CHAPTER 8.

DOING, AND UNDOING, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: A STORY OF THEORY, METHOD, AND FAILURE

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Paired readings:

- Abraham, Stephanie, et al. "Creating a Translanguaging Space in a Bilingual Community-Based Writing Program." *International Multilingual Research Journal*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2021, pp. 211-34.

- Abraham, Stephanie. "Paradigmatic Fronteras: Troubling Available Design and Translanguaging with Sticky Literacy." *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy,* 2021.

In this chapter, I delve into a moment during a project at a community writing center that served the children of the Latinx community in South Philadelphia. Beginning at the end, I trace the theoretical failures of my Translanguaging and New Literacy Studies framework and methodological failures of ethnographically-grounded critical discourse analysis. In my musings, I ponder the location of the linguistic repertoire and the notion of available design to rethink language and literacy from something "out there" and "in there" to something waiting with potential to be made. I end with some thoughts on research failures and how failures, too, present opportunities for messy research that can surprise and move us forward.

In this chapter, I delve into a moment during a research project when my theoretical framework and research methodology failed me. Working backward, I begin this story on the last day of a bilingual poetry writing workshop I had been teaching at a community writing center in South Philadelphia.

As part of a larger research project on the translingual writing practices of Latinx emergent bilinguals, this workshop was one among many writing workshops

I taught at the center that was meant to promote the bilingualism and biliteracy of these children. At the end of the workshop, the children and I decided to host a poetry gallery, where their family members and the wider community were invited to the center to view the poesía bilingüe the children had written during the workshop. The children were prolific poets, writing in a variety of bilingual poetry genres such as shape poems, found poems, and parallel poems. On the day of the gallery, I brought in a variety of materials to help the children hang and display their poetry: tape, glue, and mounting putty (see Figure 8.1).

After the children had finished arranging their poetry on the wall (see Figure 8.2), some of them roamed about the center until the gallery started. Left on the circular worktables were the remaining materials, and two of the children started to play with the mounting putty.

They rolled the putty out. They rolled the putty in. Soon the putty formed into various objects and characters. One child shouted, "Hey, I made a snowman!" As the children's play progressed, more objects formed and emerged. They, too, began to travel around the room, and we traveled with them. Held up toward the sky with proclamations of their creations, La Virgen (see Figure 8.3) appeared, gathering us around her.

And one little sculpture was even attached to the wall alongside the other displayed poetry, becoming poetry, too (see Figure 8.4).
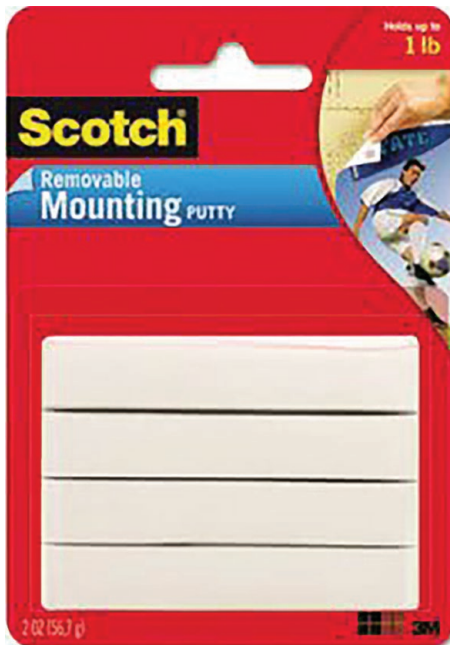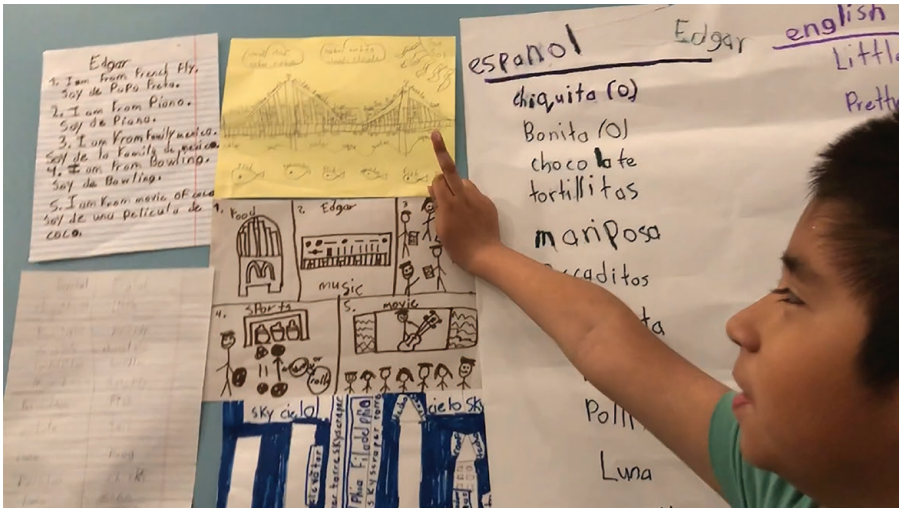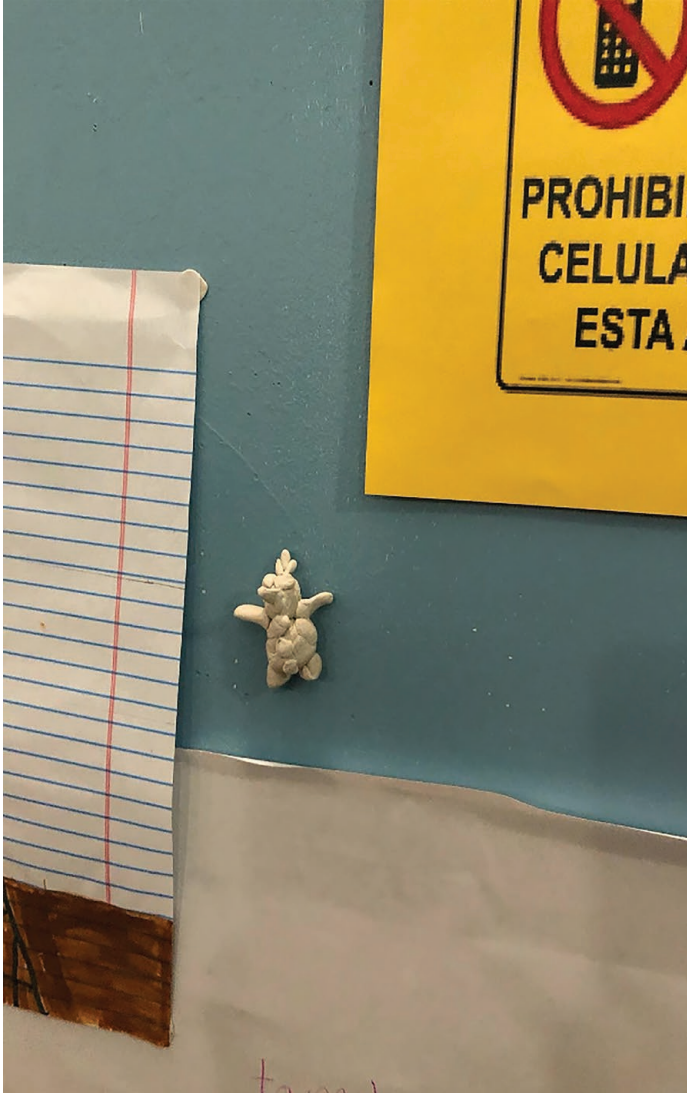

Figure 8.1. Mounting Putty

Figure 8.2. A Display of One Child's Poetry

Figure 8.3. La Virgen

Figure 8.4. Putty Becomes Poetry

METHODOLOGICAL UNDOING

It's here my methodological undoing began, a moment of qualitative research unbecoming. It was an undoing of the ways, both the theory and method, I used to make sense of literacy and language, and my expectations and intents of what language and literacy should and could become were being undone.

I designed the workshops using my pedagogical framework of translanguaging and genre-based writing. These frameworks fueled intent and design as to what poetry should look like and become by the end of the writing workshop. For instance, I had planned for the children to read examples of bilingual poetry published by Francisco Alarcón and Jane Medina. Then, inspired by these mentor texts, they would craft their own versions of these bilingual poems, all the while pulling from their entire linguistic repertoire. However, my pedagogical design was interrupted and even refused by the children as this putty also began to *feel* poetic. As the children animated the putty, or the putty animated them, soon it also became attached, literally, to the walls, alongside the other more expected poetry.

So, what did this mean for me methodologically? How could I capture literacy and language given its emergent and slippery state? And here is where method left me. I could not rely on my accustomed ethnographic methods to *collect* this language and literacy data, then transcribe it, and then analyze it with the tools of critical discourse analysis. So, I turned to the ideas circulating in the "post human" turn in language and literacy studies (Kuby, Spector, and Thiel), which is exploring how language and literacy studies can decenter the human as the sole actor in a literacy act, pushing to consider the material workings of matter with the human. Moreover, the notions of the "post" method and the "post" qualitative were also fueling this inquiry, and it's here the work of Betty St. Pierre and her pedagogically and methodologically frustrating question pushed me forward. What would post-qualitative research look like? She used to always ask. She never gave an answer, but only continued to ask the question.

THE ORIGINAL RESEARCH PROJECT

This community writing center sits amidst vegetable stalls and restaurants in South Philly's Italian Market. It is one location among several sites of this community writing organization, founded in 2013 specifically to serve the diverse Latinx community of South Philly. The center hosts a variety of free educational programming, including an afterschool writing program for children between the ages of six and seventeen, weekend writing workshops, and summer writing camps. In 2015, I was a new assistant professor at Rowan University without any institutional relationships to conduct research. Because of my interest in community language and literacy practices, I approached the center's director about a research partnership, who enthusiastically replied to my request with, "Finally! Someone wants to research us." Thus beginning an ongoing relationship with the center.

Initially, in our partnership, I drew upon several qualitative methodologies to shape the research design including linguistic ethnography (Creese), participatory research (Kinloch, Larson, Orellana, and Lewis), and critical discourse

analysis (Rogers). Theoretically, I turned to Translanguaging Studies (Li Wei), the New Literacy Studies (Gee), and genre-based writing pedagogies (Hyland) to create and teach a series of bilingual writing workshops that covered a variety of written genres and topics, including poetry, family stories, graphica, and community language mapping. I focused on understanding how the children drew upon their entire linguistic repertoire to write and create these genres. For instance, how did the children use their Spanish and English knowledge to craft bilingual poetry? My overarching research questions focused on how the children translanguaged in their speech and writing, how they responded to a translanguaging pedagogy, and how translanguaging was an act of resistance and linguistic restoration for them.

This chapter specifically focuses on the event with the mounting putty that occurred during the writing bilingual poetry workshop, which I taught on Saturdays during the spring of 2018. During this workshop, each week, the children and I read examples of different types of poems: shape poems (see Figure 8.5), found poems, and parallel poems (see Figure 8.6). Then, the children used those examples as mentor texts to inspire the creation of their own versions of these poems.
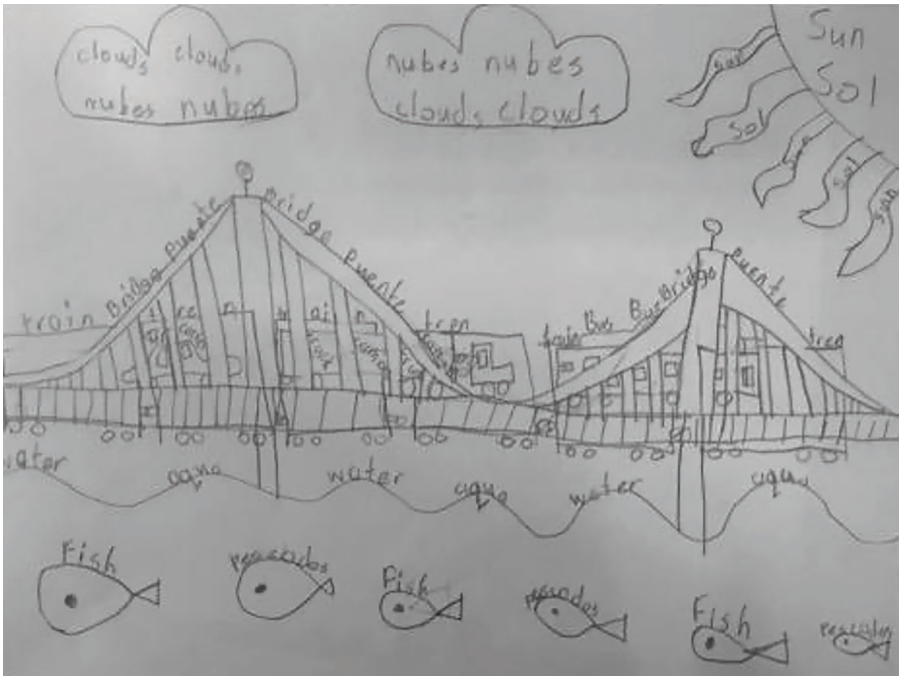
Figure 8.5. A Bilingual Shape Poem of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in Philadelphia
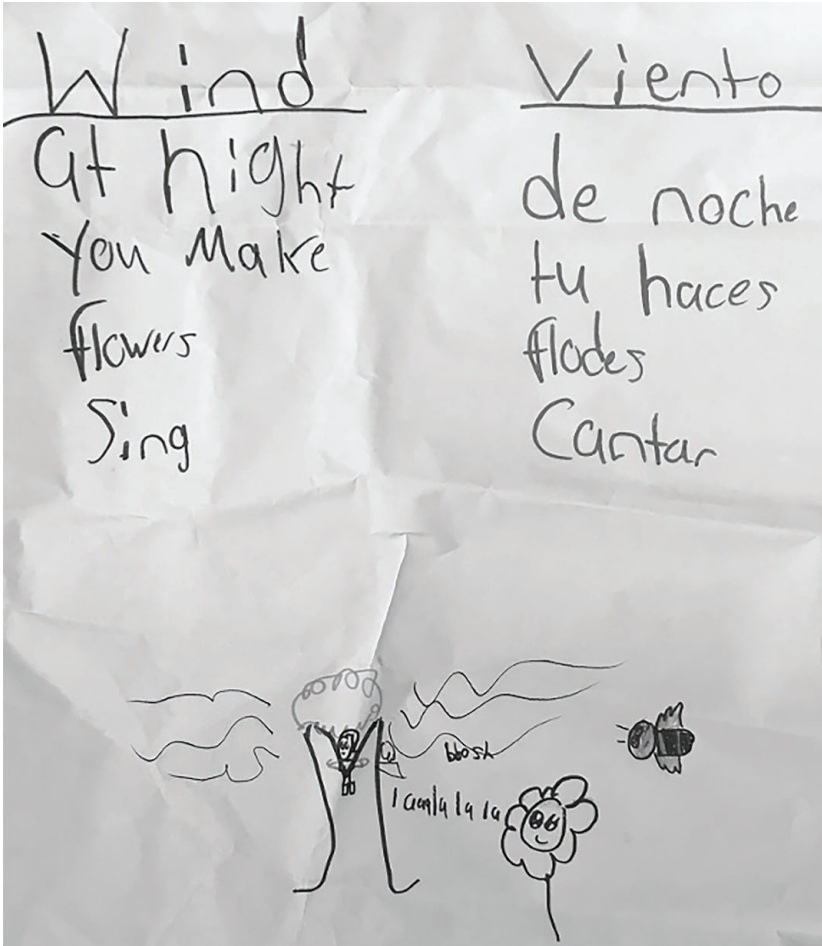
Figure 8.6. A Bilingual Parallel Poem

Undoubtedly, the children and families who attended the center had experienced linguistic and political violence. To that end, in my work at the center, I hoped my research would shape the center as a temporal escape from this violence, a space where the children could practice their languages and literacies more freely with recognition of their brilliance.

UNDOING A METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHICALLY GROUNDED CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Up until this point, I had grounded my research in the linguistic ethnographic methods of participant observation, cultural immersion, and naturalistic

interviews. As a researcher, I believed I could learn about the world and people by watching them and talking to them, and subsequently, I could share my conclusive findings through academic publications. Moreover, I located my qualitative research on the threshold of the interpretive and critical paradigms, which also shaped my assumptions as to the ontology and epistemology of the world, specifically of language and literacy.

Ontologically, I assumed language and literacy existed out there, albeit in all its messiness. Epistemologically, I assumed language and literacy could be captured through ethnographic methods and applied tools from critical discourse analysis to interpret and critique this language and literacy that I had captured. For example, I created transcripts from the audio recordings of the bilingual poetry writing workshop sessions, then I analyzed the transcripts using concepts, such as appraisal, from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Rose and Martin). For clarity, appraisal is a theory of language that examines how people use language to evaluate and construe the worth or value of things, ideas, and people. Most importantly, SFL imbues an overwhelming amount of agency upon the human and posits that the human always creates language full of intent and a defined purpose. My analysis was retroactive, and I would produce a finding after the language and literacy event had happened. Finally, more or less, this analysis was meant to be a faithful representation of what had occurred during such an event.

However, the mounting putty/into/poetry event was not something I had planned for. I had not designed a research or pedagogical project with an expected outcome of putty becoming poetry. I had not brought putty to the center that day to become part of our gallery. The putty had been full of my own intent, meant only to affix the expected and intended poetry to a wall. Moreover, because putty had seemingly nothing to do with my answerable and plausible research questions concerning translanguaging, bilingual poetry, and writing, I could have ignored the mounting putty, the snowman, and La Virgen. They weren't something I had intended to document. Yet, I decided to pay attention as putty came together "catching [us] up in something that [felt] like something" (Stewart 2).

Because theory and method are twinned, my data collection methods were also becoming undone, I could not capture this literacy and language like my other data. I could not clearly record the audio and easily transcribe it into words with line numbers and some added-on transcription techniques. St. Pierre called this "methodological enclosure," or retreating safely and comfortably to the methodologies and methods we have been taught, which enable us to "do" real research (606).

Scholars working the posthuman turn in literacy studies have attempted to decenter the humanist "human" in literacy research, rather than focus on only the acts of a human participant, they center the agency of the things, objects, and the non-human with which humans intra-act. Assemblage is one concept often put to work in literacy studies situated in the post human ontologies, or the "coming-together of heterogeneous materials (bodies, things, signs), held together in ways that might allow for durability but also for dividing up and reorganizing into new assemblages" (Ehret and Leander 6). Moreover, in Kimberly Lenters' critical instance case study of 11-year-old Nigel and his stick figure drawings, assemblage theory showed how Nigel's seemingly off-task stick figures were examples of how literacy unfolds in unpredictable ways, and rather than off-task behavior, his drawings were examples of possibility and agency. Kevin Leander's and Gail Boldt's rereading of a pedagogy of multiliteracies (NLG) showed literacy unfolded with Lee, a 10-year-old boy, and his manga; in turn, Lee's literacy defied the definition of literacy as intentional, planned, and rational, but rather his manga literacy was full of affect, spilling over into his bodily movements. Other important concepts that inform post human thinking about literacy are the rhizome, intra-action, and entanglement. Kevin Leander and Deborah Rowe used a rhizomatic analysis of a single literacy performance by three students of the book, *The Jungle*, in a secondary school to show how materiality, spatiality, and multiple resources and shifts in footing demonstrate that literacy performances go beyond mere language. Candace Kuby and Shonna Crawford used intra-action and entanglement to examine how when three second-graders studied the solar system, their literacy shifted away from alphabetic print that is passively read to "an entanglement of materials and people that call into being, in the process of becoming" (28).

Others who have been working the posthuman turn in literacy studies have also posed related questions of quandary: What do we do when print loses its privileged place in literacy studies? Likewise, I began to wonder if a snowman made out of mounting putty could also be poetry. Even though, in retrospect, it appears the children had already decided that, yes, putty could become poetry when they definitively attached it to the wall, to be openly displayed in our poetry gallery.

WHEN THEORY FAILS

I'll turn to two particular concepts within the theoretical frameworks, Available Design and the Linguistic Repertoire, to unpack the failings of my theoretical framework and the methodologizing of language and literacy.

AVAILABLE DESIGN

The first concept is Available Design, which emerged from the New Literacy Studies as a way to account for the possibilities of how literacy exists and could exist in the world (NLG). The notion of design posits an embedded intent toward a specific purpose or shape of literacy. One where literacy is and could become a recognizable part of an already existing system of designs. For example, Roblox is a human-created online gaming platform and within the platform, there exists a variety of worlds or games. Within those games, there are certain possibilities for the creation of avatars, names, and places, which are the available designs to the players.

Available design is further informed by genre theory and genre-based pedagogies, and I thought of literacy as creations and participation in a preestablished genre. Importantly, these genres already preceded us and could be appropriated by us, albeit in some new and dynamic ways, but any literacy would still be the replication of the genre and its forms and rules. Because literacy existed out there and beyond us, then, epistemologically, it could also be captured during research. Moreover, these stances also shaped how I taught literacy to the children who attended this workshop (see Figure 8.7).
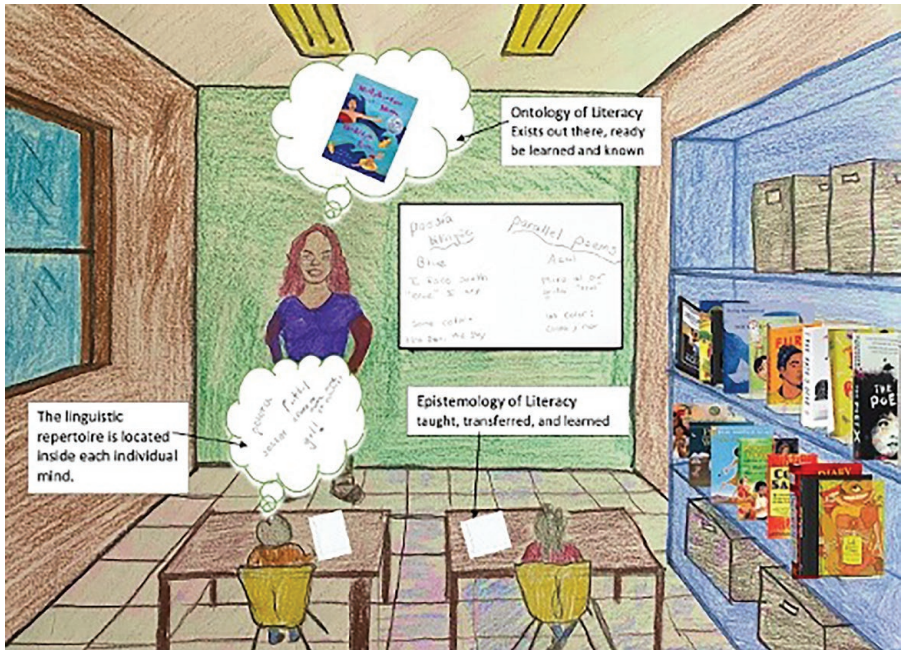

*Figure 8.7. A Comic Illustrating My Ontological and
Epistemological Stances of Language and Literacy*

Furthermore, the New Literacy Studies had troubled my print-centric definition of literacy, and I held to the idea that literacy was a socially-mediated, multi-modal meaning-making process. I knew that literacy included modes beyond the textual, such as the gestural, the aural, the oral, the tactile, and the spatial. However, admittingly, I still paid most of my scholarly and pedagogical attention to the textual mode. In other words, I paid attention to and valued print. But when putty became poetry, I wondered how could I know about literacy if no one was reading or writing anything.

The Linguistic Repertoire

I was also working the *trans* of language, pulling from translanguaging theory (Li Wei). I held to the idea that instead of humans having one or two specific languages, we have a linguistic repertoire that we use as we see fit in any given communicative context. As a researcher who turned to translanguaging theory, a critical theory of language, to explain the dynamic and vibrant language practices of young emergent bilinguals, I needed to capture spoken and written language as means of knowing about their linguistic repertoire. But my knowing of language was also slipping. How could I know anything about language if no one was saying anything? Jasmine Ulmer had already claimed that language, alone, has always been an insufficient representation of us and our things, and how we intra-act among them. So, too, I was looking to make sense of things beyond translanguaging from "language-to-language," talking and writing without so many palabras (Zapata, Kuby, and Thiel 493).

The notion of the linguistic repertoire is a critical heuristic put forward by translanguaging scholarship. It has helped to disrupt positivist and deficit notions surrounding multilinguals, particularly those who come from minoritized backgrounds. However, for the most part, the linguistic repertoire has been located solely within the cognition of the individual. More simply, our linguistic repertoire is inside our heads. At the time of this research project, I held onto this ontological belief that this linguistic repertoire was firmly located within the individual's cognition. Again, we have it; we can expand it; and we use it. Throughout the scholarship on translanguaging and translanguaging pedagogy, the linguistic repertoire is referred to as something teachers can "leverage." It is to be incorporated into classroom pedagogies and to be used; it's a place where words reside and can be retrieved from.

But during this moment between the children/mounting putty/I, just a little bit of language was used, and it wasn't clear to whose linguistic repertoire these words belonged or from whose linguistic repertoire they came from. Language felt out there, in a distributed repertoire, emerging among us, instead of

coming from just one us. When one child held up her snowman before me, I stammered, "He looks like . . . he looks like . . ." She immediately completed my sentence with, "Olaf!" As she crafted another little body, the rest of us were called around to gaze down at the new figure that had just emerged. Upon seeing it, I wondered aloud, "¿La Virgen?" (See Figure 8.8.) In response, the child only nodded. To whose linguistic repertoire did these words belong? Instead of belonging to the child or me, in our individually-possessed linguistic repertoire, they emerged among and between us. In turn, some translanguaging scholars are also pushing the linguistic repertoire out of the head and into the shared space between bodies and things (Canagarajah; Pennycook), presenting a spatialized and multi-semiotic linguistic repertoire.

Figure 8.8. La Virgen Emerged Among Us

DOING AND UNDOING RESEARCH: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FAILURES

Was this a failure or a blip in research and pedagogical design? Perhaps. Certainly, it was a departure from the research agenda, the learning outcomes, and the research questions. It was something the theories and methods I employed could not explain or capture. But failures in research are not new. Even experimental

and positivist research is hinged on the idea of replicate, fail, replicate, fail. But in qualitative research, failure feels different. It often comes with doubt as to why this project didn't work. Why couldn't we answer our research questions? Or perhaps why we weren't able to do what we had planned to do according to our research design. But maybe, a more hopeful view of failure would be to let it surprise us and reflect on our inability to make sense of something, of data, because our current theory and methods just don't know what to do with it. Yet.

In a way, all of my research projects have been failures. In an early teacher research project, I also failed to accomplish the one thing I had intended to do. Initially, I set out to conduct a Bilingual Family Stories Writing Project in my fifth-grade classroom, where I would include the "entire" linguistic repertoire of my students in a narrative writing unit. Near the end of that teacher research project, and after the children had published their final family stories, one of my most precocious students, Juan, asked to use my phone to call his dad. Although I can't remember why he needed to call his dad, I do remember, very clearly, when Juan's dad answered the phone, and he began to talk. A language that wasn't English or Spanish came out of his mouth. When the call ended, I asked Juan, "What language were you speaking?" He answered somewhat nonchalantly, "Oh, just the language of my dad." Later, I found out that Juan, who was originally from Guatemala, spoke both the Indigenous Mayan languages of his mother and father, in addition to his Spanish and English. It was then I realized I had failed to include those languages in a teacher research project intended to include the *entire* linguistic repertoire of my students. Importantly, when I tried to publish this detail in academic journals, I was asked by reviewers to delete it because it was deemed irrelevant, or it would have been just too difficult for me to have included all of Juan's languages anyways. Erase the failure and the data that didn't fit, so the findings could be neat and tidy.

So, what should we do when our research, theories, and methods have failed? One, we write about it. Two, we must also think about failure differently.

BEGINNING WITH FAILURES

When theories fail, so do methods, so when mounting putty became poetry, I could no longer hold on to my methodological approaches. While the data took on new life, I stepped back as mounting putty swung and splat. As a snowman appeared on the walls of the community center. As La Virgen se juntaba, something emerged among us that no longer fit within my research design. As putty circled the room, becoming language and literacy, a flood of ideas washed over me, mostly from my readings of the posthuman turn in literacy studies. I recalled the theoretical and methodological work that had been coming from

other scholars (Kuby, Spector, and Thiel) who were pushing the post-human turn in language and literacy studies. Concepts like affect, assemblage, and a flat ontology came to the forefront. So, I started to think about them, read about them, and then think *with* them (Jackson and Mazzei). Affect is what "sticks" together, and it caused me to take up how I felt during the literacy event and what was it they had affected me. Assemblage is the coming-together or the throwing together of humans and things, causing me to look at the new formations of a snowman and La Virgen as capable of moving, acting, and becoming. And a flat ontology reduced the distance between us, humans, and our reality, redirecting my gaze from looking out there to in there, at how we made reality happen from moment-to-moment.

Letting go of my groundings in interpretative and, gulp, the critical paradigms, I lost myself in the thoughts of the posthuman. Not only do humans matter, but the things with which we intra-act also matter, and maybe can matter more. Just as we animate things, so do things animate us. No longer was a linguistic and literate reality out there waiting for me to capture it, not waiting for me to find and analyze it. Instead, it was waiting, with potential and possibility, to be made. This also problematized my focus on only the human child and their subsequent language and writing, and my focus on only the end of their writing and not the process of it, which was already full of material intra-actions.

Soon other concepts would further undo my theory/methodology when I began to think about desire, bodies-without-organs, and the rhizome. Instead of relying on research questions, I started to ask what is being affected. What moves? I abandoned the idea of design and intent in both pedagogy and research, and I started to ask the Deleuzian and Guattarian questions of desire. Of what could become? Of what might happen?

Instead of focusing only on the actions of the humans, I looked to these tiny little bodies-without-organs forming, The Snowman and La Virgen, wondering how they had come to appear among us. Why did they move us? Why did it move me? Instead of focusing on the children's individually held linguistic repertoires, I asked how that repertoire was shared among us, instead of only within us. Instead, of linearly created poems that could be easily published with expected formats, I thought of the rhizome, splintering and poking up and out, where poetry might grow haphazardly in an unplanned trajectory. I began to linger on what language and literacy could become, instead of what it is or should be (Buchholz).

So, I had to ask of this work, if I cannot apply critical discourse analysis to this un-transcribable data, then what will I do with it? As I began to read more, Jane Bennett offered up some answers to these questions. She suggested perhaps poetry is more fitting for representing the mattering of matter, for animating

the inanimate, and for granting, or maybe letting, things have a little agency that they have always been previously denied. So, too, I decided to write poetry about putty becoming poetry during a bilingual poetry writing workshop.

Rather than capturing, enclosing, and accurately representing what had happened among us with mounting putty that day, I wondered if I could poeticize it, accompany it, and bring others into the moment. Would poetry do that? Would poetry, in its aesthetic appearance, already indicate that what was being read about this mounting putty becoming poetry wasn't a perfect or even faithful representation of exactly what had happened that day during the poetry gallery? Instead, writing poetry left what was still to be found intentionally open.

UNMETHODS: NOT COMING TO A CLOSE, BUT ANOTHER OPENING

My intent in this chapter is not to call for a new turn to posthuman thought, nor even a return to the critical; instead, it is a call to allow for more research that undoes design, theory, and methods, without tidy findings, ending with more questions than answers. Importantly, this theoretical and methodological messiness only happened because I was reading outside of my paradigmatic and methodological comforts, something I encourage all researchers to do. In turn, I'm sure many other "messy" things occurred in this research project, and during others, that I did not pay attention to. St. Pierre, among others, has pushed us to work against methodology, against a linearly designed plan when conducting research. To do research, then it becomes more about thought than methodology, about thinking differently toward and about people, language, and things.

Even as my methodology failed me, and my ontological and epistemological stances could no longer make sense of what I saw, said, heard, and felt, I remained and remain committed to doing ethical research toward the end of social justice. Questions are always more important than answers. So then, what does all this have to do with more ethical research and acts of social justice? Again, my research projects have fallen within the interpretive and critical paradigms. I have looked for how people, usually young children or teachers, are agentive or not, when can they make choices, or when they cannot. As a language and literacy researcher, I looked for an ontology of language and literacy as out there, something we could find and do, collect and analyze. I took up an epistemological grounding that I could interview and observe as children spoke and wrote, identifying specific times and places for their knowing and learning of language and literacy. Through this, I began to rethink ideas of power and agency, all central notions in discussions of ethics and any kind of justice.

Recalling this research was located among children who had no doubt had power continually exerted upon their bodies, their languages, and their literacies, always shaping them. In another way, I, too, was exerting power over and on the literacy and language practices of the children during this bilingual poetry workshop. I also began to wonder who or what is agentive. And what does agency have to do with language and literacy? And then what does it have to do with equity and social justice? For me, if the ontology and epistemology of literacy and language are relocated from "out" there and "in" there, and instead emerge between and among us through intra-actions of child and material, then this opens up new questions as to how to do more equitable research, and importantly for me, on how to create more ethical language and literacy classrooms. So, when the children picked up the mounting putty that day, when they made something that would let go and move out and beyond us, I felt power being relocated from *over* and *on* them to something that they began to *have* and to *do*.

Moreover, there are many reasons to resist methodological enclosure, but for me, one of those reasons that came to the forefront was to decenter the "human" in my research, because of who *He,* the human, is. Arguably, the human we have always been centering in the social sciences is the White, the Straight, the Man, the Abled, and the Christian. Even when we try to focus on those who are not Him, we are left endlessly comparing and contrasting *Them* to *Him.* This human-centeredness has bled into language and literacy studies, and despite many workings to undo this disbalance, there remains a singular valued literacy and language. Moreover, those who do not practice those kinds of literacy and language connected to the *Human* are left to something else: *literacies*, *language variations, home language,* and *out-of-school literacy practices.* To abandon and decenter the human is not to abandon humanizing, rather it is to abandon how the human has always been defined.

Another reason to resist methodological enclosure was to trouble my pedagogical framing of critical literacy and leveraging the linguistic repertoire, such as teaching critical literacy *to* children or leveraging their *entire* linguistic repertoire. Rather, it moved this to different ontological and epistemological assumptions. Moving away from teaching criticality to embracing spaces that *let* children be critical and *let* their linguistic repertoires emerge among them. Criticality is, instead, found in the letting and the waiting for language and literacy to take flight into something else, into something unexpected.

Finally, research in flexible, outside-of-school learning spaces, like this one, is full of potential for informing studies of language and literacy practices, especially among children who come from backgrounds that are typically excluded and erased in official schooling. In turn, methodologically those who are doing research in schools could learn from these methodological undoings, especially

given the tight and tidy research designs that often constrain and restrict research in schooling spaces.

We, as qualitative researchers, must make sure that we are, at least at times, doing some messy research, not just writing about doing it, telling others to do it, or teaching about doing it in our qualitative research courses. Do it, then share it. It's about locating research in a possible and pedagogical opening into the unexpected. However, doing this kind of research also needs recognition from multiple angles, from the writer of the research to the reviewers of such.

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