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Betraying our best intentions: on the need to interrogate how we relate and what it produces

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I start from a posthumanist understanding of subjectivity to stress how our ways of relating do not follow from previously formed intentions but emerge in assemblages. The fact that we hold certain theoretical ascriptions does not assure that we will relate in ways that are consistent with them. We might intend to embrace diffractive, decentring and performative perspectives, and effectively do so at a content level. However, we might unwittingly reproduce representational, dichotomous, centring and identitarian ways of relating to ourselves, others, our work and so on. These ways of relating are often unacknowledged. I offer my concept of performative meta-reflexivity to interrogate which ways of relating are implicitly operating and to think about what they are producing. I suggest that this practice can be helpful to become response-able for the ways of relating that we find ourselves engaged in and what they generate.

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The conceptualisation of subjectivity has changed with "posthumanist theories". It is not about a bounded subject that interprets the world through language and representation. Instead, it is about a non-unitary and dynamic subject that is produced in direct connection with forces and others (Braidotti, 2006). "Subjectivity can then be re-defined as an expanded self, whose relational capacity is not confined within the human species, but includes non-anthropomorphic elements" (Braidotti, 2019, p. 42). The sense that we make of the world, our intentions, our actions, our feelings are not thought of as originating from the depths of an individual. Who "we" are, what we say, is a production arranged in assemblages. "Every statement is the product of a machinic assemblage, in other words, of collective agents of enunciation (take “collective agents” to mean not peoples or societies but multiplicities)” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 37). Haraway (2016) speaks of sympoiesis instead of autopoiesis, pointing at how everything, including humans, is relationally produced and sustained. “Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means “making-with.” Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (p. 58). Barad (2007) also espouses a relational perspective. “The knower cannot be assumed to be a self-contained rational human subject. Rather, subjects (like objects) are differentially constituted through specific intra-actions” (p. 342). 3

With this posthumanist conceptualisation of subjectivity, the act of speaking from an “I”, being reflexive on ourselves, and so on are problematised. For example, Mazzei (2013) mainly...
drawing on Deleuze & Guattari (1983) and Barad (2007) troubles the notion of voice in practices of interviewing. She posits that voice does not belong to an organism but emerges from a becoming that includes all of what is relating at that moment, human and non-human.

How do we deal with these problematisations? Do we need to leave behind old terms and practices and propose new ones? There is a movement within posthumanism that strives towards this direction. For example, Blackman (2014) states that there is a trend among researchers working with the concept of non-human agencies to dismiss subjectivity as a concept as it is associated with the distinction between subject and object and the privileging of human agency. In a previous article (Serra Undurraga, 2021), I have noticed how there is a movement influenced by Barad (2007) that pushes for discarding reflexivity and embracing diffraction (see Davies, 2014; Davies & Gannon, 2012; Gale & Wyatt, 2017; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). Reflexivity refers to the practice of considering how our subjectivity is involved and impactful in our work. Barad (2007) argues that reflexivity relies on representationalism, attempting to define the subjectivity of the researcher. Instead, diffraction as a methodology is interested in what practices, concepts, material arrangements and more produce (and in how they are produced). Challenging this trend of discarding reflexivity, Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) are careful of not assuming diffraction as the superior term and also work with the possibilities that reflection affords. Consonantly, I (Serra Undurraga, 2021) have argued for the importance of reconceptualising reflexivity (using diffraction) not least because the reflexive practice of making sense of ourselves, actions, feelings and thoughts is something that, at least now, we find ourselves doing anyway.

When asked in an interview about the limits of the non-human turn, Grosz (Stark & Roffe, 2015) articulates how there is a rush to move away from the human disregarding how we have been, and continue being, produced as humans:

The most obvious limit to focusing on the nonhuman is our convenient forgetting of our own location, here and now, as human – our implications in the prevailing relations of power that regulate and police humans. Whatever nonhuman turn we may make, we must make it as (versions of) the human. (Stark & Roffe, 2015, p. 23)

I think that the movements towards embracing new concepts and practices through rejecting and discarding others echo a, too common, human omnipotence that believes that we can step outside constraints and be who we want to be. They are an example of how we betray our best intentions. Posthumanist theories challenge our omnipotence and yet believing that we can overcome representationalist and human centred practices relies on some sense of omnipotence.

The movements towards the new speak to me of a wish for a sharp new beginning that requires certain (very human) policing practices for fashioning ourselves according to posthumanism. For instance, Lennon (2017) speaks of the strength of the resistance that she found as an academic for using reflexivity whilst also embracing Barad’s diffraction. Surely if she is using diffraction, she cannot still be using reflexivity. Strom (2018) highlights the orthodoxy that she has encountered when using Deleuze’s concepts in conjunction with more traditional academic practices for thinking about teaching. She has been repeatedly told: “that is not very Deleuzian!” in what she argues is an exclusionary mechanism that reproduces what Deleuze is criticising. Namely, this policing prevents Deleuze’s concepts from being used – put to work – in different contexts to open up what they can produce. The policing practices enact an elitism and academicism that is contrary to Deleuzian thinking.

I am not advocating for carelessly mixing concepts/methodologies from different ontologies. St Pierre (2016) has developed the risks of doing so. However, a purist approach is not required. Following a diffractive methodology, new and generative concepts and methodologies can be produced by carefully exploring what different bodies of knowledge can do to each other – Barad’s (2007) use of quantum physics and poststructuralism being a clear example. Furthermore, I contend that the aim for consistency – necessary for good scholarship – cannot
be straightforward. I think that these policing practices paradoxically materialise a sovereign subjectivity that aims to shape itself and others to be posthumanist (thus, becoming inconsistent).

Stengers (2008), drawing on Latour, addresses how the gesture of proposing a new grand shift away from modern dualisms actually reproduces the same modern gesture:

Latourian moderns easily include those who call themselves “post-moderns”, and more generally all the “post-x”, which have flourished in the academy, each producing a new version of the “great divide”, making it even stronger, eventually thriving, even, on criticisms of it. (p. 40)

Spivak (1997), drawing on Derrida, makes the point that it is important to assume that we are within metaphysics even when we put it under a critical gaze. To think that the critical gaze hales the end of metaphysics would reproduce a metaphysical way of thinking that dreams of full closure.

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. (Derrida, 1997, p. 24)

This last point is critical to what I argue in this paper. The lack of consideration for how in spite of our best intentions we enact what we attempt to eschew can lead us to be far more trapped by what we think we are avoiding.

The gesture of moving on from certain “older” concepts or practices to posthumanist alternatives (e.g. reflexivity to diffraction) paradoxically assumes the possibility of a sovereign intentionality that directs our practices to greater aims. “We should move on because we know better.” However, if the subject is always produced in assemblages, then we would understand our practices, conceptualisations and ways of relating as products that shift in different assemblages and not as coming from a sovereign intentionality. I cannot rely on my intentions to be posthumanist. I cannot simply assert my identity as, say, relational and performative, and then expect that all my conceptualisations and practices will adhere to that identity.

Acknowledging that we constantly reproduce ways of relating that go well beyond our intentions, requires a continuous interrogation of our ways of relating in a practice that I call performative meta-reflexivity (Serra Undurraga, 2021). To practice meta-reflexivity comes from the acknowledgement that regardless of our theoretical ascriptions and best intentions we find ourselves relating to ourselves, others, texts and the world in different, unexpected and/or contradictory ways as part of different assemblages. Furthermore, it comes from the realisation that these ways of relating produce things (including ourselves) in ways that escape our intentions. This is why I emphasise the need to iteratively ask ourselves: how am I relating now and what is that producing?

In what follows I elaborate my conceptualisation of reflexivity and meta-reflexivity to then use them as tools to explore how the ways of relating that we enact are far more complex and contradictory than what would be a straightforward reproduction of the tenants of our favourite theories. We are bound to betray our best intentions. I explore my psychotherapeutic practice, my teaching and supervising, Barad’s (2007) conceptualisation of diffraction against reflexivity, and the production of this very text as examples of this betrayal. I further articulate how the purpose of the meta-reflexive practice that I propose is not simply to police ourselves and others to be consistent but to enable more response-ability (Haraway, 2016), openness and curiosity by bringing attention to the ways of relating that we unwittingly reproduce and to what they might generate.

**Diffractive reflexivity**

Barad (2007) argues that reflexivity rests on representationalism. She puts forward that reflexivity does not acknowledge that in the practices of knowing, including knowing ourselves, we are
actually producing something, becoming with the world. Reflexivity assumes a previously formed subject that then engages in a reflexive process, accounting for itself. This is why she proposes diffraction as a better alternative. In response, Pillow (2015) argues that there are many ways of thinking about and practising reflexivity, and diffraction could be understood within a certain kind of reflexivity. Pillow (2003) contends that the conceptualisation of reflexivity is tied to the definition of subjectivity, thereby we have different conceptualisations of reflexivity in relation to how we understand subjectivity. I use a posthumanist conceptualisation of subjectivity to reconceptualise reflexivity rather than to discard it.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) articulate:

We can no longer even speak of distinct machines, only of types of interpenetrating multiplicities that at any given moment form a single machinic assemblage, the faceless figure of the libido. Each of us is caught up in an assemblage of this kind, and we reproduce its statements when we think we are speaking in our own name; or rather we speak in our own name when we produce its statement. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 36)

It is not only that subjectivity gets decentred, but that subjectivity and one’s sense of identity are produced within this decentring. The last phrase in the quote above provokes me to think that our everyday experiences of continuity and identity, our ways of being aware of ourselves, are enabled – rather than just decentred – by the assemblage of different forces.

I think this conceptualisation creates scope to think about making sense of oneself not as an intentional or sovereign action but as a production of a whole assemblage. When “I” try to articulate what I am experiencing now, when I am reflexive about my experience, this “I” and this “experience” are produced through a whole assemblage, material and discursive, that produces me and the world in a particular way. For example, let’s think about the following statement: “I feel the need to publish this paper because I want to put my work out there and have an impact”. As I developed elsewhere (Serra Undurraga, 2020), I can understand this as a particular way of relating to myself, others, and my work; thus, as a particular kind of reflexivity that emerges in a particular configuration. An assemblage of cultural notions of academic productivity, the institutional practices of my University, publishing procedures, and so on are folded in (Deleuze, 2006) enabling this particular way of relating to myself. To stress the point, it is the assemblage – and not an “individual” intention alone – what enables any particular reflexivity. Furthermore, this reflexivity, or way of making sense of myself, works as an interpretative apparatus (Barad, 2007) that draws the boundaries that produce me as a type of academic subject that privileges publishing, the paper as a product with a mission, the readers as my possibility and hope for my work to generate something. A different assemblage would produce another reflexivity with different productions.

According to Deleuze’s (2006) work on Foucault, what seems stabilised as a bounded subjectivity, with an inside and an outside, is produced in folding movements. The outside, as the social terrain of power, folds in to create an inside – subjectivities – that are the inside of the outside in a process of continuous folding. The outside here is what is “outside” a subjectivity but always producing this subjectivity. Thus, this subjectivity is always liable to be transformed by the outside. The folding movements are enacted through ways of relating to oneself that are never apart from the power relations that instate them in the first place. “Recuperated by power-relations and relations of knowledge, the relation to oneself is continually re-born, elsewhere and otherwise.” (Deleuze, 2006, p. 104)

Rose (1996) argues that “the ways in which humans ‘give meaning to experience’ have their own history” (p. 25). Reflexivity is not simply being aware of our experience because the different ways in which we can relate to ourselves are also producing what appears to be a pre-existent experience. Drawing on Deleuze, Rose thinks about the folding movements as ways of relating to ourselves that are generative of the selves that we think we essentially are:
If, today, we live out our lives as psychological subjects who are the origins of our actions, feel obliged to posit ourselves as subjects with a certain desiring ontology, a will to be, it is on account of the ways in which particular relations of the exterior have been invaginated, folded, to form an inside to which it appears an outside must always make reference. (Rose, 1996, p. 188)

Our ways of relating to ourselves, of being reflexive about ourselves, and the subjectivity that is then produced does not have to do with an essential interior but is the product of a configuration of forces. “This singularized and folded inside is thus inevitably stabilized, not in relation to a domain of psychological processes, but in relation to a configuration of forces, bodies, buildings, techniques that hold it in place.” (Rose, 1996, p. 188)

My conceptualisation of reflexivities as affective ways of relating that produce (Serra Undurraga, 2020) or as I called it later diffractive reflexivity (Serra Undurraga, 2021) refers to this continuous and unintentional process of folding. When making sense of ourselves, “we” relate to “ourselves” in particular ways—not sovereignly but as part of an assemblage – producing “ourselves” in that reflexive folding. The scare quotes around “we” and “ourselves” are there because we do not precede this reflexive folding but are produced by it.

Let me give you another example. After an intense experiential group session with counseling students, I say: “I struggled to hold in mind the students”. In that moment of reflectively articulating my experience, an assemblage of psychotherapeutic theories, institutional practices, relationships with colleagues and students, ways in which significant others have related to me, the physical space and distribution of the room, my affective experience, and many other factors that escape my current awareness are collaborating to enact this particular reflexivity or way of relating to myself where I put myself as a place of holding for others, as needing to have an individual capacity for holding, and so on. Crucially, my commitment to a relational ontology is, arguably, betrayed at the moment that I relate to myself and my students in that way. This particular reflexivity enacts an agential cut (Barad, 2007) – that is, draws the boundaries – that produces me as a “professional that needs to hold others” and the students as “subjects that need holding”. Do I consider this generative? For whom? In what ways? How could it be articulated differently? These are some of the questions that performative meta-reflexivity opens.

**Performative meta-reflexivity**

With this conceptualisation of reflexivity as a constant and unintentional process of relating the practice that I propose (Serra Undurraga, 2021) cannot be the traditional reflexive questioning of our assumptions, motives, intentions, experiences, as if there were a bounded and previously formed self to be reflexive about. Instead, what I propose is what I call performative meta-reflexivity. This is the practice of questioning how we are – unwittingly and as part of assemblages – relating to ourselves/others/texts/the world; what these ways of relating are producing; whether we consider these productions generative, for whom/what, at what costs; and finally, what alternative assemblages and ways of relating could produce.

The distinction between diffractive reflexivity and performative meta-reflexivity could be considered akin to Finlay and Gough’s (2003) continuum between reflexivity – involving “a more immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness” (p. ix) – and reflection – considering “something after the event” (p. ix). I do not use this distinction because I argue that there is no moment of standing back and reflecting that is not already a way of relating and a productive action. However, performative meta-reflexivity, indeed, facilitates a movement of standing back to think about what is happening or has happened and it is in itself a way of relating that produces.

I argue that meta-reflexivity contributes something crucial (i.e. the gesture of looking back at and questioning our ways of engaging) that would be lost if we were to eschew reflexive practices (rather than re-conceptualising them). Derrida (1978) writes about reading and making
What I want to emphasize is simply that the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually amounts to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers in a certain way” (p. 288). In this text, I propose to use reflexivity and meta-reflexivity in a certain way.

Performative meta-reflexivity is performative because it assumes that the ways in which one relates are the ways that constantly produce the reflexive self and its world. It is also performative because it does not attempt to give the final picture about what is “really” happening. Using Barad’s (2007) critique of reflexivity, performative meta-reflexivity is useful as a conceptual tool because of what it can do, what it can enable, rather than in terms of offering objective answers. As mentioned, performative meta-reflexivity is also a way of relating that produces.

Stengers (2008) criticises reflexivity as giving general responses and not attending to particular encounters. The meta-reflexivity that I propose is precisely about considering particular entanglements that are local and processual. It is not about general questions of who I am, what my assumptions are, etc. as if there were a single and decontextualised answer for this. It is about considering what is happening in a particular assemblage. It is to ask how am I relating to myself/others/texts/the world in this configuration? Assuming that I cannot control and that I do not already know how I am doing it.

Performative meta-reflexivity can be useful precisely because it introduces a question into the otherwise too easy assumption that we know how we are relating because of the theories that we adhere to. If I have a relational perspective, I may assume that I will relate in relational ways as if I could just follow from my best intentions that are grounded in my cutting-edge theories. Instead, using meta-reflexive questioning requires me to stay with the sometimes embarrassing, contradictory, troubling, constraining and enabling fact that at any given moment I am relating in ways that are very distant from my best intentions. I am not assuming that I can wilfully stop relating to myself in, say, essentialist ways when part of certain assemblages. Instead, I am acknowledging that I relate to myself in ways that go well beyond my intentions and I endeavour to question the ways of relating that I might be unwittingly reproducing.

To be clear, performative meta-reflexivity directs the attention to the local emergence of particular ways of relating that cannot be simply accounted for by stating our assumptions, theoretical ascriptions, social background, intentions and so on as if they were the starting point or foundation of our thinking and acting. Meta-reflexivity is not asking us to make explicit, say, our unacknowledged assumptions as if they were established and not continuously recreated in intra-actions. Precisely the fact that our ways of relating shift depending on different assemblages implies that our ontoepistemological assumptions also change and are continuously recreated.

An example might help to clarify my argument. In my psychotherapeutic practice, I think of myself as “relational”. Following this, I assume that emotional responses are emerging in context and relationships and cannot be understood outside of this (Gendlin, 1968; Stolorow, 2005). Performative meta-reflexivity does not ask me to state: “I have a relational perspective underpinning my clinical practice” and nothing more. Instead, it asks me: how am I relating in this very moment? It is not about set positions, it is not about stating or making explicit assumptions and values but about situated processes. Performative meta-reflexivity asks us to acknowledge that what takes us to relate in certain ways goes beyond our control and best intentions. When I ask myself in concrete interactions with clients: How am I relating to the client now? I have found myself relating in ways that are far from “relational”. For example, I have found myself thinking of a client’s reluctance to bring in their vulnerability as if it was something apart from our current way of relating. I do not practice this meta-reflexive exercise to judge myself or to police myself to be consistent with my favourite theories. It is not an attempt at purism but a more pragmatic questioning: what is this way of relating doing now? It requires me to embrace my lack of control and my fallibility. It invites me to be curious about how I am actually relating, what has made that way of relating possible and what that way of relating is producing. This
meta-reflexive questioning helps me to be accountable, response-able for what these ways of relating might generate. It makes evident that there can be alternative ways of relating and producing and that different assemblages would impact how we make sense and thus on how we produce and are produced. In an important sense, this practice is more radically relational because it honours that I am in assemblage and not a direct product of my intentions. In contrast, my very intentions, assumptions, etc. emerge in assemblage.

**Betraying our best intentions**

The idea that our intentions (based on our beliefs, ethos, theoretical commitments, and so on) direct our actions is wedded to the idea of a bounded and sovereign subjectivity. Following this logic, we have a subjectivity with pre-formed intentions that can be sovereignly acted on and can be transparently accessed. However, thinking about the production of subjectivity as ways of relating to ourselves that are constantly actualised in particular assemblages requires to re-think the very notion of intentionality and agency. It is my perspective that our intentions are produced in these folding movements rather than underlying a self.

When I say that intentions, like everything, are produced in assemblages I mean that they come to take shape, to be produced, in particular intra-active assemblages. This is not only to say, as Bennett (2010) does, that human intentions are always part of a greater assemblage; that they are part of the mix. This use of the concept of assemblage as a composition or mosaic of different units that are at the same time composed of simpler units is not consistent with a relational ontology. It conceptualises human intentions as if they were already formed things. In contrast, following Barad (2007) intentions and agency and thus response-ability and accountability do not come down to a bounded person but to particular intra-actions and the re-arrangements that they produce. “Crucially, agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. It cannot be designated as an attribute of subjects or objects (as they do not pre-exist as such)” (Barad, 2007, p. 178).

Barad (2007) stresses how intentions are produced through an example. Frayn’s play called Copenhagen develops the debate around Heisenberg’s intentions to help produce a German atomic bomb. Barad notices how the play assumes that Heisenberg’s intentions are something there to be revealed. However, following Bohr, an intentional state of mind can only exist and be meaningful in relation to particular material conditions.

How do “human intentions”, “agency”, let alone “humans” get to be produced? Following Rose’s (1996) ontology of folding subjectivities, intentions are produced and not previous units. My point is that intentions cannot be used as a foundation coming from a bounded subjectivity. Our intentions have an impact, for sure, but they are (like everything) produced/productive in assemblage and we cannot rely on them as the basis of our response-ability. Fears about a lack of accountability can appear in this intersection as we tend to think about it in individual and intentional terms: assuming we are accountable for the effects of our actions if we intended to do what we did.

How do I (as a folding subjectivity in assemblage) can be accountable for what I produce without resorting to a bounded and intentional subjectivity behind my actions? I think it is important to divorce intentions from response-ability and accountability. Regardless of the intentions that we might have, we, as part of assemblages, do collaborate in producing realities – including ourselves and our intentions. Performative meta-reflexivity questions how we find ourselves relating and what that is producing (not what our intentions are) precisely because the basis of our actions, feelings and thoughts are ways of relating that might wildly differ from our best intentions (that are also continuously produced). For example, I might intend to facilitate research supervisees to develop new ways of thinking and yet find their work sitting comfortably close to my way of thinking. My ability to respond to this situation would be enhanced if I
consider the ways of relating I find myself enacting (as part of particular assemblages) and what they help to produce (including producing myself as a supervisor with good intentions).

Performative meta-reflexivity strengthens our ability to respond because (1) When I ask how I am relating and what that is helping to produce, I bring forth the assemblage that allows these ways of relating to emerge. This enables me to think about possible changes in the whole assemblage and not in my subjectivity alone. With the previous example, I might think about how institutionalised supervisory practices facilitate particular supervisor-student relational dynamics and I might want to challenge these practices. (2) Using performative meta-reflexivity I make visible the ways of relating that I enact (beyond my best intentions) and thus I open the possibility of questioning them. And (3) This practice forces me to acknowledge that everything that I find myself enacting helps to further produce me and the world. It makes me responsible because I cannot sustain the illusion that I am holding the world at a distance (Barad, 2007).

An example: let’s move on from reflexivity to diffraction

In this section, I will use performative meta-reflexivity to interrogate the ways of relating that Barad (2007) enacts when theorising diffraction in opposition to reflexivity. Barad speaks of exteriority within stressing how there are no absolute boundaries that differentiate one thing from the other. There is nothing that is absolutely exterior to anything else, all boundaries and the sense of exteriority (and interiority) that they create are intra-actively produced. Diffraction should not assume anything as essential or fixed but wonder about the differentiations produced and the effects that they have:

Diffraction does not fix what is the object and what is the subject in advance, and so, unlike methods of reading one text or set of ideas against another where one set serves as a fixed frame of reference, diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how these exclusions matter. (Barad, 2007, p. 30)

However, whilst she affirms this, in chapter two of the same book she also makes a comparison table between reflection (with reflexivity as its methodology) and diffraction (Barad, 2007, pp. 89–90). I argue that the very technology of a comparison table lends itself to read diffraction against reflection and reflexivity. Reflexivity is representationalist, reflexivity does not do anything more than mirror mirroring, reflexivity assumes entities rather than attending to their entanglement and relational production. Diffraction offers the solution to these difficulties. You should use diffraction, not reflexivity, if you want to be consistent with a relational ontoepistemology. Using performative meta-reflexivity, she relates to the concept of reflexivity as a discrete category already known that needs to be overcome and she relates to the concept of diffraction as a solution-product already formed.

In a footnote of a later text, Barad (2014, pp. 184–185) comes back to the table that divides reflection and diffraction and invites us not to read it dichotomously. She mentions how these practices often overlap. Barad argues that the line in the comparison table dividing both concepts is a cutting-together-apart and not a discrete differentiation. However, I consider that beyond the best intentions of the author, other forces in assemblage (the technology of the table, the rhetoric of progression to diffraction, the pervasiveness of dualistic thinking, Barad’s unwitting way of relating to the concept of reflexivity, and so on) have gained momentum in informing several authors that propose to move from reflexivity to diffraction (see Davies, 2014; Davies & Gannon, 2012; Gale & Wyatt, 2017; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). One instead of the other, one superior to the other.

Barad’s (2007) theory aims to make a profound shift in our ways of conceptualising. She comments on the pervasive force that drags us back to more humanist conceptualisations. She asserts that poststructuralism, by the hands of Foucault and Butler, tries to go against this force but nonetheless is unsuccessful in its attempt:
Each of these powerful attempts rockets our cultural imaginary out of a well-worn stable orbit. But ultimately the power of these vigorous interventions is insufficient to fully extricate these theories from the seductive nucleus that binds them, and it becomes clear that each has once again been caught in some other orbit around the same nucleus. (Barad, 2007, p. 135)

She recognises the revolutionary potential of these theories but underscores that they nevertheless remain orbiting around the same humanistic nucleus. She affirms that a different operation is required: “What is needed is a rigorous simultaneous challenge to all components of this gripping long-range force” (Barad, 2007, p. 135). Reading this sentence, I get a sense of a, maybe excessive, enthusiasm. How are we/is she to do that? I feel an absolutist overpowering tone: to have a rigorous and simultaneous challenge to all components. Is this not a new centre? Is this not a hope similar in form to the ones that characterise the illustration? Meta-reflexively, she is relating to her conceptualisations as powerful tools that might grant a quantum leap. There is an implicit rhetoric of progression and development that makes me feel uneasy. Meta-reflexively, I feel that I am asked to follow Barad’s theory, especially her conceptualisation of diffraction, as a new “product” that has the ultimate answer to leave behind humanistic conceptualisations. I think that this way of relating to the concepts might close down and fix thought, thus, paradoxically, betraying itself. It is a way of relating with a high level of self-certainty that precisely militates against the openness and movement that diffraction argues for.

Derrida (1978) contends that inevitably we draw on the very foundations that we work to dismantle. The break is not a clean or sharp break. In contrast, to criticise the system that we have been brought up in, we cannot but use – at least to some extent – the concepts, the tools and the practices that have produced us as subjects:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (Derrida, 1978, pp. 280–281)

This does not justify, for Derrida (1978), an uncritical use of the concepts or a giving up in the attempts to critique. Instead, we can relate to this necessity of using the concepts we criticise in different ways. A better way of relating to them is through thinking critically about how we are still using what we denounce. “The quality and fecundity of a discourse are perhaps measured by the critical rigor with which this relation to the history of metaphysics and to inherited concepts is thought” (Derrida, 1978, p. 282). Spivak (1997) argues that the answer that Derrida offers to this is to conserve the concepts but to use them denouncing their limits. Derrida invites us to use the concepts that we criticise but under erasure, that is, embracing both our criticism of them and the fact that we cannot stop using them. This notion invites us to acknowledge how the concepts and practices that we eschew still have a hold on us.

Derrida is proposing a particular way of relating to the concepts, a way that I find very generative. If we were to relate to new concepts in a way in which we think of them as completely independent from what they criticise and as the only possibility appealing to us, then we would relate to them as the one truth and we would fall prey to the same ways that we are criticising. For example, I think that diffraction is not free from the criticisms that it makes. I argue that diffraction is helpful to enable a more relational and processual thinking and it has made use of a dichotomy to assert itself.

Barad’s (2007) way of relating to her conceptualisations is not uniform. For instance, she writes in a footnote: “It would be surprising if my own attempt at making a successful ionizing “quantum leap” out of the humanist-representationalist orbit doesn’t fall prey to the same pull, snagged by some component or another, so great is this force” (Barad, 2007, p. 428). Here there is an acknowledgement of other forces beyond the will of an author (that is also a production) to push for a quantum leap. In consonance with Barad’s (2007) material-discursive arguments, I would say that it is not only the humanist-representationalist orbit as an abstract force but
different concrete material-discursive practices – as, say, editorial practices to make convincing arguments – that pull towards enacting ways of relating in conflict with a relational ontoepistemology.

As I have argued, the ways in which we relate to ourselves/others/texts/the world are the product of the assemblage of diverse forces. It is not only what we intend to do (because of our theoretical commitments) but also how we relate when we are part of, say, the conference assemblage, the journal assemblage. For example, Pillow (2015) points out how very often the authors speaking about diffraction are in a concretely separated, white, and privileged space in journals and conferences, preventing rich and complex conversations with other groups of scholars and theories. Thus, even if there is a theoretical embrace of multiplicity and difference, interacting with the conference space we might reproduce more homogenous and exclusionary ways of relating against our best intentions.

When reading Barad’s 2007 text, one of the ways in which I found myself relating to it was as if I needed to rebel from a way of thinking that is imposed on me. This contributed to generating part of the text you are reading now where I relate to Barad’s 2007 text attempting to denounce how she also reproduces what she criticises. However, as I will develop in the next section, what I intend to do with meta-reflexivity is not to police arguments in their consistency so that we stop betraying our best intentions (as if that were possible!). Instead, I hope that performative meta-reflexivity helps us to bring our attention to how our ways of relating are always more complex than what we intend. Furthermore, I hope to enable response-ability in addressing the force that these ways of relating can generate. This hope is my intention that is certainly betrayed in this very text in ways that go beyond my grasp.

Is it about stopping betraying our best intentions?

If we are not discrete subjects with internal intentions that then are actualised but we are produced in folding movements from the assemblages that constitute us, we are bound to betray our best intentions. Different ways of relating emerge from different assemblages that will not necessarily be consistent with our stated intentions (that are also a folding product). Moreover, with Derrida (1978), I think that language itself (as part of our assemblages) has the force to make us betray our best intentions and draw on and reproduce the very concepts and practices that we are criticising.

There is a distinction between the content level of what it is argued – that can be consistent with our best intentions – and the level of the ways of relating that are enacted. Performative meta-reflexivity points at this second level. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue that sometimes, concepts like the “multiple” are put forward with plenty of enthusiasm but this is far from sufficient to enact them. That is why they affirm that one has to make the concepts, not only to announce them. I understand this as a way of relating to the concepts that performs what it announces: If I announce tentativeness, I need also to make my inquiry tentative, I need to actually relate to the concept in a tentative way. Nonetheless, in affirming tentativeness, I am necessarily not tentative.

Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between announcing and making highlights for me how while we might think that we are thinking/feeling/doing something we might be relating to ourselves/others/texts in other ways that we are not aware of. We announce something but we do otherwise. This is where meta-reflexivity is called forth. This meta-reflexive work has to do with thinking about how we are relating to ourselves/our work/concepts/etc. and not only to what we are putting forward in terms of content: how we make our concepts, not just how we announce them. I stay not only with what the texts explicitly embrace but I meta-reflexively question the ways of relating that they enact and what these ways produce.
Deleuze and Guattari (1987) interrogate themselves, questioning if it can be said that they are bringing new dualisms in opposing *rhizomes* to *trees* and *maps* to *traces*. In articulating an answer to that, they put forward that these concepts are not oppositions, they are not neatly separated. “There are knots of arborescence in rhizomes, and rhizomatic offshoots in roots” (p. 20). They assert that it does happen that the rhizome gets rooted, that we end up reproducing exactly what we wanted to dismantle, that the map becomes trace. Then, they argue, what needs to be done is to bring the closed structures back again into the map, back into the rhizome. “It is a question of method: the tracing should always be put back on the map” (p. 13). There is a sense of needing to continuously work to *detranscendentalise* what has been coded and taken.

We invoke one dualism only in order to challenge another. We employ a dualism of models only in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models. Each time, mental correctives are necessary to undo the dualisms we had no wish to construct but through which we pass. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 20)

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write about how we unavoidably construct dualisms even when we actively do not want to, and we need to work again at undoing them and in this endeavour, we produce yet another one, “the furniture we are forever rearranging.” (p. 21)

Considering the propositions of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Derrida (1978, 1997), there is a need to acknowledge the inevitability of betraying our best intentions and reproducing what we are criticising. Furthermore, there is no “pure” conceptualisation that can move away for good from what is criticised. I argue that performative meta-reflexivity is useful here for thinking about what ways of relating we are more or less unwittingly reproducing.

Here it seems that I am proposing to use meta-reflexivity to be able to *make* the concepts and not only announce them. But, can we *make* our concepts? Can we stop betraying our best intentions? What is the purpose of this performative meta-reflexivity? Is it a policing practice that would help me to rectify my ways of relating so that I am consistent and actually do what I state?

Meta-reflexivity helps to identify the ways of relating that I am unwittingly reproducing so that I am able to question them, to think about what they are producing, to shift to a different way of relating, and so on. The gesture of “reflecting back” to myself using the meta-reflexive questioning is needed to avoid becoming trapped in reproducing ways of relating that might be detrimental because of what they produce in particular contexts. Meta-reflexivity is useful to become more response-able for the ways of relating that betray our best intentions.

Importantly, these ways of relating that betray our best intentions are unavoidable, needed and can be generative. There is no promised land free from them. To question, with meta-reflexivity, how I am relating, what assemblage is facilitating that and what that way of relating is producing – without assuming that I should be relating in particular ways – opens more/new possibilities. In local assemblages, the productions of different ways of relating can be useful in unexpected ways. This meta-reflexive practice grants more space for different ways of relating without closing down the inquiry to pre-set models that we ought to follow.

I try to open an invitation to not assume that we already know which ways of relating we ought to be practising. Furthermore, I try to open an invitation to not assume that we already know the possible ways in which we can relate. Meta-reflexivity is an invitation to open up ourselves to find ourselves relating in surprising ways. With Despret (2008), it is an incitement to explore what/who we might become in certain encounters.

Coming back to my example with Barad, when I meta-reflexively question Barad’s ways of relating to her conceptualisations, am I assuming that betraying her best intentions is something that should be rectified? Diffraction needed to eschew reflection to take shape as a concept and tool. Then, what meta-reflexivity would contribute to this example? It would help to continue thinking about diffraction and reflexivity without closing down the inquiry. I suggest that performative meta-reflexivity forces us to acknowledge that we enact ways of relating that betray our intentions, facilitating that we become more curious about ourselves, others, different theories and methodologies, opening up space for nuances, contradictions and complexity. This
militates against exclusionary groupings (e.g. researchers using reflexivity or diffraction). Furthermore, it enables us to become more response-able not for our intentions but for the ways of relating that we find ourselves engaged in and what they generate.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude by using performative meta-reflexivity with this very text. How am I relating to the concept of performative meta-reflexivity in this writing? I am explicitly saying that a focus on the productions in/of particular contexts is what gives conceptualisations their situated value. However, I might be offering my notion of meta-reflexivity as a kind of one size fits all solution. I believe that my text conveys that we should all and always use meta-reflexivity and question our ways of relating, wonder about what assemblage made them possible and think about what these ways of relating are producing. This is, indeed, a way of relating that I criticise but I have reproduced. Furthermore, I realise that, implicitly, I propose to use meta-reflexivity as if it were an individual and sovereign decision – “we should use meta-reflexivity” – even when I am explicitly arguing that we cannot rely on our intentions. That is, even if I am conceptualising that our intentions emerge as part of assemblages and not from a bounded and already formed subjectivity, I still offer performative meta-reflexivity as a tool that can be chosen and applied. Realising how I betrayed my best intentions makes me open new questions: Which assemblages might enable a meta-reflexive questioning? What does meta-reflexive questioning do to particular assemblages?

The times I have used performative meta-reflexivity with this text were not the result of my decision as a bounded and sovereign author. In contrast, it was as part of particular assemblages that I have come to question how I am relating and what that is producing. For example, I found myself using performative meta-reflexivity as part of the publishing-assemblage: after having my ideas articulated in the text, with the feedback from reviewers. One of the anonymous reviewers of this text pointed out how in my citational practices I mainly draw on white scholars and invited me to use performative meta-reflexivity to question myself. Another reviewer noticed my use of literal quotes and thought that they might silence my own voice. As part of assemblages, I have indeed related to the academic field by privileging white voices even when I come from Chile, and I am continuously aware of the outrageous consequences and repercussions of colonialism. This way of relating might be further enhancing white voices to dictate what is appropriate scholarship and silence or subdue other voices including my own.

Using performative meta-reflexivity is potentially disruptive, this questioning has led me to rethink my ideas. The meta-reflexivity that I propose is not a one size fits all tool; it is useful to produce an openness in our conceptualisations, to become response-able for our unwitting ways of relating, but as a disruptive practice it might hinder the building and necessary stabilisation of concepts and practices for them to work.

Betraying our best intentions is unavoidable precisely because we are not bounded and sovereign subjectivities; meta-reflexivity is a tool that emerges from the acknowledgement that we will. It is a tool for considering how we are relating assuming that we will be surprised. It requires that we hold our intentions more lightly and are ready to see that how we relate is always more complex than what we intend. Acknowledging how we enact ways of relating that go beyond our best intentions grants the possibility of not adhering to our favourite conceptualisations as frozen truths but being open to the constant practice of questioning and re-thinking. Meta-reflexive questioning asks us to be accountable not for what we intended but for the ways of relating that we enact through the assemblages that constantly produce us. It grants us more response-ability for the worlds that we are constantly collaborating to produce, wittingly or unwittingly.
Notes

1. The use of the label “posthumanist theories” is complex. It can lead to homogenise different bodies of knowledge. This is why it is crucial to clarify and acknowledge the nuances of the term. Barad (2007) thinks of posthumanism as what does not take the distinction of human and nonhuman for granted and recognises nonhumans as relevant for naturalcultural practices. Braidotti (2019), thinks of the posthumanities as the result of the coming together of posthumanism (critique of “Man” as the privileged term) and post-anthropocentrism (critique of the exceptionalism and hierarchy of the human). Braidotti (2006) explicitly associates Deleuze with certain way of understanding the posthuman as reconfiguring the possible becoming of subjectivity with the inhuman: the subject as an assemblage. She considers that Haraway’s non-anthropocentric work resonates with Deleuze’s work. When I use the expression “posthumanism” or “posthumanist theories”, I am clustering the theories that consider the subject as an ongoing production of human and non-human forces. I consider authors like Deleuze and Guattari, Haraway and Barad are highly influential in this stream. However, the term is certainly a generalisation. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1983) do not use it. Haraway in an interview (Gane, 2006) explicates how even if she has used the term for example in the “Manifesto” has stopped using it and goes to companion species instead as she thinks that the human/posthuman lends itself to be used in evolutionary ways as moving towards a “next stage” (however, she acknowledges that many authors do not use it in that way). Later, Haraway (2016) calls herself compostist not posthumanist.

2. According to Colebrook (2002), assemblage refers to how life as a process constantly needs connections. Anything – a body, a city, a group, etc. – is the product of connections and not the other way around. That is, the connections are ontologically prior to any unit.

3. Intra-action (Barad, 2007) is a concept that stresses how relating is ontologically more fundamental than the – always temporary – units that emerge from relating.

4. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) postulate that there are three ways of thinking: one is the tree-like root-thinking, the second is the fascicular-root thinking and the third is the rhizomatic thinking. The first has a central root and grows from hierarchies and dichotomies – like a tree and its branches. The second does not have a central root but a fascicular root system but ends up reproducing a root anyway. The third, the rhizomatic, moves away from roots; it is a flat multiplicity with no hierarchy nor any fixed coding or categories. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) also offer the concepts of maps and traces. Maps are open to connections and experimentation without closing on themselves or reproducing an established explanation and tracings are closing down into a previously established idea that does not bring novelty.

5. Deterritorialisation is an important concept in Deleuze and Guattari’s work. Every kind of unit that we can think about – a concept, a body, a person, a country – needs to have been territorialised to be what it is; deterritorialisation is the possibility of this unit to become differently. “The very connective forces that allow any form of life to become what it is (territorialize) can also allow it to become what it is not (deterritorialize)” (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxii).

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