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Dwelling with wildflowers: Qualitative inquiry as life-living and life-giving

Abstract

In this short piece, I reconsider qualitative inquiry based on my chance encounter with a buttonhole flower. This encounter offered me an opportunity to explore not only my relationship with vegetal life, but also how dwelling with wildflowers allows one to reconceptualise qualitative inquiry as a practice of life-living and live-giving that emerges from a logic of conviviality. Practicing qualitative inquiry as life-living and life-giving serves as a means to unmoor our practices of inquiry from the abstraction of *re*-presentation and the predicative logic on which this is based, and to offer instead a conceptualisation of inquiry as a process of dwelling with/in the world, and in this togetherness, experience (the potential of) life.

Key words: artfulness, ecological thinking, to dwell, conviviality, buttonhole flower

> *I had no other alternative but asking nature to teach me how I could preserve and cultivate life (Irigary, 2016, p. 19)*
>
> *Instead of sending persistent but fruitless reminders to a culture forgetful of life, we must cultivate a different culture, starting from a drastically new relations to plants (Marder, 2016, p. 128)*

Creating this piece was a practice in slow writing (Ulmer, 2017). Of giving recognition to everyday (more-than-human) materialities, occurrences, and experiences[1] and how these move and change me. It meant paying attention to the world around me, the patterns of diffraction and composition produced by and productive of the movement of my bodymind with/in the world. In this piece, I pay particular attention to the minor gesture - the "subtle movements that occur around us as the world constantly continuous to unfold" (Ulmer, 2018a, p.321). Manning (2016) writes that the minor gesture is a site of dissonance "that

[1] In following Manning (2016), I understand experience to relate not only to human life but rather to the "tense of life-living, not human life per se, but the more than human" (p. 3).

makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday" (p. 7). As a singularity connected to an event, the minor gesture allows for new modes of expression by offering "new modes of live-living"[2] (p. 8). Such is this piece, being attentive to the minor gesture as a means to give recognition to the ecologies from which qualitative inquiry emerges and the forms of life-living and life-giving these are entangled with. In writing this, I seek to offer variation to the experience of conducting and writing qualitative inquiry by conceptualizing it in terms of artfulness (Manning, 2016) and ecological thinking (Bateson, 1985). This is done to unmoor qualitative inquiry's structural integrity by bringing forth the potential for change from within the concept itself.

To explore thinking otherwise about qualitative inquiry, I draw on my encounters with wildflowers (cf. Ulmer, 2018b), and in particular, with the buttonhole flower. In his book, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Marder (2013) posits that humans must overcome their privileged and instrumental relationship with plants that are informed by a hierarchical logic of being based on anthropocentrism. This would necessarily entail not viewing plants as inert and passive objects serving as mere resources for human needs and desires. Instead, by taking up a different ethical stance, Marder (2013) argues, humans should give recognition to the diverse modes of being and "ontological particularity" (p. 93) of plants. Such recognition may allow us to "brush upon the edges of their being, which is altogether outer and exposed, and in so doing to grow past the fictitious shells of our… existential ontology" (Marder, 2013, p. 13). To pursue this line of thought, I explore how my chance encounter with buttonhole flowers made "the lines tremble that compose the everyday" (Manning, 2016, p. 7), and how this trembling invited me to think otherwise about qualitative inquiry.

I present this piece in four short vignettes in which I sketch how my encounter with the buttonhole flower offered me an opportunity to explore not only my relationship with vegetal life, but also how dwelling *with* wildflowers allows one to reconceptualize qualitative inquiry as a practice of life-living and live-giving.

[2] Life is not confined to human life, but is inclusive of more-than-human life.

i. Encountering life

In early winter, there is a particular smell and feel to the veld[3] where I live in the Highveld[4] of South Africa. The drying wild grass full of seed, the smell of dust, the glint of the hardened resin of the grey-green wild olive and *Karee* trees, the buzz of the highway in the distance, the infrequency of bird song, and the monotony of the rusted wire fence that the encloses the piece of land I often walk on. Although I enjoy walking in the veld and make time for it as often as possible, I have come to realize that I do not allow myself, at times, to slow down and be folded into the world around me; to truly become attentive to and appreciate it. To listen, feel, and sense it – to reach out toward the world around me and to draw it into my bodymind. Yet, recent encounters with wildflowers have made me slow down and *attend* to the world. Over the past year, I have started to notice wildflowers that I have never noticed before. Small purple and yellow flowers that one would never see in a home garden, yet striking, in the semi-arid grasslands they grow. Many of the wildflowers that have made to slow down are considered weeds, not cultivated enough for our aesthetic (or productivist) sensibilities. Others speak perhaps more to our sensibilities. So, for example, during the summer months from December to February, the candelabra flower dots the landscape with its individually pedicelled magenta flowers forming a large umbel that stands out against the green grassland in which it grows.

One encounter during the past year with wildflowers has made me truly pause and reconsider how I position myself into coming to knowledge about the world. This encounter was with the buttonhole flower. This is a small, sweetly scented plant lying flush with the surface of the soil. Its two leaves and conspicuously white flowers with deep purple anthers emerge from beneath the soil during the autumn and winter months only when other grassland flora in the semi-arid grassland in which it grows is dormant. In thinking about my encounter with the buttonhole flower through qualitative inquiry, I wonder what we can learn *from* and *with* this small flower. How can the buttonhole flower help us challenge hierarchical structures of being

[3] *Velt,* a Middle Dutch word that was taken up in Afrikaans as *veld*, literally means field. The word is widely used in southern Africa to refer to open country.

[4] The Highveld is an inland plateau region in South Africa.

and thought premised on anthropocentrism and how this informs the manner in which we come to knowledge through our practices of inquiry?

ii. Observing, collecting, classifying, and representing life

This small wildflower that disrupted my image of thought about qualitative inquiry is entangled with pre-colonial healing and magical practices, the voyages of discovery, the molding and standardization of colonial sciences and fields of study such as botany. After briefly tracing these entanglements, I consider how reading them through my encounter with this wildflower enables me to begin to reposition my conceptualization of qualitative inquiry.

The buttonhole flower was historically valued by the indigenous communities of southern Africa as attested to by its use among the San, Khoikhoi, and Basotho. While the San and Khoikhoi communities are claimed to have made use of it as a medicinal plant before the arrival of European colonists (Van Wyk, 2008), the Basotho people, who live in the area where the buttonhole flower (known as *lematlana* in vernacular Sesotho) is endemic, have historically used it for its magical properties. For example, Moteetee (2017) states that the root, stem, or leaf of *lematlana* was shaped into a doll that barren women carried on their backs and pretended to suckle. Doing this, it was believed, would make such women fertile. Elsewhere, it is indicated that *lematlana* was employed as a charm against lightning, to find lost items, or to use in conjunction with divining bones (Jacot Guillarmod, 1971; Moffet, 2010; Moteetee, Moffet, & Seleteng-Kose, 2019).

The genus in which the *lematlana*-buttonhole flower is presently classified was brought into the fold of colonial science as part of the voyages of discovery and the collection of plant specimens for the Royal Gardens at Kew, Britain. At the time the Royal Gardens was, according to Saltmarsh (2003, p. 224), “planted in scientific order according to the classification recently established by Linnaeus” and served the purpose from 1841 onwards to aid “the Mother Country in everything that is useful in the vegetable kingdom” (Brockway, 1979, p. 452). Although Europeans collected plant specimens from southern Africa from at least the 1600s, it was only in 1775 that Carl Linnaeus gave the genus its scientific classification based on a plant specimen collected by Francis Masson (Victor, Smith, & Van Wyk, 2016). With his publication of *Species Plantarum* in 1753, Linnaeus introduced the use of binominal

plant names, a practice that persisted until the 1990s when the study of plant anatomy and morphology was replaced by DNA sequencing and the classification of vegetal life into clades of phylogenetic trees. According to Baber (2016), the Linnaean classification system emerged from "[t]he search for a universal taxonomical grid or the attempt to impose some order on the morphological chaos created by the availability of new plants [from the colonies]" (p. 672) and was central to the development of modern science (and modernity).

Francis Masson was the first imperial plant hunter for The Royal Gardens at Kew. Over a period of twelve years between 1772-1775 and 1785-1795, he traveled extensively in the Dutch colony of the Cape of Good Hope to collect plant specimens for the Royal Gardens. After his first visit to the Cape of Good Hope, Masson wrote a letter to Linnaeus in December 1775 to request permission to name an unusual plant specimen he had collected. He requested the plant specimen to be classified to a new genus, *Massonia*. In his letter, Masson wrote that he would have "declined receiving [the] honour from any other authority than the great Linnaeus, whom I look upon as the father of botany and natural history, in hopes that you will give it your sanction" (Saltmarsh 2003, p. 234). Linnaeus approved of the genus name *Massonia*, which was subsequently published in *Supplementum Plantarum* in 1781. This genus has been described as "one of the humblest and least beautiful members of the Cape lily family" (Lighton 1973 in Saltmarsh 2003, p. 234) but also as attracting "the dullest eye by their very singularity" (MacOwen 1929 in Saltmarsh 2003, p. 234).

The *lematlana*-buttonhole flower as a species was folded into colonial science as one of the over 40 000 plant specimens collected by the British natural historian, and erstwhile gardener at the Royal Gardens at Kew, William Burchell during his stay at the Cape Colony between 1811 and 1815 (Victor, Smith, & Van Wyk, 2016). Of all the plants in the *Massonia* genus, this species occurs the furthest east in southern African and is the smallest. At present, the herbarium at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew houses 3690 of the specimens collected by Burchell (Stewart, 2019) during his travels in South Africa. According to Baker (1896), the *lematlana*-buttonhole flower, or *Massonia Jasminiflora , Burch. ex Baker* as Baker classified it in 1870, "was first *discovered* at the beginning of the [nineteenth] century by the celebrated traveller Burchell" [my emphasis] (p. 60). After returning to Britain, Burchell cultivated a buttonhole flower in his garden at Fulham, of which he sent a dried specimen to Kew herbarium in 1818. The first 'live' specimen of *Massonia Jasminiflora, Burch. ex Baker* housed

at the Royal Gardens was donated by Reverend Miles of Almondsbury, Bristol, in 1892 after receiving the plant from an acquaintance living in the Orange Free State (South Africa) (Baker, 1896).

In *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*, Pratt (1992) argues that the Western scientific revolution was essentially a male enterprise that sought to dominate nature through the practice of observation, collection, classification, and representation. Furthermore, a critical moment in this process of male assertion over nature was the publication of Linnaeus's *Species Plantarum* and the subsequent development of the field of natural history. For Pratt (1992), "Natural history asserted an urban, lettered, male authority over the whole of the planet; it elaborated a rationalising, extractive, dissociative understanding which overlaid functional, experiential relations among people, plants and animals" (p. 38) [5]. Natural history, and the emergent field of botany, thus formed an essential part of colonial and imperial expansion. On the one hand, "the colonial pursuit of products, profits and power around the globe constituted the structural and ideological contexts for the birth and consolidation of botanical knowledge" (Baber, 2016, p. 676), while on the other hand, the new and emerging science of botany played a vital role in the expansion of the empire through its practice in the colonies.

The practices of inquiry pursued by natural historians and botanists such as Linnaeus, Masson, and Burchell, and as it manifests in the naming and classification of *Massonia Jasminiflora, Burch. Ex Baker*, points to a process of objectification and abstraction of life from living whereby living communities (human and non-human) are coded and over-coded and turned into passive objects for scientific study (Marder, 2016). It is a mode of exchange between

[5] Within the context of the South African colonial period Beinart (1998), however, reminds us that colonial scientific knowledge emerged from and was depended on "a multiplicity of indigenous and colonial agents" (p. 778). This is the case since natural historians and botanist, such as Masson and Burchell, depended as much on indigenous guides and settler communities for knowledge of topography and local fauna and flora, as they did on the colonial infrastructure. The generation of Western scientific knowledge thus involved a complex and nuanced process of knowledge transfers, albeit "in the context of dispossession and violence" (Breinart, 1998, p. 784).

humans and the environment premised on the presupposition that words (*logos*) can represent the real. A presupposition that consequentially leads one to fail to "linger before a tree - or a flower – to contemplate its singularity and meet it in its reality (Irigaray, 2016, p. 46). Marder (2016) similarly argues that our outdated methods of classifying 'living' things, such as plants using the Linnaean system, greatly impacts how we conceptualize and treat non-human life. In agreement with Irigaray, he understands the image of thought that informs such classification to be based on the erasing of difference between individuals in a species by positing these as inconsequential or superficial. Such thinking he refers to as species-thought. For Marder (2016), to "continue working with the notions of specie, genera, and kingdoms… is to capitulate before the power of abstraction, oblivious to singularity" (p. 37). Such "frozen moulds of thought" (Marder, 2016, p. 38) entails domesticating life, and as a mode of knowing brings life into the anthropocentric fold through "projecting its own rationality" (Marder 2013, p. 94) in encountering it. Conceptualizing life differently through our practices of inquiry could thus serve as a means of transforming our ontological relations with the world. Perhaps we can learn to encounter and relate to the world differently by practicing inquiry premised on openness and attentiveness toward it; inquiry based on a logic of conviviality, of living (*vivere*) together (*cum*).

iii. Reaching out toward life

My first encounter with the *lematlana*-buttonhole flower was fleeting, noticing it in passing and pausing for a while to observe it. Even though the small flower was not readily observable between the tall, drying grass of the winter veld, it was conspicuous once I noticed it with its white flowers emerging from between its two small oblong leaves lying flush on the ground. On arriving home after my walk, I shared my encounter with my partner and showed her a photo I took of it with my cell phone. The photo was taken looking down at the flower. I must have been crouching given the angle of the photograph, but I could not recall. Yet, the photograph did not reflect what I experienced in encountering this flower.

To truly attend the *lematlana*-buttonhole flower, you have to lie yourself down on the ground next to it. You have to change your perspective; *the manner in which you relate to the earth and your bodymind makes contact with it*. You have to let go of your 'frozen moulds of

thought.' One means to change how your bodymind relates to the earth is to learn *from* vegetal life and the manner in which they encounter and attend to their environment. Plant-thinking, as proposed by Marder (2013), is suggestive of a logic of conviviality, of living (*vivere)* together (*cum*) and of creating community through "teasing out something in common" (Marder, 2016, p. 93). Such togetherness grows from radical openness and attentiveness to one's environment. Through my encounter with the *lematlana*-buttonhole flower, I have come to appreciate that it is not abstracted from life, but wholly immanent to it in responding to its embeddedness within a particular assemblage - to its particular ecology. In reading such immanence together with qualitative inquiry, allows me to reposition inquiry not as a practice of taking from the world through processes of observation, collection, categorisation and representation, but rather one of reaching out to the world "to grow not against but together with the environment, including other human beings, animals, and plants" (Marder 2016, p. 162). It is to such possibilities for growth with one's environment that I briefly turn my attention in considering artfulness (Manning, 2016) and ecological thinking (Bateson, 1985).

In referring to the early thirteenth-century German word for art (*die Art*), Manning (2016) argues that artfulness foregrounds the craft of learning as opposed to the object of creation. There is thus a shift in emphasis from the object created (form) to the manner of practice (process). The foregrounding of process is to recognize that "[t]he actual world is a process and process is the becoming of actual entities" (Whitehead, 1985, p. 22). Artfulness, then, is a means to map "the way to a certain attunement of world and expression" (p. 47) that concerns "dwell[ing] on the process" (p. 7). It is the aspect of 'dwelling on the process' that I consider in relation to qualitative inquiry. Apart from the more common understanding of the infinitive verb to dwell as meaning to reside or linger, it also refers to the act of hesitating (from proto-Germanic *dwaljana*), go astray (from proto-Germanic *dwelana*) and to perplex (from Middle Dutch *dwellen*). Yet, to hesitate, go astray, or be perplexed is always in relation to someone or something (human or more-than-human). Dwelling is thus not only a relational process of lingering with/in one's environment, but of hesitating as one encounters it, and being/becoming perplexed and led astray by it. It is this *togetherness* with the world that the verb to dwell implies and that highlights the potential of recasting inquiry as a reaching out towards and being receptive to what the world offers. But to be receptive of such offering, one has to hesitate in encountering, become perplexed, and be willing to be led astray.

Qualitative inquiry would thus become a feeling-forth of future potential of what life might be (Manning, 2016, p. 47), together. It is in this convivial movement that the possibility of creating different ecologies of existence through qualitative inquiry unfolds.

Inquiry informed by dwelling in the process entails given recognition to and participating in a world that is always in motion, in-between, becoming. Yet, the in-betweeness of the world cannot be abstracted from the act of participation. In a manner, participation is modulated by one's attention to the ecology in which inquiry unfolds. Thus *togetherness*, furthermore, implies a willingness to let go of the illusion that privileges thinking and knowing (mind) as an individual endeavor and repositions it within the relational processes of life-living. Repositioning thinking and knowing within qualitative inquiry in this way means folding it back into its ecology and recognizing that thinking and our practices of knowing emerge from the unit of the organism (i.e. human) *and* the environment as a whole (Bateson, 1985). Such recognition stands in contrast to the Cartesian logic that informed the scientific project of Masson and Burchell when they encountered vegetal life in the Cape Colony. Their projects were premised, as Whitehead (2011) points out of modern science in general, on the "assumption of bodies and minds as independent substances, each existing in its own right apart from any necessary reference to each other" (p. 241-242). The danger of this assumption is twofold, according to Bateson (1985). Firstly, to "act on the premise 'What interests me is me, or my organization, or my species,'" is to disassociate yourself from "other loops of the loop structure" (p. 484). Thus, to deny your *togetherness* with the world. Secondly, such disassociation leads to separating "mind from the structure in which it is immanent, such as human relationship, the human society, or the ecosystem" (p. 485), a fundamental (epistemological) error that is productive of anthropocentric thinking and the manner in which (vegetal) life is encountered.

What I am in the process of learning with/from the *lematlana*-buttonhole flower (and vegetal life in general) is the importance of thinking ecologically. Dolphijn (2018) proposes that everyday life is made up of complex transversal relations, which are productive of the "assemblages in and through which we [think and] act [and that] thinking is necessarily a relational power" (p. 131), a consequence of the pathways along which information is transmitted. Thus, the thinking system is not bounded since "[w]hat thinks is the total system which engages in trial and error, which is man [sic] plus environment" (Bateson, 1985, p. 483).

What does this mean for us in thinking about our practices of qualitative inquiry? For one thing, it changes thinking from being oppositional to affirmative. Affirmative thinking is based on relationality and mutual coexistence, on conviviality. This understanding of thinking is supported by Dolphijn (2018), who states that ecological thinking is "not so much in search of answers to problems posed by our era, but rather searching for ways to be interwoven with the movements and the swerves of today" (p. 131). Thinking ecologically could enable our practices of inquiry to become more attuned to and respectful of the places where we dwell, where our inquiry unfold, as well as the human and more-than-human others with whom our practices are entangled and with whom they emerge. In a sense, our practices of inquiry should be brought back to earth.

iv. Qualitative inquiry as life-living and life-giving

By bringing inquiry down to earth, by lying yourself flat on the ground to engage with and attend to a *lemantlana*-buttonhole flower helps one to reposition qualitative inquiry as a practice of artfulness. When practices of inquiry are not understood and validated in terms of the objects (knowledge) it produces, but rather as enabling one to dwell in the process, in the middling of experience "where futurity and presentness coincide" (Manning, 2016, p. 47), it becomes a practice of artfulness. Instead of abstracting our inquiries and the 'objects' thereof from reality by collecting, classifying, and *re*-presenting them, artfulness helps us to be with our practices of inquiry in-the-world and in-time. It helps us to slow down and take cognizance of the places and temporal dimensions of our inquiry, placing ourselves in the larger processes of life. It provides us with an opportunity to appreciate and show gratitude toward where we find ourselves and with whom/what we participate in and through our inquiry - the human and more-than-human – and with whom we share life.

I believe it is worth meditating on conceptualizing and pursuing qualitative inquiry that is attentive to its ecological embeddedness as well as its processes of coming into expression.

In other words, qualitative inquiry as a practice of live-living and life-giving[6]. Marder (2016) states:

> When lingering with plants, in thoughtful and physical proximity, I try to pay attention to their singular mode of attention. I notice, first, that plants do not attend to an object or groups of objects. *Their attention is inseparable from their life and growth*… human attention convoked and directed toward life must strive,… to be similarly nonobjectifying (p. 158) [my emphasis].

In pursuing our encounters with the world through conceptualizing qualitative inquiry as a practice of live-living and live-giving, what becomes foregrounded is not intention, but *attention* and *affection*. Inquiry involves as much as learning about the world as it involves letting the world address us and being open to what it has to offer. As such, qualitative inquiry as a practice of life-living and life-giving is based not on subject-object relations but rather on subject-subject relations (even though such subjectivities may be so ontologically distinct that we may not be able to ever fully comprehend them). Qualitative inquiry as a practice of live-living and live-giving is a meeting place; a practice that reaches out toward the transversal threads of living through which life is composed by recalling "our inclusion in the fold of the earth, our dwelling place" (Marder, 2016, p. 156).

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[6] I recognise that my proposition for qualitative inquiry as life-living and living-giving is paradoxical, for inherent in it is a double-movement. On the one-hand, inquiry is by implication an act of *re*-presentation and abstraction, a backgridding activity that reconstructs experience after the fact (cf. Manning, 2016, p. 47). Manning (2016) convincingly argues, at the hand of Whitehead, that to represent is to bring a phenomenon to standstill and to conceive of it out-of-time; to relegate it beyond experience and to cast it as unchanging. On the other hand, "experience [life] is (in) movement" (p. 47), and as such inquiry as life-living and living-giving, posits that our practices of inquiry should dwell in "the relational movement through which the present begins to coexist with its futurity" (Manning, 2016, p. 47). Lingering in the *event* of inquiry with others, human and more-than-human, to become perplexed and be lead astray. Practicing qualitative inquiry as life-living and life-giving serves as a means to unmoor our practices of inquiry from the abstraction of re-presentation and the predicative logic on which this is based, and to offer instead a conceptualisation of inquiry as a process of dwelling with/in the world, and in this togetherness, experience (the potential of) life.

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