting here with this flutter of nerves in her stomach. Will there ever be a method that could capture and present this feeling of butterflies?

She finds what she’s looking for, takes out a crisp new exercise book. She opens it on to the front page where a flyer is stuck with pritt-stick. What happened to all those flyers? All the hands that held them, the eyes that read them, will anyone come? Will they be strangers or will there by familiar faces?

She is at home here. She knows this space, like the parents who spend their time here, she knows the feeling of following the flow of a toddler around the room. But her own children are getting big now. Will the parents still see her as one of them? She realises she is neither insider nor outsider, that just being a parent isn’t enough to connect them.

She writes the date on the top of the first page. She clutches the notepad, clutches to the notion of the ‘textual warrant that she has been immersed in the participants’ world, and that her accounts of what she has seen can be trusted.

Amina Child

Amina exists as a consequence of the world. She and everything around her ‘is constantly in the state of ‘becoming’ something new’, the condition of her existence is created in difference. She pushes the solid wood of the door, feels and simultaneously creates the weathered grain and heavy resistance by her movement. Flexes her muscles from shoulder to elbow, wrist to fingertips. She is momentarily fixed in a constant non-linear intra-action. An assemblage of Amina – Floor – Chandelier – Mummy – Footstep echoes. She sees the wallpaper, exposed bricks, feels the floor holding her up beneath her cotton socks, rubber soles, sees high ceiling, a hundred tear drops made of glass that reflect and refract the light (the refraction mirrored in her movements within the world), a window in the sky pouring

65 Macfarlane (2010:20)  
66 Manney (2010)  
67 Mohanty 1984  
68 Jones et al (2010:481)  
69 Rautio (2013:397)  
71 Rautio (2013:398)  
72 Rautio (2013:398)
sunlight through green glass into a pool of green light on the floor. Amina catches the light in her eyes.

She waits in the dark for sparks, messages running on wires, messages from her eyes of shapes and light, measures from her fingertips of solid and dispersible. Messages of echoes and dulled tones, the sounds of ‘indoors’. Her world is built on illusions of texture from the atoms in her fingertips that may truly never have touched a thing.73

Amina has been a part of this place before. She knows these encounters with the diamond shapes beneath her feet, that make her want to run. Quick! Ha! A joyful chase! A squeal of delight as she makes her way to her familiar room of pictures. These pictures are vibrant, like all matter, have agency.74 They pull Amina in to the space, she is drawn to their colours and shapes, their giantness...

Amina cannot be captured with numbers, she cannot use the words that describe this being-in-the-world, how she feels about this space, the pictures, the patterns on the floor, the way the light sometimes, but not always, flows in from the high up window and makes her cheek feel warm when she passes through it. Language cannot capture these in-betweens. Even a photo from the eye of the observed cannot contain them. But it’s closer. It’s a link from media to mode.75 A step closer to feeling the stickiness,76 capturing the ‘glow’.77

Something is different.

Someone is here. She is on the bench. Why is someone here? Will this woman stop her playing? She freezes on her usual route. She turns instead to the safety of mum, feels with a panic the unfathomable stretch between them, spins back and hurtles through space for the comfort of mum’s patterned cotton trousers.

Yasmin Mother

Indoors. In from the rain, in from the crowds of Christmas shoppers, in from the noise, the roar of cars, the hoot of trams, in to the full bodied quiet of the gallery. The heavy doors shut behind you with a thud that echoes up towards the ceiling. The two of you make foot prints of droplets on the shiny floor. The crinkle of your jacket fills the quiet.

A smart usher smiles and hands you a piece of card,

‘Would you like a map?’ Amina is already running away. You take the card with an apologetic smile and chase after her bouncing bobble hat, pulled by the stretching distance between you.

73 Barad (2007:153)
74 Rautio (2013:397)
75 Dicks et al (2006:82)
76 MacRae et al (2017:503)
77 MacLure (2013:228)
Ok. We’re here. A heavy sigh escapes you. You head for the bench, Amina clings to your leg as you smile at the woman and sit on the opposite end, laying your shopping down and releasing the weight from your tired arms. The woman smiles at you, asks if you’re here for the thing. You nod your head eagerly,

‘Yes! Is this it?’

You spot the paper on the floor, the cameras on the bench, the tripod hidden in the corner. You expect she will tell you what to do with them, once the session starts.

The woman seems friendly. She takes a form from her side, talks about permissions, something about research, photographs, confidentiality. Every play session has permission forms these days! What is the obsession with photographs? You’re ready to sign. You stop. Your eyes are drawn to the tripod. The hidden camera, spying on Amina as she plays.

‘Are you going to film?’ the feeling of panic is rising in your stomach, who is this woman? Is she judging you? Is she the same as that guy in the street, did this smiling white woman vote for Brexit? What side is she on?

‘I don’t want you to film.’

‘That’s completely fine,’ she smiles. ‘It makes me quite self-conscious anyway!’

You smile. You’re safe here.

She says, ‘How would you feel about sound?’ and scuffles through her bag, shows you a voice recorder.

‘Yeah, sound is fine,’ you ease your guilt, you want to make her happy. ‘You can’t see my messy hair’ you add. She laughs. You laugh too.

You take the crumpled flyer from your pocket. You want to ask what she thinks about the 2-year-old check, how to prepare for it. When you picked up the flyer last week you imagined talking about the EYFS thing, telling her about the bright cards and wallcharts that your sister passed down to you when Amina was born.

This doesn’t happen.

Instead she mentions a town in Italy a lot and some guy from the 50s who sounds a bit strange.

Amina has spotted the camera. The woman shows her how to press the buttons and they begin an adventure around the gallery, she’s letting Amina choose what pictures to take. Amina looks tiny with the giant camera! The camera is heavy, she needs a bit of help holding the weight of it.

You have a flash of memory of your granddad, this space always connects you back to him. Remember when he brought you here, those tall looming photos, was that the first trip? That explorer had taken photos of Somali families. And he said he was so proud to see them in such a stately building. You thought they all looked a bit hopeless really, starring at the camera, slightly amused, as if they were saying, what are you doing here?

You think of all the art works, all the artefacts, all placed away from home in this grand architecture. There’s that uneasy feeling you get in the museum, all these things sorted and
collected, out of place. Didn’t you read somewhere that the French president was sending things back? All those stolen things, wouldn’t that be a start?

Your mobile interrupts the quiet of the gallery.

Amy Researcher

One year later. In the cosiness of your study, you turn on your laptop. Sip your coffee as you wait for it to wake up. You find the very first date, the very first file of photos. The very first photo. The screen is filled with her happy, toothy grin. Her face is so close you can see the blueberry smudge on her cheek.

Did you ever see her again? Did she come back? What was her name? You search the sound files, find the first date. You let the sounds and voices wash over you as you move from photo to photo. There’s the sound of a mobile phone. One side of a conversation, gaps for the other unheard voice.

The voice: No, we haven’t gone home. Thought about it, but Amina would’ve had a meltdown. We just carried on.....

...He was just a skinny lad, about 18?...

... I’d’ve shouted something back if she hadn’t been with me...

... I thought we voted you out. Just like that.

And he spat right in front of me.

You quickly press pause.

78 Larios and Sherlock (2018:14)
List of Image sources

Armchair photo: https://pixabay.com/photos/chair-hotel-vintage-retro-old-1439051/
Data photo: Authors own collection
Glow photo: https://pixabay.com/photos/dust-doorway-door-window-sunlight-1523106/
Lemon photo: https://pixabay.com/photos/lemons-yellow-fruit-tart-2100124/
Mosaic photo: https://pixabay.com/photos/background-mosaic-pattern-polygon-2689751/
Ruins photo: https://pixabay.com/photos/salon-space-room-interior-style-4231458/

Bibliography


*Ruth Boycott-Garnett* is at the beginning of her doctoral research at the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her PhD is in collaboration with Manchester Art Gallery focusing on the entanglements of babies, matter and space in an interdisciplinary study across arts and wellbeing. She is interested in creating work that re-imagines cultural spaces and academic knowledge through a lens of inclusive action. Since 2008, Ruth’s work has involved creating theatre, art installations and creative engagement programmes for babies, young children and families. **Twitter:** @RuthieBG1  
**Web:** [https://gtr.ukri.org/person/7C1ECF1A-179A-4B4A-9917-2F588A81BE4D](https://gtr.ukri.org/person/7C1ECF1A-179A-4B4A-9917-2F588A81BE4D)