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TAYLOR, Carol <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0914-8461>>, FAIRCHILD, Nikki, KORO-LJUNGBERG, Mirka, CAREY, Neil, BENOZZO, Angelo and ELMENHORST, Constance

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Published version

TAYLOR, Carol, FAIRCHILD, Nikki, KORO-LJUNGBERG, Mirka, CAREY, Neil, BENOZZO, Angelo and ELMENHORST, Constance (2018). Improvising bags choreographies: Disturbing normative ways of doing research. *Qualitative Inquiry*.

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Improvising Bags Choreographies: Disturbing Normative Ways of Doing Research

Abstract

Post-qualitative research-creation improvisations offer new possibilities to explore method/ology. In this article we question how bags, as seemingly mundane objects, work as ontologically lively matter – as active agencies – to choreograph human-nonhuman relations and heterogeneous materialities. Working from three questions – How might a bag become? What do bags do? What do bags enable and enact? – we discuss four research-creation improvisations and the insights they generated. The article maps how bags choreographies put affects, bodies and materialities into co-motional relations in order to disturb normative approaches to research both within conference sessions and through writing articles.

Keywords

Bags; post-qualitative; research-creation; choreographies; thing power; materialities.

Gaining speed with/in/out/toward/to/for bags

In this possibly post-qualitative, post-human, or more-than-human article, we experiment with what happens, what takes place and what is produced when bags and other human and non-human materialities connect, collide and intersect. By paying attention to bags as mundane objects of life we illustrate the interrelatedness, connectivity, and potential embedded in ‘thing power’ (Bennett, 2010) and matter that we (as scholars) generally bypass and potentially deem meaningless or lifeless. We outline how we deployed bags in four research-creation improvisations which took heed of Manning’s (2016) invitation to combine and create novel

approaches and connections as a means to study what objects do and what their performativity may enable in the context of scholarly research. The research-creation thinking-doings enacted were partially inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) for whom creativity and experimenting is a mode of thinking.

Our bags research-creations occurred at a workshop at the *Gender and Education* annual conference in June 2017 that we attended (three of us in person, three virtually) which enabled us to experiment with bags to explore the possibilities that bags might produce and offer. In this article, we exemplify some of what our bags research-creation improvisations did – how they worked methodologically as improvisations, becomings, and recreations; how they recalibrated what ‘counts as data’; how they materialized relationality, resistance, interactions, and intra-actions through the work they did as mundane objects in a conference space. We narrate how the possibilities opened up by bags choreographies improvisations helped destabilize normative ways of doing research – at conferences, in research practices, and in ‘reporting’ research inquiries in academic articles. Our improvisations were oriented toward showing how bags prompt wonder and produce different spatial awareness; how bags solicit, assemble and combine things, objects, and matter; how bags communicate, attract, desire, and produce; and how they enfold odd, familiar, partial, broken, fixed, full, dreamed, seen, replaced bodies all of which are coming together-with bags in unexpected ways and always more. In line with the innovative research-creation post-qualitative approach to knowledge-making we took, the article itself is shaped as a ‘baggy writing space’ which contains other-than-usual writing practices than those found in more ‘mainstream’ academic articles.

Bags/ *Wunderkammern*/ Choreographies

The activity of gathering together very different objects and materials and trying to classify them started in the sixteenth century with the phenomenon of *Wunderkammern* as places that brought together pieces of the world around us, a world deemed wonderful and full of amazing surprises.

As Lugli (2006, p. 126) explains:

The wondrous is a meta-historical category that has been defined all along the eighteenth century, didactically first and foremost, as a form of knowledge, that is, a very special half-way stage, a kind of mental suspension that lies between ignorance and knowledge, which marks the end of ignorance and the beginning of knowledge.¹

Bags/ *Wunderkammern*/ choreographies forge an assemblage of fragments in an emergent temporary unity:

- ~ Boccioni's Futurist sculpture, *Testa + Casa + Luce* or *Fusione di una testa e di una finestra*, in which objects literally enter the sculpture.
- ~ Objects juxtaposed in a way that is surprising and thought-provoking.
- ~ Objects which make up, form (and perform) other objects (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).
Combination follows combination and each one resonates differently. Different materials accumulate, align and compose in mobile juxtapositions which fire our imagination and populate our dreams.
- ~ Fragments of the world enter the perimeter of the bag. Things pile up without any precise order.

¹ 'La meraviglia è una categoria metastorica che si definisce fino a tutto il Settecento, didatticamente prima di tutto, come una forma di conoscenza, cioè uno stadio intermedio e particolarissimo, una specie di sospensione mentale che sta tra l'ignoranza e il sapere, che determina la fine dell'ignoranza e l'inizio del sapere' (Lugli, 2006, p. 126)

- ~ A dynamic, not static, mattering of objects “speaking” to each other in ways we are unaware of.
- ~ Objects producing wondrous relations.
- ~ Places full to bursting with natural (*naturalia*) and artificial (*artificialia et mirabilia*) things.
- ~ Things making connections without necessity, logic or reason which obey their own laws and belong to the realm of dreams and wonderment.
- ~ Bags improvising relations, soliciting new collections and intra-actions.

Bags/Wunderkammern generate potentialities of thinking-doing and possibilities for performing vital ecologies of spacetime-matterings (Barad, 2007) instantiating bags’ capacities to disrupt normative research. This is what we experiment and wonder about in this article.

Why bags?

Bags have been our companions since earliest times when they freed women’s hands to forage, hunt and rear children. Bags in cave paintings date back thousands of years. Bags did work in military campaigns. Today, all around us, bags have adapted to changing needs: they establish wealth and status via designers such as Hermès, Louis Vuitton, Prada and Gucci (Russell and Tyler, 2005). Bags are political (Markstedt, 2007) and performative (Blaise, 2005), they are sites of racialization (Magnet and Mason, 2014), and encode and enact discourses of gender, materiality, power, and knowledge. The bag is a prosthesis of the body and the body is equally a prosthesis of the bag – that is, bags are a kind of superposition in which body and bag mutually extend each other. The bag is the exteriority that extends the interiority, which in turn expands the exteriority in a continuous never-ending process (Massumi, 2002). Bags, bodies and

environments together produce expected and, more importantly, unexpected affects and effects on us.

In academia, bags activate us as (a)gendered, race(d), classed and particular bodied scholars. Bags are conferred on conference attendees – thick and durable, eco-friendly, bulky, too small or heavy. Such bags lend us an identity (now I am a gender scholar, now I am an international researcher!) and a belonging (I have a bag which displays and enacts my sense of being ‘at home’ here); and they travel home with us to find another use (or not) or are discarded in conference hotel rooms. Furthermore, as academic writers, thinkers, and collaborative partners we continually haul bags around with us – handbags, workbags, computer bags. Bags possess us as much as we possess them: bags take on relational force in engaging us as carriers, owners, explorers, shoppers, analysts of their contents, and judges of other bags and bag carriers. It is apparent that bags are not only objects of human possession and utility. Bags are more-than-human mundane performative objects which, in personal, public, virtual, and actual ways, have a capability to transform the subjects and objects associated with them. Bags enact improvisational choreographies of mattering. Bags orient bodies in spaces and, in entangling humans and more-than-humans together, constitute us as a form of bag-species: A new sort of ‘we’. Bags are lively matter (Bennett, 2010) with an ability to effect border-crossings.

In what follows we re-orient bags, moving them from the sidelines and perimeters to the centre of our research and attention. We comment on how bags became entangled with those of us (Carol, Nikki and Constance) who brought them to the conference, with those of us (Mirka, Angelo and Neil) who appeared inside the bags via I-pads and Skype meetings, and with those

who participated in the bags workshop-creation event. To explore these entanglements, we have effected a number of agential cuts (Barad, 2007) to enable us to examine and create knowledge about bags and how they functioned in the context of the academic conference, as part of a research-creation apparatus and, afterwards, in the writing of this article.

Improvising Bag Research-Creations

Improvisation has inspired many qualitative researchers in diverse and unexpected ways, as they seek to align the concept-practice of research-creation (Manning and Massumi, 2014) with arts-based research (Naughton *et al.*, 2018), emergent and becoming research (Taylor and Hughes, 2016), performance studies (Massumi, 2011), and performance philosophy. The heterogeneity of improvisation has been instrumental in producing different forms and enactments of experimentation which have shaped recent shifts in qualitative and post-qualitative research. Manning and Massumi (2014) propose that, rather than relying on free improvisation, highly ‘technical’ processes (such as research and scholarship) benefit from structured improvisations by building into them ‘enabling constraints’, suggesting that ‘like the dance practice, the philosophical exploration is a technicity in its own right, activated and activating across registers of content and processual invention’ (Manning and Massumi, 2014, p. 94). They contend that the constraint of ‘activation’ can work against description or reportage which relies on describing the past, previous and before and propose, instead, the openness of activation, of improvisational research-creation which activates its own dynamic forces and new occurrences.

In our case, the enabling constraint was *bags* (always a plural) and our task in the workshop at the conference, and in the writing of this article, was to activate a space for ‘quasi-chaos’ to take

hold, a quasi-chaos ‘pulsat[ing] with potential technicities’ and enabling ‘as-yet-unstructured improvisations’ (Manning and Massumi, 2014, p. 114) to be activated. Thus, in the bags research-creation workshop we, the participants and audience were continuously entering, rotating, and exiting the presentation space. We and the participants did not ‘sit still’ and observe but moved through four different activity stations and intra-acted with: bags with objects in them; a bags autopsy table; a bags-image production; and virtual bags dialogues.

Of these research-creation improvisations one of us wrote:

Bag entanglements, bag-bodies, diverse lines of flight. Mattering of bags happened. Leakiness of bag boundaries. What became a bag or of a bag was less certain. Some attended a conference in a bag or through a bag. Bags were blurring the lines between presence and absence. A single bag event was no longer one but became a multiple. Bags and people involved with bags multiplied. Unexpected appearance and meetings happened within and through bags. Some presentations took place in IKEA and garbage bags. Conference participants lived through difference with and in the bags. Bags held the session together.

Others of us wrote:

Bags multiple.

Bags carry, contain, hide, transport, disappear, separate, travel, decompose, non-decompose, give, take, conceal, bring together, change, offer shelter, friend, sense, recognize, freeze and heat, store blood, generate ice and keep soap and soul warm and, and.

Bags perform.

Bags are always more than one.

Bags become.

Bags bag.

Where can I find a garbage bag?

In the library?

In a conference space?

Is somebody there? Is somebody in my garbage bag?

An academic dialogue inside a dark garbage bag—how would that work? What would it produce?

Bags activated in this way became mobile, vital and immanent, revealing potentials, relations, movements and flows as we explored:

What is a bag?

What do bags do?

What do bags enact and enable?

Bags-improvisation 1: Bags with objects in them

And at this point the possibilities are endless. Who knows what else there might be in this bag

Oh, there're lots of interesting objects. Look at this!

Oh, it's a whip! And these are handcuffs and there are leather belts, some lubricant jelly, hair removing cream and vibrators, sexy underpants (see also Benozzo et al., 2016) ...

A space

Full and/or empty

Heavy and/or light

Hard and/or soft

Static and/or dynamic

Continuous and/or discontinuous

Public and/or personal

A bag as something that contains a portion of (our) world.

A bag as an object with different uses: to carry other items and transport us. Who/what is transported by whom/what?

A bag contains objects that can be wonderful (strange or extravagant, eccentric and unexpected, questioning, imagining, probing ...);

Travel bags, handbags, manbags, coolbags, beachbags, washbags...

A bag has an aesthetic connotation: it can be ugly and/or beautiful; it can give pleasure, or it can disgust, it is seductive...

‘An extra appendage – counting all my limbs and luggage – drag around.’

‘#BLM racialized – black boys – respectability politics. Baggy pants perhaps getting killed for baggy pants’

‘Too much baggage – emotionally incontinent too much history, too many children’

This improvisation narrates how body-bags co-compose relations which undo the ‘I’ and relocate it as multiple, in transpersonal and processual bag-species: multi-limbed bag-human hybrids; the #BLM movement and the marginalization of African Americans in the United States; and enduring gendered notions of women’s emotionality.

Bags-improvisation 2: Bags-autopsy

The bags-autopsy table – a gathering of bags, scissors, threads and fastenings – offered an invitation to encourage cutting-together-apart, a movement which is ‘not separate consecutive activities, but a single event that is not one’ (Barad, 2010, p. 244). People circle the tables wondering if they should ... cut... rip ... snip ... sew ... the workshop participants were initially reticent ... who will make the first cut? ... then one rips open a bag ... others join in as bags entangle them and lines of flight take bags in new directions. Cuttings-together-apart (Barad, 2014) are materialized as bags are re-worked, re-designed, re-made. Bags and humans as ‘data’ see bodies re-oriented and hybridized in the act of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987), these vibrant bag-human hybrids brimming with (non)sense (Deleuze, 1990). New bags-human relations materialize as participants sit, cut, sew, chat, create, leave, return, repeat.



Figure 1 Autopsy

The bags-autopsy research-creation improvisation does not produce pre-determined methodological outcomes but engages new ways to think bags as connective, multiple, affirmative and generative (Van der Tuin, 2015) – bags as companion-species (Haraway, 2008). Bags mobilize regimented striated space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) creating something fuzzier, not quite smooth but felted and textured, as both transversal and physical cuts diffract normalized bags meanings and allow us to think bags differently.

Bags-improvisation 3: Bags-image production

88 bags and counting

Hessian bag

Shiny bag

Black bag

Tea bag

Sand bag

Posh going out bag

Walking bags

Flower bag

Travel bag

Handbag

Shoulder bag

Shopping bag

Bag displays

Plastic bags

Brown in any shade bags

Black bags

Eye bags

Football bag

Tied up with string bags

Valise that wants to be a bag bag

Dog treat bag

Bread bag

Sweet bag

Valise that's given up on being a bag bag

Bag collection

Happy bag

Swinging bag

Jewellery bag

Banana bag

Paper bag

Big bag and baby bag

Wicker basket dreaming bag dreams

Expanding bag

Envelope bag

Leather bag

Hanging bag

Bag couple

Bag insides

Golden shot bag

Zipper bag

Love bag

Bottle bag

Summer plant bag

Blue bag

Trolley bag

Box of bags

Earring bags

You can't see what's in me bag

Folded bags

Torn bag

I'm so pink and girly bags

Carpet bags

Bed bags

Hanging on the door bags

Bag in hand

Bag on nail

Bag on top

Pooh bags

Ready for your hand bag

Disemboweled bag

Dog treat bag

A case becoming body bag

Wine bucket bag

My favourite work bag

Bags in hallway

How many bags do I need bag

Stripy bag

Let's go bags

Low slung bag

Hiding behind the door bags

Garden bag

Chair bag
Waste bag
Button bag
Tic tac bag
Lounging on the floor bag
Swimming bag
Reading bag
Golfing bag
Phone bag
Human turtle bag
Hairy bag
Forgotten bag
Wire bag
Multi-coloured bags
Conference bag
Seated bags
Trendy bag
Us and Them bags

This research-creation improvisation emerged with the collective assemblage of 84 bags images (personal photos, internet images, fine art images) into a pecha kucha slideshow. There was a little art in this assembling – attendance to contrast and colour and style. Workshop participants

contributed four more images, which were added to the growing bag-image choreography. One bag image per slide.

88 bags images

One image per 20 seconds

88 x 20 seconds image-production

Each image changes automatically to the next image in a pecha kucha

Repeated when ends

A continuous moving-image slide show

In *Cinema 1*, Deleuze (1986, p. 2) contends that cinema ‘does not give us an image to which movement is added, instead it immediately gives us a movement-image’, because the movement-image extracts ‘from movements the mobility which is their common substance’ (Deleuze 1986, p. 24). This ‘extraction’ of ‘mobility’ occurs because of three things: one, shots are edited into sequences (montage); two, shots are taken from different angles and distances; and three, the viewer’s gaze is free to move over the image as they wish. These three characteristics free the image from space and connect it to time, constituting movement-images as ‘mobile sections of a duration’ (Deleuze 1986, p. 23). Here Deleuze brings in Bergson’s (2004) idea of duration to think about how the perpetual changes of cinema images (montage) works as a figuration of our consciousness which, according to Bergson, also continuously changes. Image and mind are connected by and in the activity of unceasing variation. Mobile sections, as sensory, material and temporal movement-images, *includes* the viewer’s perception, sight and knowledge as well as the ‘force’ of the object. The image is not a representation of an ‘object’ and neither is the viewer separate or separable from the image: s/he is intrinsic to it through brain and consciousness in a

material-psychical connection: ‘the thing and the perception of the thing are one and the same thing, one and the same image’ (Deleuze 1986, p. 65, 63). And so, bags-images are us. We are them. We move with them, become them, are entangled-with/in them.

Bags-improvisation 4: Virtual bags dialogues

Improvisational dialogue. Unexpected activation. Without knowing and seeing anything from where I am inside this bag something is being produced and this something leaves a trace. A bag – filthy, dirty, stinky, plastic container of no-knowledge. Not. And yet. Place of unanticipated and surprising conversations. Space of relating; inside something unexpected and unexpected something inside. Smooth and calm yet simultaneously harsh and violent movement between speakers and participants. Gentle entries and fast, rapid departures toward a dialogue.

Not knowing who is who. Who cares?

Productively failed improvisation.

How are you doing?

How do bags function? What can bags do?

How do bags embody? How do bags body? What do they materialize?

How to begin in relation to bag-events?

How do you function in relation to bags? How do you relate?

How do bags think-feel?

How do bags affect and be affected?

Where are you able to go and what might you be able to do?

I am not sure. I have to go now.

Cut. Movements in the room. Curiosity. Caution. Hands on the back. Looks. Breath. Quiet. Hot room. Sweat flows. More movements. Words flows through the room, around and through the human and non-human bodies. Hands writing. Hands cutting. Hands sewing. Hands pulls. Pulse. PC does not want to connect to Skype. Frustration. More sweat. Moments of excitements. Lots of energy and movements. Laughter.

Cut. Two non-human phenomena. Two human phenomena. What's up? Two apparently passive participants. Their crossed arms and legs produces affects in and around me.

Cut. Materialization of bags and borders

Materialization hanging on materialization.

Materialization moving with materialization.

Materialization producing materialization.

Materialization?

Materialization produces phenomenon.

Materialization is always becoming

In and through my body I sense how my thoughts intra-acts with fragments of other spacetimematterings and the movements of my fingers on the keyboard. Pictures arise in my head and produce affects. Bags produce borders. Bags produce discourses and discourses produce bags. And



Figure 2 Cut

Cut. Bodies are troubled by those who appeared virtually in bags. Bodies-in-bags (I-Pads, Skype, Neil, Mirka Angelo) as fleeting figures of the absent/present, attendance as virtual and partial contained within bags. How might this text encompass these virtual engagements? How might these multiple I/i as thinking/writing/doing be remembered? Grosz's (1995, p. 21) question about 'the ways in which the author's corporeality ... intrudes into or is productive of the text' helps us re-member (materially reassemble) the traces of the then-virtual, now non-existent conference performances. Bags as unwavering and unwitting participants in their own representational capture of past, current and still-to-be events. Travelling onwards. Still sweaty in hearing those recordings, the virtual-material trace of bodies-in-bag-species.

Cut. Skype rings. Mirka is there. Laughing: Mirka inside the black garbage bag. She is attending this conference from Finland; sitting in the public library wearing a garbage bag and Skyping us. Other library patrons stare.

Cut. Connection with Neil, and then all together. Neil, Angelo, Mirka, Constance, Carol and Nikki.

Cut. On the PC desktop appears the blue contour of an IKEA bag and the ceiling of a room. Introduction of the event. Carol's voice in the distance.

Cut. Some participants look inside the bag. Telling the story of the IKEA bag and of the IKEA ad. They are having difficulties in hearing the voice emanating from the IKEA bag. It seems as the 'performance' does not work, perhaps too much prepared or am I too distant from the participants? Or is the difficulty with the audio?

Cut. 'To experiment is to try new actions, methods, techniques and combinations . . . we experiment when we do not know what the result will be and have no preconceptions concerning what it should be . . . Experimentation by its nature breaks free of the past and dismantles old assemblages' (Baugh, cited in Torrance, 2017, p. 74).

Cut. 'Experimentation is about interrupting the taken-for-granted, doing something different, trying something out to see what happens, creating the new.' (Torrance, 2017, p. 71).

Cut. A body bathed in the nervous sweat of the new. The anticipation of the virtual appearance at a conference workshop. A not-yet which has the explicit aim of disturbing the expected and accepted striations of the academicconferencemachine space. This clammy body sits, alert, ready to engage and be engaged. The body's virtual encounter planned as an unplannable 'minor gesture' (Manning, 2016). Technically transformed through an I-pad like a 1990's MTV robotic talking head – sanitized, dry, pickable-uppable, droppable-downable, not quite reachable: a fascinated simulacrum. A body not quite encountering other(s') bodies whilst encountering with (un)certainly the policed, disciplined and imagined – but real and contestable – contours of 'that' greater body: conference, academic etiquettes, fields and traditions of knowledge.

Flashed recognitions. Planned. Let go.

Wrong?! That didn't work. Let go.

Moved already. Other. Bother! Right?! Let go.

It's passed already. Invent. Remember plan. Off-centre. Try again. Try new. Let go.

Catch up (?). Let go.

Cut. A virtual participant in the bag. At the whim of others' interest and curiosities, subject of and to the manipulations of those who decide to engage (Manning, 2013), inextricably a part of that wider choreography of bags experimentations. Bodies in flow: a bag holder for a body that is not present; a (non/sense)body-bag, leaking its virtual content; opened for display, for (non)identification, to be added to the unknown in the play of the academic workshop. And then, closed again – forgotten, dead, buried? Until the next wave of curiosity entices another (non-embodied) encounter with/in the workshop.

Bags choreographing research-creation: Bags-data and data-bags

McCormack (2013, p. 171) describes choreography as ‘a process disclosing geometries of moving involvement – a choreography of worldly arrangements expressive of rather than reductive of difference’. In our research-creation experiments, bags choreographies put affects, bodies and materialities into co-motional relation which are productive of different spacetime-matterings by, again and again, cutting-together-apart of/ with human and non-human phenomena (Barad, 2007). Bags-doings entangling ‘my/their/our/its’ body/ies and producing cuts and diffractions, affects, thoughts and movements in/ through/ around ‘my/their/our/its’ body/ies. Bags, conceptualized as temporary structures, are regenerated, melt, transform, appear, and disappear while opening up new directions/movements/becomings.

This posthuman experimental-theoretical-research-creation-improvisation produces and becomes in open processes where bags function as active agents and productive relational matter. Our experiments are not about determining what bags/borders are but about the potentialities of bags-data-becomings which, in an agential realist understanding (Barad, 2007), appears as an assembly of materialities which incorporate us/them/it/other as researcher. Such becomings break the pattern of what may appear as bags *as* data (Koro-Ljungberg, 2013, St. Pierre and Jackson, 2014, Brinkmann, 2014, Augustine, 2014, Benozzo and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017).

Instead, bags-data and data-bags choreograph many types of (bags) materials. Data is not just about ‘things’ that you collect through, for example, interview, observation, statistic or video. Books and articles, conversations with others, diary notes, everyday experiences, hiking in the forest, Facebook, old memories, community discourses, political discussions and ~ and ~ and ~ are also part of/in this bags-(data)-choreography.

Our experiments, and this article, explore how bags-species have been produced via a range of bags-choreographies. The workshop and the textual returns serve as heterogeneous experiments in which bags feature and act as the constant relational connection. As our ‘enabling constrainers’, bags weave and flow along-with the people present at the workshop who worked and chatted on the bags autopsy table, moved around the room and talked into bags to distant collaborators, wandered down the side tables reading the bags texts, and wrote into the texts with their bags definitions. Bags-people collectively producing and enabling, releasing flows, producing movement, and creating space for stillness, sitting and contemplation. Bags-people creating openings for ‘participat[ion] in the direct experience of a world in-forming’, which recognizes that ‘the subject does not precede this experience, it is in-formed by it’ (Manning, 2014, p. 164). Bags and bags-people produce endless potentialities. For example, the pecha kucha slideshow at the front of the room ongoing during all of this, created possibilities for spatial performance by dismantling the ‘front of the room’ because the bag stations have dismembered the four ‘normal’ quadrants of the room. Bags-related activity perfused the room until the room itself performed, its space trans-forming and its axis spinning widely away from its former function as a normative place for teaching. Bags as choreographic objects (Manning, 2013) – as catalyzers – rearrange the everyday classroom space by opening up new affiliations, affective relations, intimacies: a women’s sewing circle; a laughing interchange, a pass-by comment, a lingering look, an intensive deepening and slow diffusion. Bags co-compose fleeting actions which organize an ‘us’ in the here-and-now. Bags enable and constrain the way this text was written.

Perhaps bags have always been concert/ed co-conductors in a human-non-human choreography, it's just that 'we' haven't yet noticed they've been doing it! Bags have potential to urge us as scholars to think about our work and our lives differently. What is or remains stable, what is enabled, what is constrained: in the bags, in the beings, in the knowings, in the doings and more? We hope you, the reader, can also be drawn into our methodological bags choreographies which materialize past, present and future. The relational possibilities (with bags) are unlimited and always already here.

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