The Materiality of Research: 'The Materiality of Facts and Fiction: Recomposing Myself from the Sickbed' by Charlotte Wegener

In this feature essay, ***Charlotte Wegener*** *'recomposes' her writing from her sickbed. Drawing inspiration from the work of novelist A.S. Byatt, she describes how dialogue with one of Byatt's protagonists, Phineas, provides a way of thinking about the potential contingency of the border between the factual and the fictive when undertaking social science research.*

This essay is part of a series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at **lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk***.*

The Materiality of Facts and Fiction: Recomposing Myself from the Sickbed

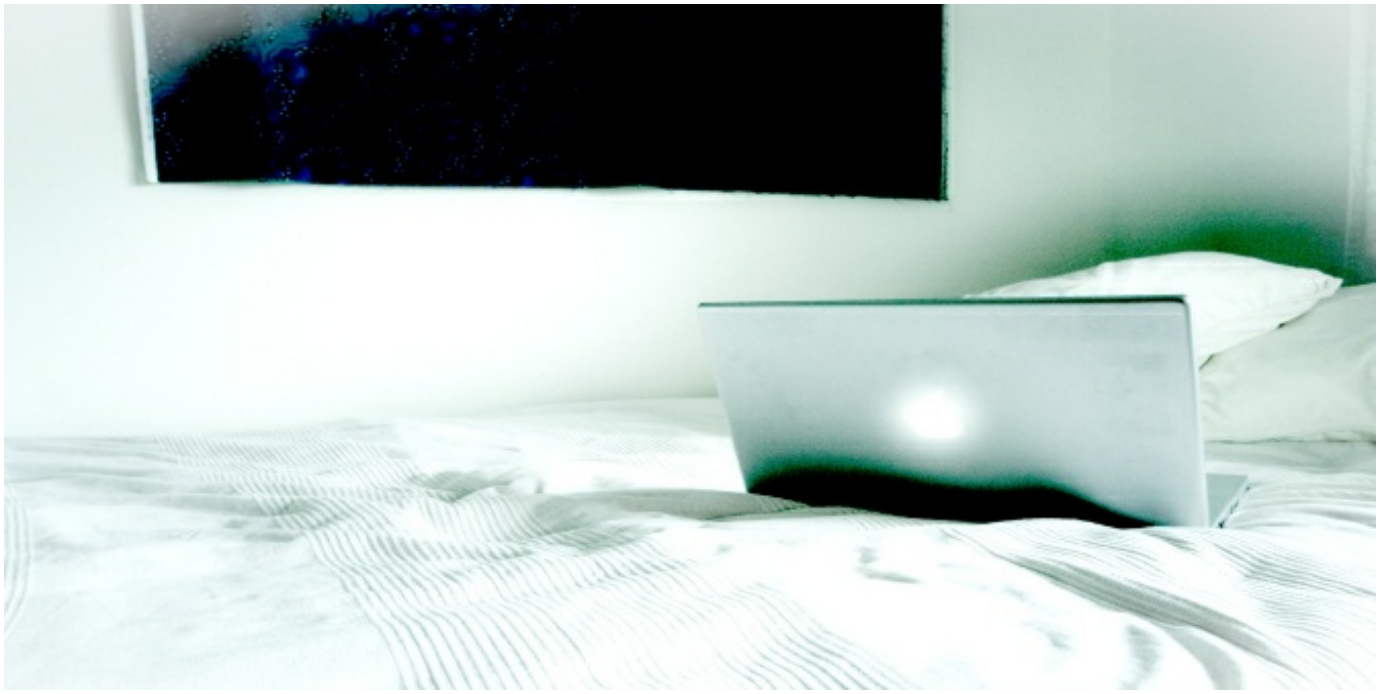

Image Credit: Johan Larsson

On the first pages of A.S. Byatt's short novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2001), the protagonist Phineas abandons his poststructuralist literary studies and walks out of the lecture hall into 'real life' to become a biographer. In his quest for 'things' and 'facts', however, he runs into considerable trouble. Things have unfortunately inscribed meanings far beyond their factual appearance. In his new area of study, biography, to Phineas' disappointment, facts also turn out to be scarce and slippery and do not lead to any coherent stories or insights. Through writing, however, Phineas is eliciting himself: he becomes a person, someone who really exists in the world with both his body and his intellect.

I am writing my way to the body through Byatt's authorship. It may take a while …

Today, I have a fever. I was supposed to get up, get dressed, drive my car for an hour, attend a meeting for an

ongoing action research project, collect data, have coffee, be enthusiastic about the project (which I am), be empathetic to the project coordinator who is having a hard time (which I am), plan the next meeting, think clearly, include other peoples' perspectives, drive home, answer emails … My Spelling and Grammar program says: 'Long sentence. Consider revising.' I follow the trail and open the box:

> *Your sentence may be too long to be effective and may be hard to follow. For clarity and conciseness, consider rewording your sentence or splitting it into two sentences.*

This is exactly the point. My days are too long to be effective and the abundance of activities makes my line of perception too hard to follow. My body is falling behind. It may even be *left* behind. I need time for clarity and conciseness and I consider ways of re-inscribing bodily being into my processes of knowing. As John Dewey has taught me, epistemological and ontological processes are intertwined. I do not intend to follow my Spelling and Grammar program's advice and split myself into two (feelings and thoughts, private and professional, pleasure and pain and, ultimately, body and intellect).

Today, I have a fever. My body is right here. I really missed it and needed it to make my work *work*. I am recomposing from the sickbed.

In *The Biographer's Tale,* Phineas sets out to write a biography of a biographer, Destry-Scholes. Since this biographer is a masterful storyteller and arranges facts so wonderfully to narrate other people's lives, he himself must have been an intriguing person worth portraying. This is Phineas's reasoning. It turns out, however, that this may be far from the truth. Destry-Scholes's stories, allegedly based on facts, may in fact be somewhat fictional. Byatt describes it this way in *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays*:

> *My own short novel, The Biographer's Tale, is about these riddling links between autobiography, biography, fact and fiction (and lies). It follows a poststructuralist critic who decides to give up and write a coherent life-story of one man, a great biographer. But all he finds are fragments of other random lives – Linnaeus, Galton, Ibsen – overlapping human stories, which make up the only available tale of the biographer. It is a tale of the lives of the dead, which make up the imagined worlds of the living. It is a story of the aesthetics of inventing, or re-inventing, or combining real and imaginary human beings. (10)*

Why is this so fascinating to me? The dead ones, the ones who have left, the ones supposed to be there when we need them. The imprint of a body not occupying this chair anymore. The sense of what this emptiness allows for. I reach out and grasp the air, the memory, the longing. Something is disappearing and yet, something is appearing; it slips through my fingers; I touch it at the periphery of my range. I want to write about it. Writing makes sense, not because writing produces a coherent life-story but because the *act* of writing makes it all overlap – feelings and thoughts, private and professional, pleasure and pain. Body and intellect. The inventing, re-inventing and combining of the real and the imagined becomes the only available tale. How do we write about what is lost and what has not yet materialised? How do we write about things we sense so strongly, but which escape uniqueness and solidity?

Are we as social science researchers all in some way biographers? Who are we portraying and for what reasons? Which information are supposedly the 'facts' and what happens to these facts when we arrange them into writing? Which facts do we include and which do we leave out? How does the arrangement of these 'facts' inscribe their meaning? And how do we keep questioning ourselves and each other about these issues?

Now and again, I ask Byatt's protagonist Phineas. I asked him about analysis while struggling with PhD data (Wegener, 2014) and now I reach out again. During his quest for a new life beyond poststructuralism and

uncertainty, Phineas falls in love with two women simultaneously: one is a Swedish bee taxonomist, and the other is Destry-Scholes's niece, a hospital radiographer. The bee taxonomist is red-haired, burly and bold. She invites Phineas to join her indefatigable fight to save the brown bee. The radiographer is pale, delicate and elusive. She invites him into the secret world of X-ray images and cries disconsolately over the sudden recognition of cancer.

Phineas becomes the lover of both of them. Whom to choose? This is, of course, not the question. The brown bee may survive; the cancer patient may die. It is the fighting and the crying – the *passion* – that produces a life-story. Equally, it is detailed knowledge about bees, biotopes, X-ray technology and cancer cells. Knowing *how* and *that* is fine, but we also need to know *what it is like* (Worth, 2004). Body *and* intellect.

In *The Biographer's Tale*, as well as in many other of her novels and essays, Byatt addresses the desire to transcend the self-referential postmodern subject. Her characters try to bridge the gap between language and an external reality and are driven by a scientific curiosity to understand things in their biological aspects, free from culture, allegory or metaphor (Pereira, 2014). In an interview with Nicholas Tredell, Byatt states:

> *I get so distressed by literary theories which say language is a self-supporting system that bears no relation to things, because I don't experience it in that way. I don't have any naïve vision of words and things being one-to-one equivalents, but they're woven, like a sort of great net of flowers on the top of the surface of things. (65-66)*

Phineas, of course, must face the impossibility of his quest for pure 'things' and true 'facts'. He finds only fragment upon fragment of texts. Wherever he goes, whatever he writes, he is led to himself. What he is finally able to write is an account of his own presence in the world.

As I am writing this account, a feeling of an absence materialises into a presence too. I need to investigate this premise thoroughly. Maybe we need to write our way to our own presence in the world to be able to write in ways that do justice to the people we narrate and to produce texts that touch our readers.

Charlotte Wegener is Assistant Professor of Innovation in the Department of Communication and Psychology at the University of Aalborg, Denmark. Her work concerns innovation with a specific focus on education, workplace learning and research methodology. She teaches writing classes and is passionate about making academic writing creative and rewarding, to herself and others. She has three kids, two cats and one woodstove, all of which support her writing immensely.