Videography as Refrain

Diffraction with Forward, Backward and Stop in a Preschool Outing

Theresa Giorza

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

theresa.giorza@wits.ac.za

Abstract

A public park adjacent to an inner-city preschool invites children and their teacher into new encounters with the world, literacy and themselves. The park and preschool are situated in the inner-city of Johannesburg, South Africa. In this article, the researcher performs as mutated-modest-witness of events that unfold in lively materialdiscursive encounters between children, grass, friendship, a pen, cement table, sand, sticks, the alphabet and daylight. The agential realism of Karen Barad and the nomadic thinking of Deleuze and Guattari offer ways of re-imagining 'the child in the park'. Diffracting with repeated viewings of video clips the researcher finds that forward and reverse movement and stops in different moments throughout repeated viewings of the same video footage produces different and new 'stories' about the events and the children involved. Conceptions of 'child' as literacy learner and of researcher-as-writer mutate through this diffraction which instantiates a non-representational videography practice.

Keywords

affect – diffraction as method – learning as worlding

The lives of children have historically been closely connected with the lives of their mothers and the domestic or inside space. Increasingly and largely due to developments in women's rights and the growth of formal childcare and education spaces, children are becoming recognized as having lives independent of their mothers and even their families and are considered as an independent social group (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013). Deleuze and Guattari's lyrical chapter entitled 1837: *Of the refrain* creates the image of a

child venturing out from home into a strange world as if at the beginning of time, “One ventures from home on the thread of a tune” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 311). A familiar tune or a circular walk creates a safe and generative space and allows for new openings and gradually extended boundaries.

The research project that this article is based on was my doctoral research that involved a group of reception year children in a small not-for-profit daycare centre and preschool in Johannesburg. Photo and video permissions were obtained from all the children and their parents and from the teacher and ethics clearance granted by my university. Exploring the intertwined roles of artist, teacher and researcher, (Irwin, & de Cosson, 2004; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008; Irwin, 2013) and following Malaguzzi's concept of the “environment as third teacher” (Gandini, 2012), I used video and photography to document the experience of my own and the children's learning with this particular time and place. The preschool was adjacent to a public park to which the children's teacher took them several times a week during their play time. On each occasion the outing to the park resembled a maiden voyage of sorts. Every outing was different and the park offered new encounters and events. In their relatively brief life experience, children are likely to experience these adventures as important and memorable. The place of the park, with all its layers of history and prehistory is ancient and has stories that tell themselves in different ways. The past is here in the present. Perhaps we can read the stories in the age of the trees, the lines of the buildings around the park? The trees mark a time of planting (the establishment of the city of Johannesburg) and a taking of ownership. The trees are exotic species marking the space as a colonized urban space. Some of the seeds and seedlings for the large central Joubert park were donated by Kew Royal Botanic Gardens when the city of Johannesburg was established in 1887 (Cane, 2016, p. 151). This smaller park is a similar marking of civilized, ordered recreational space established a short while later. As Huffman (2010) notes, this highveld plane had few trees in the pre-colonial period, necessitating the building of stone enclosures rather than wooden ones. The grassland is invisible beneath the ‘urban forest’ of exotic jacarandas that line the city streets. Circles of stone enclosures are buried beneath the circles of colonial acquisition. Circles of marking and taming and re-marking continue. Children in the park dance their circles of playful endeavor, making a home together with this welcoming treed neighbor-space that they visit daily.

In this piece of writing, I diffract Barad's notions of difference and diffraction, both spatial and temporal, with Deleuze and Guattari's lyrical refrain: the sing-song same-same rhythmic repetitions that re-

iterate and reassure but that also, in their sameness, draw attention to the tiny changes and the spaces in-between that allow the unexpected and the new and unanticipated to enter. As mutated-modest-witness (Haraway, 1997), already part of and implicated in the events I witness, and in a cyborg form of human-with-camera, I/we dance among the intra-actions and entanglements of spacetime to find new multi-sensory narratives of learning and becoming.

Lefebvre (1991) notes that modernism has removed the visible traces of time from our environment. Now time is only visible on clocks where it can be regularized, made strictly chronological and also can be bought. Barad (2014) wants us to recognize time as “phenomenal” just as space is. The past is not gone and irretrievable and fixed. It is present now and implicated in the present and the future and produced differently and intra-actively “in the making of phenomena” (Barad, 2014, p. 181). In venturing outside one leaves the order of the home space which was created to provide stillness and safety (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.362). While this order always has the potential for disorder and change, the striations of the school and its systems are powerful materialdiscursive controls. Time in the park is made possible by the ‘free’ space allocated on the ‘daily program’ that hangs on the wall exerting its order on the day. To some extent, in the park, one contends more often with the disorder of chaos, and the world “worlding” (Barad, 2007, p. 392): one part of the world making itself known to another part (Barad, 2007, p. 335; p. 379). It is important not to see the attention to the park space as a move into a dualism of inside and outside – both are mutually constituted and are always folding into one another. Thresholds are important middle spaces made possible by the movement from one to the other and the intra-action of the shades or variations of inside-ness and outside-ness, further complicated by the outside of the inside and the inside of the outside. Movement and energies in all of these kinds of spaces are constantly decoding and recoding – ordering (into striations) and going off on lines of flight (smoothing out). Quantum physics undoes the notion of inside/outside, as it shows the tiniest part of the universe, “a force extending a mere millionth of a billionth of a meter in length” (Barad, 2017, p. 63) reaching “global proportions” and destroying entire cities. Energy and time are forces that can disrupt all our comfortable Newtonian explanations about place and time and the sequential processes of cause and effect.

Here I offer some stories of learning experiences that take place in and with the public park close to the preschool by way of an assemblage of

image and text. The images are offered as frozen, stop-frame selections from re-turnings, re-runnings, and re-versings of video material. The accompanying text attempts to track or mark particular agential cuts in which video practices have agency (Murris & Babamia, 2018). According to Barad, an agential cut is the only possible description of reality: it is a mapping of an intra-action within a phenomenon that makes no claim to universal or essential truth. The intra-acting visual and verbal notes are propositions for working in experimental ways with and among human and nonhuman forces in education.

I explore the affordance of a park as a place of potential, change, chaos and virtuality rather than as the 'natural' antidote to too much concrete, indoor-time, and stale air. Parks and gardens have featured strongly in the early childhood discourse either as Fröbelian representations of 'nature', innocence, purity and growth (Taylor, 2011) or as a source of curative physical activity and controlled secure surveillance (Knight, 2016). These notions of 'park-as-nature' position us (me, the teacher and the children) as outside of 'nature' or the 'world'. What becomes visible through this diffractive account is an intra-active curriculum: a thinking-with-the-park where desire leads and connects human and nonhuman in a mutually affecting and constantly emergent world(ing) (Thiele, 2014, p. 208). For Barad, diffraction is a concept that connects and makes noticeable the way the world works as an integrated and unified entanglement of forces. Her famous example of waves behaving both as collections of particles but also as "disturbances" (Barad, 2010, p. 252) helps to make this concept clearer. Waves meet other waves and become different and cause different patterns of disturbance but can still be measured as individual particles (by a particular device). Events and entities both macro and micro, inside and outside, living and non-living are all implicated in the on-going becoming of the world and the universe (one or many). Diffraction as a concept is about our taking on our always changing subjectivities (in relation), responding to what these connected subjectivities mean and acting ethically within these relationships. Ontology (being) cannot be separated from epistemology (knowing) or from ethics (doing). Worlding (Barad, 2007, p. 392) and becoming worldly with (Haraway, 2008, p. 3) are both ways of recognizing our inseparability as a 'becoming together'. Haraway's biological sciences perspective starts from an inter-species "withness" (Guigni, 2011, p. 11) while Barad's quantum physics framing takes the behavior of particles as an entry point. Both demand that we acknowledge that human creatures (and the cells, chemicals and atoms of which we are made) cannot be afforded 'other' or outside status. This

‘objective’ outsider status, often referred to as a Cartesian subject, positions (some) humans as separate and superior knowers, knowing the world as outside and distinct and unaffected by the impacts of their/our knowledge producing machinery. We are of the world, the universe, and like all other parts of it, we can and do impact profoundly on the conditions for one another’s being and becoming. It matters that diffraction is central to the methodology put to work in this article and the research that generated it.

1 Dancing with Letters

One morning in September, I accompany the class and their teacher on a visit to the park. The class come here often as it is actually their ‘back yard’, only a fence and a gate separate their centre from this public space. All of the children start to run immediately we are in the space. Some do cartwheels and forward rolls. There is a slope on one side of the park and this means that one can lie down and roll down the slope. This brings delight and shrieks. An airplane flies overhead. The noise of the airplane combined with the thrill of rolling down the grassy slope creates what Dewey would call “an experience” and for Barad – this is one part of the world making itself known to another, a monist intra-activity of affect. The world worlding. The teacher notices how the children are taken by this moment and she remarks: “Wow, that was exciting!”.

FIGURE 1 Handstand with froggy shadow

FIGURE 2 Blurry leg

FIGURE 3 Hoodie cartwheel

FIGURE 4 Rolling down/with a grassy slope

My camera is turned on but I am not only being photographer, making photographs. As I engage with questions and conversations, losing my focus on filming or photographing, the camera continues to record visuals and sound, just as my lungs continue to breathe. After a day in the 'field', I download all the photos and video clips. My computer saves them in numbered sequence. Over time I view and review the clips and still photographs and select the pictures that I think are worth saving. Two pictures caught my eye: One is of three children drawing together in the sand. Some of the marks made in the sand are recognizable as letters of the alphabet, others look abstract. The other picture that stood out was the picture of the grey cement table with the thin spidery lines making up an A and an M. This image is much more compelling than the real object was, flattened as it is against the picture plane or paper surface. It has the allure of ancient Roman graffiti or Northern Cape rock engravings. There is something ancient and precious about these children's marks: ancient in that the signs have come down the ages although now they are being repeated as fresh, new and exciting discoveries. The texture and color of the weathered cement table has a surprising beauty and subtleness.

I consider which clips I think I should transcribe. I create stills from some of the video clips to help me to identify narrative sequences I can work with. Sometimes I give the clips descriptive titles so that they are easier to locate. Re-turning (to) some of the video footage, I hear voices that come from outside of the camera's view that I had previously not noticed. I am accustomed to favouring the visual aspect of video and now am forced to

listen more carefully, replay the footage and decipher the audio content, much of which has been incorporated without my knowledge or choosing. The apparatus offers me new views of a past that is not fixed but returning in new ways. The video footage gives me access to events that at the time were peripheral to my view and consciousness. As I re-turn to the series of short clips I made over that one day, I un-do my selections and re-make connections between them and a chronology rewinds. A story begins to emerge from the digital material. The 'voices off' in the earliest piece of video mark the beginning of Marla's enquiry into the mysteries of writing, "I found a pen!". In another section of video I hear her voice again: "Do you know how to do an 'A'?" The vignette that initially drew my attention was the scene with the three girls drawing in the sand and then dancing together before leaving the park to return to the Centre. I had manually transcribed this one short piece and became familiar with it. Gradually the connections between it and the other clips appear like invisible writing revealed by a flame. The drawing on the table is connected to the drawing in the sand. The discovery of the pen and the paper started a whole story off. It began with one child and drew in her friends. It held her attention throughout the cartwheels and *bolamakisi* (head-over-heels) and even through the game of duck, duck, goose.

2 Re-turning with Marla and Paper: The MarlaPaper Assemblage

"I found a pen!", Marla says, excitedly, showing me her treasure. 'Should I hold it for you? Oh, its broken,' I say. Ballpoint pens are usually not made available for children to write with in the Grade R year. Their writing is limited to writing their name on their artwork and usually with pencil. Some teachers favor wax crayon as no attempts can be erased. Marla is not giving up on this pen that has arrived unsolicited into her hands, even if it is oozing ink. Marla notices a piece of white paper floating past. It calls to her in its whiteness, its flatness, its rightness for her literacy desiring pen. This is its "thing-power" (Bennett, 2010); its capacity to affect. In Baradian terms, Marla and pen become a phenomenon of intra-acting agency. She responds, catches it, and tries to write.

FIGURE 5 Chasing paper

FIGURE 6 Writing playground

FIGURE 7 Paper pen friends

Friends and paper and pen. Marla's connection with the pen draws in her friend who becomes part of the assemblage for a while. At what point does she ask me if I know how to do an 'A'? Who else did she ask? Can I write on a leaf?

FIGURE 8 Writing on a leaf

She finds another piece of paper – a label or package of some kind. The flotsam of consumerist urban living is rich treasure for a wording worlding humanpen assemblage.

FIGURE 9 Packaging as writing surface

The children are all called together to play a game of ‘duck duck goose’. Marla and the pen are still intensely connected and cannot be disengaged. Unlike the intense speeding up of the discovery of the pen, this is a slower consolidating time. Marla sits still, her whole body focused on her important new tool, now a part of her cyborg becoming-writer. Her hour in the park has been taken over by this pen. The disturbance of her state is not due the pen, but rather to the in-between of Marla and the pen. The affect causes disturbance, things are not the same. The smooth and the striated spaces of curriculum are not discrete and separate, but flow and change one into the other. The game of duck duck goose coordinates the movements of all the children and precedes their return to the more formal space of the preschool building. It draws on the schooling they have received with regard to responding to instructions, making a circle, controlling their individual impulses. These are the striations of a structured pedagogy.

FIGURE 10 Duck duck goose matters less

The park table: a flat, textured surface invites Marla to try out her letters. She defends her hold on the pen from one of the boys who tries to snatch it away: “It’s mine!” she claims. Not so much possession or ownership as a cyborg becoming. She and her friend, Mbali, make letters on the table. Marla has painfully short, bitten nails and her fingers on her right hand are now stained with the marks of a writer. My impulse is to psychologize and pathologize and to assign a cause for this effect (nail biting caused by stress and always definable in terms other than normal, healthy and complete). This urge is disrupted by my own sense of the complex materialdiscursive phenomenon that is nail biting, as nail biter myself. I consider the complex intra-action of inside and outside that produce the conditions that result in nail biting. They are intense affects that produce material results. So I choose instead to acknowledge and appreciate Marla’s capacity for intensity. Her urgent and intense relation with the pen today is another expression of her “capacity to affect and be affected” by what she encounters. “Spinoza asks: What can a body do? We call the *latitude* of a body the affects of which it is capable at a given degree of power, or rather within the limits of that degree. *Latitude is made up of intensive parts falling under a capacity, and longitude of extensive parts falling under a relation.*” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 299–300; emphasis in the original). In this way, both her capacity for action and her connection with the things around her make her who she is in this event. The concept of molecular becoming that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explore at length in their chapter entitled “1730: Becoming intense, becoming animal,

becoming-imperceptible" (pp. 271–360) uses a non-Cartesian, Spinozist ontology in which qualities of bodies and objects can only be expressed in relation to what they do: "A race-horse is more different from a workhorse than a workhorse is from an ox" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 257). The longitude of the body is the name given to "the particle aggregates belonging to that body in a given relation; these aggregates are part of each other depending on the composition of the relation that defines the individuated assemblage of the body" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 256). An individuated assemblage coheres with Barad's intra-actions that "cut together-apart (in one movement)" (Barad, 2011, p. 125). The entangled phenomenon is an assemblage of elements that produce one another through the relation, none of them pre-existing the event. The impulse to interpret the event in the park as expressions of individual identities, abilities, personalities, or interests and intentions of particular children misses the flow of immanence that continually creates the world in its infinite and endless possible actualizations.

The child and the writer are in relation. Writer becomes child and child becomes writer -in parts. The pen-holding fingers and the hand-eye of the writer take away molecules from the dancing child. In an intra-active assemblage of Barad, Bennet and Deleuze and Guattari, the thing-power of the pen and the molecular becoming-writer interferes with the child dancing.

FIGURE 11 Park table holding hands

Fingers can be bitten, and fingers can hold pens and become blue with ink. Fingers can also do friendship. Marla and Mbali hold each other's fingers in a tentative sign of closeness in a beginning friendship emerging in their shared thinking with the park. The imposition of a system of verbal, written culture onto the hundred languages of orality, movement and dance, drawing, and friend-making seems like a kind of violence. Many early years teachers claim that parents put pressure on them to get their children writing long before their Grade R year. Student teachers return from their teaching experience placements with reports of three-year-olds sitting at tables for most of the school day. While corporal punishment is illegal, punitive practices are rife (Murris, 2013). The normalization of sitting at tables for extended periods may seem to an adult like a mild form of discomfort but is a harsh form of restraint and a gross violation of the purpose of education. The materialdiscursive power of the school readiness agenda is a diffraction of future time in the present. The downward force of literacy is a force from future time that intensifies Marla's capacity to enact her literacy moves for better or for worse. The discourse of preparation and 'readiness' materially affects Marla and her intra-active becomings with the children, park, the pen, the table, the sand.

FIGURE 12 Table as writing surface

The three girls move to the sandy patch near the table. Human and nonhuman intra-actions speed up and slow down the intensities of engagement. Speeded up moments of thrilling new discovery are interspersed with slower less intense gatherings of thought, re-doing and doing differently again.

FIGURE 13 Writing in the sand

Marks in the sand. Sticks work well as writing tools and there are more of them to go around. All three girls now draw together. What comes first? The letters or the images? First letters then images. The letter is abandoned. Mbali draws a girl with long hair: a familiar visual refrain. K says she is drawing a king. We are now in the world of princesses, princes and kings.

FIGURE 14 Drawing a girl

How does a princess dance? You need a prince. Who will be the prince? Oracy returns to the intra-action. I am struck by the ease at which the girls move from their stick drawing to their storying, to their dancing. The elegant expressiveness of Marla's movements in her solo dance contrast so strongly with the more constrained and contained movements I see in the tight spaces indoors and in her intense, perhaps anxious "literacy desiring" limiting her movements to eye and hand.

FIGURE 15 Dancing with the park 1

FIGURE 16 Dancing with the park 2

3 Refrain: Cutting Together-apart – Otherwise/Again

The girls end their park-ing with this dance and we go back inside. In this thinking-with; writing-with; drawing-with the park, the lightness of this teacher's hold on the curriculum makes this encounter possible. She has left spaces or cracks for the incidental and the unexpected to enter. She is assisted by this space just next door. It is always there but always different, in ways that are beyond her control or choosing. The arrival of a pen on this occasion set off a string of events for Marla and her friends and for me. Their assemblage of desire propelled them into the flow of intensity that waxed and waned and moved location around the park. For others there were parallel events going on unnoticed by me and my camera. The becoming-dancer and becoming-prince enter in a defiant nonsense-making (Wohlwend, Peppler, Keune, & Thompson, 2017) that reasserts the power of a "hundred hundred" languages (Malaguzzi, nd.).

The park is not a definable feature in a city with predetermined qualities like 'nature', 'play space', 'fresh air'. The park and everything in it: plants, creatures, equipment, people, constitute an infinite number of intra-active phenomena with fluid and changing characteristics and the capacity to make 'child' intelligent. If we can make a cut to see the disturbance patterns that are created when parts come together and make themselves known to one another, and specifically these children, their teacher and this park space, we can appreciate the complex workings of a park-preschool assemblage as a material-discursive assemblage of learning. This is a 'worlding' of which we are all a part, in our fully natural fully cultural becomings, part of and response-able for and with one another.

Moving backwards and forwards and making different stops along the way in both directions with the footage gives me as researcher a view of the event and child that is repeatedly new. New virtualities are created in the in-between of my intense latitudinal capacity to respond with and to the digital material, camera apparatus, and photoshop software and my extensive longitudinal connectivity with the park, the children, their teacher, schooling and research. The "hundred hundred" multisensory and multimodal ways that children encounter and engage with literacy and becoming-literate are also the ways that this learning works for me as researcher: the video material invites me to diffract practice, experience and memory through time, through theory, and through the superposition of waves of viewings, re-viewings, re-turnings, re-workings and re-writings: creating rhythmic refrains of becoming-writer/researcher, not yet finished.

This article draws attention to an enacted ethics of worlding: a relational and response-able positioning within the phenomenon of child/park/literacy/researcher. This positioning or 'cut' was made with the apparatus of videography and through an acknowledgement of the entangled and co-constituting subjectivities of the human and non-human, animate and inanimate elements that make up the world of which we are a part. It is beyond the scope of this article to unpack all of the implications of current literacy teaching practices but it does join with the activist moves of scholars in the field who have taken up an ethico-onto-epistemology. Both the micro and macro worlds of one day in/with the park, and a global and historical human-centered pattern of teaching and learning and becoming literate are made visible through the use of the apparatus that is children-park-camera-researcher-teacher.

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