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## AN EPISTLE OUTLINING MY QUEER-FEMINIST ORIENTATION TO READING/WRITING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

*Sarah E. Truman*

Dear Anani and Anna and David,

I hope this finds you all well in Arizona. I'm writing to you from my kitchen table here in Melbourne on a honey-warm summer afternoon. I've been musing over your question, *what does it mean for me to write qualitatively? And what's my writing process/tips?* When I sought to answer this question the first thing I thought was, "well I always write from somewhere." I write from a physical location, from a socio-cultural milieu, from inherited body/minded modes of thinking, from a theoretical orientation influenced by other thinkers, writers. I write in relation. I write toward readers, futures, pasts, and in conversation with other writers, thinkers, researchers—like how I'm writing to you right now!

My "writing" practice also always includes movement away from my desk (walking or running), tea, and books. I've conducted a lot of research on the relationship between movement and ideation—I always go for a walk as part of a writing project. But when I'm at the desk writing (which during the world's longest lockdown here in Melbourne has been my mid-century-modern kitchen table) there's usually tea, and *always* books. I knew this—that I always have books nearby. But it wasn't until you sent me that question about writing qualitatively that I decided that I should focus on the importance of reading for writing in my response. And I decided to write my response in the epistolary genre, specifically as a letter.

I've decided on this genre because: (1). Writing *to* someone always helps me get ideas down. (2). It's good to think about audience when writing as it invariably changes how I write, and your question about my approach to writing qualitatively was born from a class David organized for graduate students (so that's my audience). (3). The epistolary genre is underused in qualitative research, and it should be used more! (4). The books that surround me on my table currently are books

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that employ epistolary genre or theorize it (I've been thinking about epistolary forms of communication due to having been a pen pal throughout the duration of COVID-19).

Currently on my desk are Derrida's *The Post Card* (1987), Ashon Crawley's *The Lonely Letters* (2020), Kathrine McKittrick's *Dear Science* (2021), and Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka* (1986) among other piles of books I'm not going to list off. Derrida, McKittrick, and Crawley all theorize and employ aspects of an epistolary genre in their books: as friendship, as love, as lures for different futures and strange arrivals. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari are mainly describing how Kafka's writing was influenced by letter writing (which is "diabolical" and introduces a ghostly element between sender/receiver!) In my book *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation* I use an epistolary genre as part of a larger post card project focused on queer-non-arrivals, and the strange strangers that do arrive in research/life. I discussed that chapter when I visited your class at ASU and so it feels fitting, given the literal, figurative, and actual milieu I'm sitting in right this instant, to stick with this genre in my response to you. There's an immediacy to the epistolary genre: it apostrophizes (attempts to speak directly to someone), allows space for internal interjections, while at the same time—like all writing—is aware that meaning might never arrive as intended to the reader (forever delayed!). Letters, like all writing, occupy a queer time space. And I don't know about your experiences, but time and writing has gotten even queerer for me here during the world's longest lockdown in Melbourne where for months on end we were only allowed out of the house for an hour a day, and confined to a 5 km radius of movement. Historically, particularly in novels, epistolary genres gave voice to female characters who didn't enjoy the privilege of occupying space in public the same way that male characters could: sometimes in the form of diary entries, or through the form of letters. Some of my most important friendships in my life have been pen pals so I take the genre seriously outside of the academy, and it became a significant event in my experience of being here in hard lockdown during the pandemic as I started pen palting again. So, in this epistle (letter) I'm going to talk you through how I approach *reading* as a practice that relates to my *writing* (qualitatively): both of which are framed by what I call the queer-feminist materialisms. I'll then offer some propositions that may help you, or other qualitative researchers, think about your own approach to writing qualitatively.

My angle of orientation to conducting qualitative research is through the queer-feminist materialisms (Truman, 2019, 2021). I'll explain all those terms but I'm going to start with the term materialisms. What do I mean by materialisms? I write about materialisms a lot, but for the sake of this letter, I'm talking about the material effects/affects of words, concepts, ideas, gestures, events, and citations throughout a qualitative research endeavor. Thinking, reading, theorizing, citing, and writing are *material* practices (Barad, 2007; Snaza, 2019; Truman, 2016). And they materially change me as a researcher, reader, writer. They are also *situated* and speculative practices (Haraway, 1988): in other words, reading and writing take place somewhere and are reaching somewhere (kind of like this letter which is

taking place here in my kitchen in Melbourne as well as the milieu I'm writing from and hopefully reaching you all in Arizona and your milieus across space and time!). Both situatedness and speculation are important concepts in queer and feminist thought: we always read, write, cite and conduct research from somewhere, in situ. But, we are also always undergoing change through the processes of reading, conducting research, chatting with people, and writing. And we're also (hopefully!) reaching toward somewhere else (speculative) in these endeavors—luring different worlds (Keeling, 2019; Stengers, 2011; Truman, 2019). That differential is always at work.

As an ethico-political tending, feminism is the advocacy of (more-than) human rights and justice fueled by a desire for equity across all sexes, genders, sexualities, classes, abilities, and races (Ahmed, 2013; Kafer, 2013). As a scholar and researcher and writer and reader, I think that “doing” feminism requires me to interrogate institutional structures, genealogies of thought, and social-cultural-language practices to recognize where inequality lies. This also includes affirmative, or speculative practices that might propose different worlds: reading, citing, and writing practices can do this. I sometimes use the term queer in front of feminist materialisms to activate queerness' potential to unsettle norms and acknowledge how queer and trans scholars have influenced feminist scholarship as well as affirm queerness as an identity (and in case there's any confusion, “gender critical,” trans-exclusionary scholars are *not* feminist) (Halberstam, 2005; Luciano & Chen, 2015; E K Sedgwick, 2003). However, as Shannon and I argue (2020), queerness must not merely function as a “lubricant for easing into doing thing *differently* while failing to attend to *difference*”—this refers to the very real differences experienced by LGBTQ2A+ people in a cis-hetero-white-ableist-patriarchy. That caveat returns me to the beginning concept in this section: materialisms. The need to take concepts seriously. Activating a concept is a material practice and creates and destroys worlds (and can have *material* effects on research participants and other concepts in writing). If I'm writing about particular people or research participants, I think about what kind of concepts they may or may want to be aligned with, narrated through, subsumed beneath, lifted by and so on. In this way, there's a feminist praxis at work throughout the research practice.

That was a quick tour through my orientation to *qualitative research*. It also informs my orientation to reading practices and citational practices. Citational politics are mentioned frequently in Black, Indigenous, and feminist approaches to research (McKittrick, 2021). But it's difficult to cite (and write) well if students and researchers don't have the time to *read* well. As a researcher, where I write from and in relation with changes through the process of researching and writing—which always includes reading. But there's many kinds of reading! So, I want to write a bit about some of the swirling politics of reading I've encountered in the academy. Then I'm going to talk about some of my pragmatics for reading/writing—which are of course related to my politics.

Now you, Anani, and Anna are graduate students, and this may or may not relate to you, but I often speak with graduate students who are overwhelmed at the prospect of where to start in reading. And I encourage them to start where they are and

take the time to study. I notice here in Australia, and during my time in the UK, that because PhDs are only three years long, students are in an oddly rushed state where writing (which translates into publishing or finishing a dissertation) has become more important than taking time to read well. I think this is beginning to happen in Canada and the US, too, although those programs are longer. Concomitant with this rush to write before reading (or rush reading in order to write), I've noticed that students entering graduate school—especially in the field of education—have vastly different undergraduate degrees and training. For instance, graduate students who've completed undergraduate degrees in literature or history will have studied in very different ways to those who studied music or biomedical sciences. I'm not sure of your backgrounds, but my BA was in English literature and philosophy. As a result, I had read a significant amount of critical and literary theory in undergrad. Both English literature and philosophy rely on theory to make sense of the texts a student is studying. In many instances philosophy *is* theory (and arguably so is literature). But it's also always intertextual—in that a philosophical text is in conversation with other philosophers, philosophies, or thought experiments related to other fields. English is entirely intertextual: from understanding Greek or Roman mythology, biblical references, or intertextual references of other literary works (and it is often also very Eurocentric!). When I took courses in “women's writing” or the lecturers would have us read Judith Butler (1999) for example or some other theory to help make sense of gender as it is activated in a literary text. Or if we read a book/film that brought up queerness we were introduced to Eve Sedgwick (1993). Or when studying “world literature” we would be introduced to some literary scholar who critiqued empire and racial logics alongside the text (Spivak, 1988). Other fields are like this in their own ways, but literary studies, cultural studies, and philosophy did provide me with an angle of reading/writing that helped me in graduate school. So, it's an approach I still use. And as a lecturer I try to remember that the *reading repertoire* (Iser, 1972) and reading techniques that students arrive in grad school with can be very diverse.

This brings me to the importance of reading time. In our increasingly rushed production and output machine of academe, all too often I hear from students and colleagues, not only that they don't know where to start to read, but also that they *don't have time to read*. Last year I even heard a senior academic telling a group of junior academics how to block out time for writing to get 200 words down a day. Now of course making time for writing is an important part of writing, however, when I chimed in for the need to block out time to read *before* writing and *during* writing, I was met with a confounded stare.

I'm curious as to how you make time for reading to accompany your writing and complicate your writing? How do you read? Where do you read? What are your techniques? I'd love to hear them. In the meantime, I have some propositions I've been thinking about on how to cultivate a culture of reading in the academy.

Those of us who are teaching, supervising, and students in the academy need to make time to read ourselves, and to foreground the necessity of reading for all academics. One way to start this is to make reading *part* of classes—like we did in high

school. I'm not sure about your high schools, but we would sit and read during class at my high school. Let graduate students read *during* class time. If you're a student tell your instructor to read Thompson and Harney's *Ground Provisions* (2018) and how they discuss the importance of not "outsourcing" reading in the academy: they argue that we must make it part of the work we do when "at" work (in class). So that's an important ethos for those of us teaching to consider. Those of us who are academics, or want to be academics, likely need to read more than just during class as well. And one way to help facilitate this is having a social reading practice, particularly with challenging texts. Join a book group: read in conversation. Start letter writing in response to books and articles (like I have during lockdown with some colleagues and friends). Also, I think that departments should build in reading time as part of an academic's workday. Two hours per day, *paid* reading time (\$\$\$!). One hour in the morning and one in the afternoon. That's ten hours of paid reading time a week. Then when academics go to write, they will be up to speed on theory and research to inform their writing.

How many hours a week do you have time to read?

Another thing I think about a lot is the politics of reading practices. In the race (and it really can feel like a race) to keep up with publishing/reproductive speed in the academy, some students may be enticed to skim read—even as a means of seemingly performing a "good" citational politics. This may look like reading a tiny bit of a paper/book to *extract* a resource. This may be done for various reasons—perhaps to demonstrate breadth. It may be just to cite a scholar and they may thank you for it in a world where citation indexes are weighed against grant and tenure applications. Over time, however, skim reading is not a particularly helpful practice. I think it should be discouraged.

In my book *Feminist Speculations and the practice of Research-Creation* (2021), I have an Interstice on citational practices where I list a series of metaphors that I think of when thinking about citational practices—and the scholars who incited my thinking about the term. An important part of reading is remembering where ideas came from—particularly if I'm going to then be writing about those ideas. I challenge you to think metaphorically about your approach to reading as it relates to scholarly writing: why are you doing it? What is your theoretical orientation to reading? *In conversation? Snowballing? Cross-pollinating? Casting a net? Plugging holes? Covering your ass? Playing politics? Trolling? Stealing? Montaging? Affecting? Diffracting? Magpie-ing? Quilting? Weaving? Digesting? (Remember what happens after digestion—absorb those nutrients—fuel a new genre—and don't just circulate crap!)* If you have other metaphors for how you think about reading practices, I'd love to hear them.

To get back to your original question, *what does it mean for me to write qualitatively? And what's my writing process/tips?* and my decision to write about reading as an important component of my approach to writing (which is embedded in a queer-feminist materialist tending), I'm going to share some of my techniques for reading that turns into writing. These are all techniques I encourage graduate students to try. I have decided to write these as an unordered list. As a literary device, a list has the capacity to link seemingly "disparate agents into a tense unity" (Truman,

2021, p. 99) and promises disjunction rather than flow (Bogost, 2012). I also think lists are underused in qualitative research, like the epistolary genre, and so I'm going to write you one now as an intervention into qualitative research writing.

*Trumey's Unordered List of Reading Practices (which also includes some writing practices)*

- Be consistent in your reading. Read every day.
- Use marginalia. Make notes in/on texts. Illuminate it. Engage materially with the text.
- Create annotated bibliographies of key texts. Develop knowledge of a field/concept by building your own annotated bibliography of it. Many students go straight to writing lit reviews when I think an annotated bibliography can be very useful and develop an understanding of the breadth of a field. Start with a favorite text. Don't cut and paste the abstract, write your own entry in your own words (then you can use it later and not be plagiarizing!).
- Look at the citation list in a text you have written an entry on. And read those texts if they're related to your bibliography (as well as searching the library to build your bibliography!).
- Read theory related to your annotated bibliography (and make an annotated bibliography of theory).
- Create summaries and precis of the most important articles, books, texts that are part of your annotated bibliographies. This way you begin to expand your writing from the constraints of an annotated bibliography.
- Remember your politics: look at who is missing. Who is missing in these fields? Build an annotated bibliography of them! Build an anti-annotated bibliography!
- Alongside this approach I also "read" tangentially.
- Read philosophy.
- Read fiction.
- Read poetry.
- Listen to songs.
- Listen to podcasts.
- Read the news.
- Go for a walk or swim or run and think with movement and place.

These tangential readings and musings and scholarly practices help frame up the vector I am—the situated place I write from, and write to, in a field that I'm helping create. In terms of the epistolary genre that I've engaged with throughout my life in research projects, and in this brief letter to you all, it has been informed on all the registers I just outlined above: I've read theorists who write *about* the genre (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986); I've read theorists who employ the genre (Crawley, 2020; Derrida, 1987; McKittrick, 2021); I've read fiction that activates the genre in the form of letters and diary entries from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, to Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, to Jeff Vandermeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (which draws attention to the notion of an unreliable narrator, which of course I'm not, ha!). Further,

I just went on a walk to the shop to clear my head before I wrote that section above. In terms of this letter to you, I've activated elements of that genre and the ethico-political orientations of some of those pieces of writing here.

As someone who is currently supervising PhD students and does press them to read deeply, and broadly, as well as do the seemingly mundane task of writing annotated bibliographies/summaries, once they have completed an annotated bibliography or summaries of a series of texts, I often ask them to link those writings in a literature review across a series of texts. And then I usually ask them to try and *activate* a concept in relation to them, based on their own argument regarding a piece of data (this could be "data" in terms of something that came up in research, or it could be "data" in terms of an idea they have, or it could be "data" in terms of something *missing* in the literature, or it could be by performing whatever they're thinking about—i.e. letters!). I think of synthesis as a mode of reading theory, or a thread of thought, through a series of other texts. Significantly, the writer in this situation is also a vector. *What would it mean to be a queer-feminist vector primed by whatever else I've synthesized in reading and research sites, and then set about writing?* I always tell students to take their situated and speculative orientation to writing seriously.

So, I'm going to end on this note to you all (well not you, David, you're already a scholar, but for the students): what kind of contribution do you want to make to the field? A piece of writing will have the synthesis of all the readings and texts you've encountered, and the vector of you moving through it! Have an opinion! And use 1st person voice (or 2nd person like I am here if you're writing to someone but usually in qualitative articles/books I use 1st person, owning the argument). Vectorize and realize that you will be changed in the process of reading and writing (and research). But take the time to read. I often tell students that the most time they're ever going to have to read is during their time as a grad student. Savor it, protect it, use it.

The sun is setting here—a salmon hue. I'm going out for another walk among the eucalyptus trees. I hope you're all well, and I look forward to hearing your approach to reading and writing—and what you're currently reading and writing!

Warmly,  
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