

Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives.
Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. 168 pp.

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Abstract

Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei's (2012) *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives* introduces a methodological and philosophical process with prismatic potential for analyzing data with and through theory. This book is a rich resource for qualitative educational researchers looking for new methods to approach their research differently. Searching for a way to read, think, research, and write with complex theory, the authors of this book review came together for a peer-led doctoral reading group. Given our disparate disciplinary commitments, as well as our uncertainty as to how to embark on such a task, our group coalesced around the approach offered in *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives*. Jackson and Mazzei implicitly propose the format of speed-dating theorists within their book, which we found ideal for our theoretically promiscuous reading group. We offer a window into our speed-dating experiences through a creatively flirty medium: dating service profiles. Like the profiles, the productivity of using *Thinking with Theory* as a guide for promiscuous theoretical thinking, researching, and writing is not in its prescription, but rather, in the emergence of different productions of knowledge that occur relationally.

Speed-dating Theorists through *Thinking with Theory*

Searching for a way to read, think, research, and write with complex theory, the five authors of this book review came together for a peer-led doctoral reading group at The University of British Columbia. Given our disciplinary commitments in museum education; place-based education; gender, sexuality, and schools; and Indigenous education—as well as our uncertainty as to how to embark on such a task—our group coalesced around the approach offered by Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei (2012) in *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives (TWT)*. Jackson and Mazzei implicitly propose speed-dating theorists,ⁱ a productive format that we describe in this review.

We found *Thinking with Theory* an ideal textual chaperone for our theoretically promiscuous reading group. *TWT* structured our approach to speed-dating theorists through the selection of the six theorists included in the book: Derrida, Spivak, Foucault, Butler, Deleuze, and Barad. Further, key concepts, or as they are referred to in *TWT*, “schematic cues”, which these theorists advance, are introduced: Derrida and deconstruction; Spivak and marginality; Foucault and power/ knowledge; Butler and performativity; Deleuze and desire; and Barad and intra-action. Jackson and Mazzei also demonstrate what might be produced when readers engage in thinking and researching with theory. The format of the book provides suggestions for metaphorical first dates with the six theorists in the form of primary (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1977/1983) and secondary text readings (see Colebrook, 2002). Recommendations are offered for follow-up dates with scholars who have gone steady with the six theorists by putting their theories to work in their respective qualitative research projects (see Jackson, 2004; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010; MacLure, 2009; Mazzei, 2011), as well as recommendations from researchers who have called off long-term relationships (see Tuck, 2010). In other words, Jackson and Mazzei suggest three layers of readings, including texts written by the theorists, texts by other scholars who closely study these six theorists, and research exemplars by scholars who use the theorists’ concepts in their research inquiries.

The book revolves around Jackson and Mazzei’s processes of reading what they call “data chunks” with and through the work of the six theorists. Jackson and Mazzei focus on data chunks from interviews they conducted with two first generation women in the academy, a category they trouble in the book through their “thinking with theory” process. Jackson and Mazzei describe thinking with theory as a methodological and philosophical process in which researchers analyze their data alongside theory in order to consider “how knowledge is opened up and proliferated rather than foreclosed and simplified” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p vii) in qualitative research. The authors’ explorations of “reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory”, which they describe “as a moment of plugging in, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives” (p. 4) illuminated for us how our own work could be shaped by the complexities of thinking and researching with theory as we also entered into these theoretical relationships. Jackson and Mazzei reveal the prismatic potential of thinking with theory through distinct, yet intertwined, workings of data chunks, as well as thinking data through theory.

In this review, we offer a window into our own speed-dating experiences through a creatively flirty medium: dating service profiles. In our imaginedⁱⁱ (acade)match.ca profiles below, we incorporate elements you might find on a dating site. The profiles include a headshot,ⁱⁱⁱ a description of some of the theorists’ scholarly interests^{iv}, and reviews by those who have dated the theorists. These profiles provide a playful recap of our academic dates with the six theorists included in *Thinking with Theory* and the ways these theories impact our educational scholarship and research. Like the profiles below, the generative value of using *TWT* as a guide for promiscuous theoretical thinking, researching, and writing is in the emergence of different productions of knowledge that occur relationally. As such, while there are traces of what these fledgling relationships have done for us in the following profiles, this review is an invitation for you, the reader, to think of what thinking with theory might do for you.

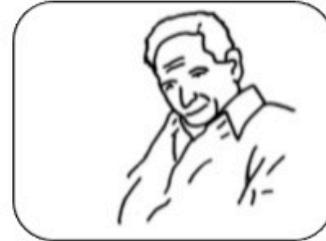
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Dating for Promiscuous Thought

♥ You have 1 new match: Jacques Derrida

What Jackson & Mazzei say about me:

Jackson and Mazzei are especially impressed with my ability to help guide academics into noting the "snags" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 30) and the productive destabilization of deconstruction (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, pp. 28-30). We had a great conversation about "[p]laces of irruption [that] tear the fabric of what is supposed to be—where language is strained, where meaning is missed, where destabilization occurs, and where excess produces a snagging that resists a closure" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 16). I think you can tell I left quite a lasting chain of impressions on Jackson and Mazzei, who were convinced my ideas about deconstruction can bring attention to events and excesses of race, class, and gender, which can lead to re-thinking institutional structures.



What I'm really good at:

People always come to me asking questions about deconstruction, but then they realize how much more there is to know. I can tell you about the trace of the absent present, being under-erasure, the aporetic, the event, and how signifier/ signified imposes meaning-making structures (Spivak, 1976).

Things I could never do without:

I will never give up on text. Nothing exists outside of it anyhow, so why try to go without it?

Reviewer: Marc Higgins

Comments: I am ever indebted to Derrida for the invitation to witness the deconstructive self-transgression of the concepts, categories, and constructs that I cannot (not) live without in decolonizing education. With/in these self-transgressions, decolonizing positionalities (e.g., (un)doing Susan Dion's perfect stranger in Higgins, Madden, & Korteweg, 2015) as well as pedagogies (e.g., border crossing and self-reflexivity in Higgins, 2014a) are always already exceeded by the (binary) otherness to which their identity is indebted: coloniality. Becoming levers to pry open these spaces, these excesses reveal new possibilities and problematics in the space that is de/colonizing education (e.g., deconstructive meta-methodological (mis)readings in Higgins, 2014b).

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♥ You have 1 new match: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

What Jackson & Mazzei say about me:

Jackson and Mazzei astutely notice what others sometimes fail to see, that I "[reject] postcolonialism as an adequate referent for the times because decolonization has not happened" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 36). They also understand my re-thinking of the relationship of margin and centre in identity politics in academic settings; where the margin is part of the centre, not held outside of the centre (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, pp. 37-38), and recognize the importance of Derrida and Foucault in shaping my own thinking and writing.



What I'm really good at:

I am always (already) disrupting and dislodging both the ways in which marginality operates within the academy, and the process of knowledge of the wholly other becoming fetish and falsity. I focus on the fixation of the self/other binary, not because it is a binary, but rather a binary whose politics, ethics, and ideologies I do not fear bringing to the forefront. And if not that, certainly how I'm always turning questions on their head; tell me, how do you (i.e., self) hear a call you cannot (bear to) hear (i.e., the wholly other)?

Things that drive me crazy:

Claims of justice for the other when the (ideological) self that is the absent present (First World) researcher is not placed under erasure. More so when it is under the ruse of letting the other speak for themselves. Also, strategic essentialism without the strategy. And people who seem under the spell of *Gayatrichakravortyphobia*, and always want me to speak with less complexity (Chakravorty, 2010). If you want to date me, you need to live with my complicated thinking.

Reviewer: Brooke Madden

Comments: Thinking with Spivak's marginality challenges me to deconstruct the view that decolonized/colonized neatly maps onto Indigenous education/teacher education within the teaching machine. Plugging into marginality produces new analytical questions: How are decolonizing concepts, spaces, and practices shaped in relationship with, or even produced through, coloniality? How is the margin coded and valued for authenticity and essence through separation? How do these cuts reify and limit possibilities for teaching subjects (e.g., Indigenous teacher as 'cultural expert')? With Spivak, I am reminded that decolonizing work is always within/against coloniality. For example, I can use essentialism strategically, while looking to Indigenous knowledge for models of plurality.

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♥ You have 1 new match: Michel Foucault

What Jackson & Mazzei say about me:

While others continue to try to figure out how people come to power, I am far more interested in what power *produces* (see Foucault, 1977, p. 194). Jackson and Mazzei understand this about me, and go further in working with my ideas about how power and knowledge intersect and circulate in the daily lives of the women in their research. They probe and utilize what I am trying to say about how the "power/knowledge doublet captures how people's actions are local reactions and responses, even struggles and resistances, and are temporarily embedded within specific, and shifting, relations of power" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 49).



What I'm really good at:

Scholars and theorists (such as Deleuze and Spivak) have been interested in my analysis of the relationships between power, knowledge, discourse, and the subject. If you are looking for a discursive treatment of power/knowledge in schools, museums, or other institutions, I'm your theorist.

Things that drive me crazy:

I dislike essences and origins and I get irritated when people misquote me by saying knowledge *is* power. That's not what I said! Thankfully, Jackson and Mazzei do understand my work and clearly examine how power and knowledge "express one another" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 54).

Reviewer: Marie-France Berard

Comments: Although I do not turn to Foucault in my doctoral research, Foucault's writings on the archaeology of knowledge and discourse have critically shaped my thinking about the disciplines of art history/museum education and the art exhibition as a discursive space. After re-discovering Foucault through the lens of Jackson and Mazzei, I find most generative his conception of the power/knowledge doublet as *producing* the subject. If the museum can be analyzed as a site where institutional, discursive power operates, what would it mean to conceptualize the museum public as already in relationship to the discursive power of the institution/exhibition? In various ways, museum audiences disrupt exhibition discourses, thereby opening spaces for the production of new subjectivities.

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♥ You have 1 new match: Judith Butler

What Jackson & Mazzei say about me:

We obviously had to have repeated conversations to learn more about how the three of us are constituting each other, and how Jackson and Mazzei are co-constituting the women in their studies. I really appreciate how they understand my re-thinking of agency as simultaneous reproduction and contestation of gender categories (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 67), yet wonder if they would question how my ideas about performativity relate to racialized identity categories (we only hinted at that conversation). All the same, we agree (at least momentarily) that "language *produces* the discursive possibilities of performance and therefore 'the doer' becomes an effect of that language" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 68).



What I'm really good at:

Re-examining the gender binary, re-examining notions of gender and sex altogether (Butler, 1990, 1993), talking about power and subjectivity (Butler, 1997), and the possibility of inter-subjective ethics (Butler, 2004). I am great at prompting people to question if they can ever 'see' people without noticing the aspects of the material body that are shaped by the cultural and discursive powers that constitute an apparently cohesive 'self' into being. I prompt people to ask, is their 'seeing' of others possible without the discursive influences of the hailings and citations that enact all the 'selves' into being? Is there even an essential 'self' to see?

Things I could never do without: Discourse. Language. Power.

What I'm looking for:

I'm just a discursively produced subject looking to explore the limits of intelligibility in this socially constructed world we live in—or, I guess, are co-constituted by. Looking for somebody—some-bodies that matter (Butler, 1993)—who agrees that language is of the upmost importance. I'm not one for labels, so if you're into tossing off the normativizing boxes that constrain us, you should definitely drop me a line.

Reviewer: Sam Stiegler

Comments: I have dabbled around with Butler before but never this intensely. I'll admit I previously misunderstood what she was saying about performativity. I used to think it was all about performing, but I am seeing it is more complex. For instance, Gilbert's (2014) use of Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2004) reflects on how, in recounting their experiences of misery as youth, queer adults' desire to wrap queer youth into similar histories enacts an "ethical violence" that only sees queer youth through the lens of queer adults. Gilbert's reading of Butler reminds me to analyze the normativizing forces associated with the assumption that one can point to a youth and declare them to be "like me".

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Dating for Promiscuous Thought

♥ You have 1 new match: Gilles Deleuze

What Jackson & Mazzei say about me:

Fantastic date. Jackson and Mazzei obviously know the process of plugging in data/theory (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 5), and thinking in terms of how a concept *functions*, rather than what it is or means. Interestingly, I expected them to think with my concepts of the minor, micropolitics, or even becoming (Stivale, 2005), but they chose desire. Our conversation was generative because we work with the idea that "desire ...is not a 'thing' or a characteristic, but rather a force" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 92). We desire not because we lack something, but "because of the forces and actions that are actively becoming" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 87; see also, Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/1983).



What I'm really good at:

Creating philosophical concepts. Like my friend Foucault (although we did have a rift), I am not interested in essences or origins, hence I do not ask what a concept *is*, but how it functions. My philosophy is rooted in a sense of usefulness, in how we might live in *this* world.

Things I could never do without:

Encounters...that's why I love to visit art galleries every weekend and watch films. A film is creative; a living thing, and art can take you on a new line of flight. I also loved working with Felix Guattari; not always easy, but very stimulating; it was a proliferation. We created a rhizomatic web of concepts.

Things that drive me crazy:

Psychoanalysis and especially the fixation on the Oedipus complex! Since Lacan, the unconscious has become an enterprise for crushing any production of utterances! Desire is NOT something that you lack! Desire is productive; it always wants to create more connections. Your unconscious is not a theatre; it's a factory, a producing machine!

Reviewer: Marie-France Berard

Comments: Like Tuck (2010), my first meeting with Deleuze was rather "dizzying, and not quite pleasant" (cited in Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 85). Reading Jackson and Mazzei plug in their data with Deleuzian concepts of desire and assemblage as a productive force was a revelation. In my doctoral research, I ask, "What would happen if I inquired into the art encounter with/as a desiring assemblage?" Adopting a post-qualitative approach to research, I do not seek to represent what the art encounter *is* but rather, examine and think differently how it *functions* within the entanglement of bodies, [art] objects, discourses, and spaces.

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Dating for Promiscuous Thought

♥ You have 1 new match: Karen Barad

What Jackson & Mazzei say about me:

Through meeting me, Jackson and Mazzei are able to think in completely different ways about their research. After all, they say that my work helps them consider in their research "how these constructions and interactions, then, are not just about bodies, nor just about words, but about the mutual production of both subjectivities and performative enactments" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 111). We had excellent talks about my ideas on intra-activity and diffraction, though I do wonder if they have fully taken up my insistence on how matter matters (Barad, 2007).



What I'm really good at:

Neologisms and putting old words to better use are my thing: diffraction, discourse-matter, intra-action, agential realism, ethico-ontoepistemology, distributed agency, spacetime-matter, and posthumanist performativity. And just when you thought that objectivity had only one meaning, I've swooped in to re-think this term too.

Things I could never do without:

My pals Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Niels Bohr are almost always at my side when I head out on philosophical journeys. I love what they have to say about discourse, performativity, and complementarity. I also can't do without double-headed arrows (see Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 110)!

Things that drive me crazy:

When people talk as if matter doesn't matter. Matter is dynamic and shapes knowing in being, just as talking shapes knowing in being. Matter matters. Discourse matters. And they matter together (Barad, 2007).

Reviewer: Elsa Lenz Kothe

Comments: Scholars who are rethinking educational research by taking seriously human and non-human agents in educational settings (i.e., Kuntz & Presnall, 2012; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010) are guided by Barad's work. Barad prompted me to reconsider how art objects and visitors in museum spaces influence one another. I was further inspired to use walking interview methods by Kuntz and Presnall (2012), who were so taken by their date with Barad that they renamed interviews "intraviews" and walked with research collaborators through and outside of school spaces to understand the post-human productions that were generated from the intra-actions of stories, spaces, places, and material objects in teaching.

What *Thinking with Theory* (Dis)Allows

Our speed-dating encounters guided by *Thinking with Theory* proved valuable, particularly since Jackson and Mazzei introduce methods for keeping the spark alive by their encouragement to think in complex ways about multi-faceted topics through challenging theories. We were fully persuaded to “go to each of the theorists because they help us think something that we cannot think otherwise, or with anyone else” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 15). While the neologism of “thinking with theory” is nothing new as scholars have been “thinking with” for years (e.g., Deleuze’s [1988] *Foucault*), the concept is nonetheless an important and continued commitment to making explicit, transparent, and intentional the theories with which we think.

One cautionary note, no reader should expect this book to be a comprehensive analysis of the writings of the theorists included; rather, *Thinking with Theory* should be used as an entry point to one major scholarly contribution from each of the six prolific thinkers. To fully realize the value of *TWT*, we advise that readers follow the format suggested by Jackson and Mazzei, namely, to read primary texts, secondary texts, and research exemplars along with *TWT*. Though *TWT* is a rich resource in itself, there could be multiple volumes of dating guides taking up the subtleties of the six theorists’ concepts, additional concepts by these theorists, as well as the theoretical work of other scholars. Furthermore, the relationships with theorists fostered and encouraged by *TWT*, like with any relationship, require work. As Lather (2007) reminds us, part of this scholarly work is to allow oneself to be vulnerable to theory or wounded by thought if one wishes to think, and ultimately live, otherwise.

Jackson and Mazzei provide a methodological approach that nudges qualitative researchers out of habitual patterns of data analysis through entertaining relationships with theory and theorists. *Thinking with Theory* makes clear that this book is an entry point into a mode of thinking, researching, and analyzing that allows scholars to research differently and that is always in motion. Therefore, when read as invited by the authors, that is, an introduction to Jackson and Mazzei’s philosophical and methodological approach to engaging productively with theory, *Thinking with Theory* guides the way to make a first move towards finding one’s theoretical life-partner(s).

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Notes

ⁱ Speed-dating theorists, or quickly working through major writings by theorists and related theoretical and research texts in order to find a theoretical match, is a format also explored elsewhere by educational researchers (e.g., Childers, Mazzei, Koro-Ljungberg, Daza, Jackson & Rosiek, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Our imagined profiles are just that—projections of how we think the theorists might fill in this information. As this is a playful exercise, we are not attempting to represent or make coherent the theorists and their theories by speaking *as* or *about* them; rather, we offer these profiles as situated moments of our own thinking *with* these theorists, that is, taking up our own lines of thought prompted by these theorists' ideas. This counters, as Butler (2004) urges, the “ethical violence” that necessitates that one consider themselves and others coherent in every moment (p. 27).

ⁱⁱⁱ All images in the profiles were drawn by Marc Higgins.

^{iv} The terms “under erasure” in Derrida’s profile, and “binary” in Spivak’s profile are struck through in order to indicate Derrida’s theoretical concepts of the trace and being under erasure, which is also used and expanded upon by Spivak. Being under erasure indicates that despite attempts to theoretically move beyond through ceasing the use of certain concepts, like a binary, those concepts still exist referentially through traces, even when absent.