Worlding with Kin

Diffraction Childfish Sensorial Ecological Encounters through Moving Image

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Abstract

Bodies sensing ecologically is a concept the author uses in order to imagine how children can engage/communicate with the more-than-human-world prior to language acquisition. Meaning through bodies; sensual knowing emerges as the means for making sense of things in the act of sensing. A very young child finding ways to be with nonhuman animals; plants; the weather; water; and materials in their everyday is described a sensorial ecological encounter. Postqualitative methods and posthumanist approaches feature as central, diffractive analysis explores difference as connections and relations within and between different bodies, affecting each other and being affected.

Keywords

sensorial ecological encounters – early childhood – postqualitative research – diffractive theorising – posthumanist feminist approaches – walking methodologies

FEATURE Karen Malone's article is based on the film 'Childfish Encounter' which can be viewed [here](#).

1 Worldings of Sensorial Imaginaries

There is an urgent need to supplement the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject.

WHATMORE 2006 cited LORIMER 2010, p. 237

Lorimer citing Sarah Whatmore (2006) brings our attention to the importance of seeking different approaches to exploring the multiplicity of subjects in our posthuman research studies. In the research study this paper draws on I am reconfiguring possibilities through video episodes to capture sensorial ecological encounters without (or limited) talk or text. The challenge is to reconfigure "our habitual and anthropocentric ways of seeing that are most often taken for granted in analysis of educational data" (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 526). The camera eye attunes me to child-worlding bodies; ongoing gestural roles of children in relations with the non-human. In short but complex episodes the images find spaces for the pauses, the silences, the recognition of ecological kin tracings. Like the tendrils of a floating sea jelly, rising and falling in the waves pulsating; worldings of sensorial ecological imaginaries leave traces behind in the moving images. I am searching for

them, data that has a sensorium glow. As Latham and McCormack (2009) suggest (cited Lorimer 2010, p. 239) “the force of images is not just representational. Images are also blocks of sensation with an affective intensity: they make sense not just because we take time to figure out what they signify, but also because their pre-signifying affective materiality is felt in bodies”. The image whether a moving image or static has often been viewed in educational data as the essential replication of the representation, a classic cause and effect can be read into what we observe in the retelling. To counteract this very linear view of representation a diffractive analysis is adopted that seeks the means for recounting interference and difference as central to the possibilities of analysing the video (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Each reading can be different; adding more complexity more possibilities. Questions continue to arise and are unanswered; the sensorial companion bodies only tell some of the story through gesture; most is speculation. But there is no desire to tell it as it is or what happened in these encounters but to open up opportunities for multiple readings.

This study considers how parents and early years educators might support public pedagogical practices by engaging with these moving images – video captures – as the tool for noticing and attuning to a young child’s sensorial encounters as a central component of their everyday, place-based happenstance. The study builds on a long history of research on children’s experiences of natural environments and the unique opportunities that sensory rich interactions with the environment can provide (Abram 1996; Beery and Jorgensen, 2018; Carson and Pratt, 1965; Chawla, 1994; Cobb 1993; Gill 2011; Lekies and Beery 2013; Malone and Tranter 2005; Malone and Waite, 2016; Nabhan and Trimble 1994; Rautio 2013; Sobel 2002, 2008; Wells and Lekies 2006). What makes this research study distinctive though is its emphasis on very young children, children’s ecological bodies who are ‘pre-human word literate and pre-naming’. Wren is 2 years old in the video she visits the aquarium and a range of other ecological locations where she engages with kin (animals and non animal kin) on a regular basis as part of everyday life. She is pre-language in that she is only beginning to name things. But language in this instance is only one language among many and the emphasis on the video is not whether she speaks audible words but that the language communicated between her and the kin animal (the fish in this case) is not dominated or privileged by a desire to communicate, name using the settlers language but through her sensorial body. Postqualitative methods and posthumanist approaches feature as central in the study, with diffractive analysis allowing for the exploration of difference as connection and relation

within and between different companion bodies, each affecting the other and being affected.

2 Sensorial Worlds

Bodies sensing ecologically is a concept I am using in order to imagine how children engage/communicate with the more-than-human-world prior to 'human language and naming'. A child finding ways to be with nonhuman animals; plants; the weather; water; and materials through their bodies. Indeed, through this research you could say I am attempting to map a child's response to entities sensorially. To embark on this research with children there is a need to be attentive to the very subtle encounters and sensitivities of a child with her/other bodies. Engaging with the writings of Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) where the child is emergent in a relational field, "a space in which non-human forces are equally at play and work as constitutive factors in children's learning and becomings" (p. 257). I am therefore challenging "anthropocentric ways of seeing and doing analysis of educational data" (p. 257). Looking for pedagogies outside of learning that is observation and language focused.

Massumi (2015) explains that attending more closely to understandings of nonhumans garnered from the practice and experience of co-relationality allows us to be open to learning to be 'affected' by what we experience rather than documenting what we observe. Snaza et. al (2014) suggest bodies as sensorial objects can attune to our relationality with others; Ingold (2010) speaks of attending to it. Jean Luc Nancy (1997) identifies beings-in-common as the means for acknowledging our coexistence in the world with a range of others and Marisol de la Cadena (2015) drawing on her work with Indigenous peoples in the Andes proposes we are all 'more than one – less than many'.

Meaning through bodies; sensual knowing emerges as the means for making sense of things in the act of sensing. In Le Breton's (2018) recent book *'Sensing the World'* he describes the shift in his thinking from an engagement with the anthropology of the body to an anthropology of the senses. Emerging from the work in the 70s from scholars such as Foucault who focused on the 'body' as an object with the body and the senses (mind or knowing) separated, in contrast, Le Breton is interested in how the body was the existential ground for perception and being "before thought there is feeling" (2018, p. 1). My research reclaims the presence-ing of the body as in the inbetween; assemblages of knowing and being, sensing and sense-making.

Children's experiences of close relations with other animal 'bodies' for instance have often been explained dismissively in the literature as anthropomorphism, the attribution or projection of human characteristics onto individuals of another species. Anthropomorphism is often dismissed as being anthropocentric. But this narrow focus on anthropomorphism (nonhuman animals being perceived through human attributes) relies on a form of speciesism, where individual bodies are predicated on their membership to certain groups of animals or a scientifically determined species. Reframing a shared sensual knowing of beings is to share our animality. Emerging as an act of sense making where belonging to predetermined 'species' has no fortitude to knowing, being or the ethics of being 'treated' as animal, other than human.

Kay Milton (2005 cited Rautio 2017) writing on the perception of nonhumans species by humans identifies the role of anthropomorphism as the means for attributing human characteristics to nonhumans entities is narrow and misplaces the importance of our relational knowing. In this study, it is through sensorial bodies, bodies sensing and recognising other bodies that sense making as knowing and being is activated. 'Being with the world' is how Rautio (2017) describes forming a different view of ourselves as human in relation to nonhuman others: "...it is about realizing that the relation is always already there, and as much influenced by behavior and existence of other co-existing species as it is by our actions".

Ecomorphism and not anthromorphism may be a better means for naming this experience of 'sensology' (taking from prominent sensory studies scholar Richard Newhauser) that I have proposed in this and other papers. Ecomorphism supports a view of humans as interdependent with all ecological beings, objects and weathering of the earth and 'ourselves' is determined by our being in a world, what lies beyond the illusory border of our bodies. Ecomorphism attributes the qualities of a shared life through sensorial ecological knowing. "Matter and sense" argues Pyyry (2015, p. 151) who is also interested in unpacking this notion of sensorial knowing "are understood as intertwined, and 'agency' is distributed in rhizomatic ways".

3 Worlding Reconfigurings

The theoretical framing of this research is supported by a diffractive theorising drawing on a relational ontology. As a 're-turning' (Barad 2007) like composting I am diffracting data drawing on an emerging 'posthumanism and vital materialist turn' that supports a shift in focus, from culture as outside of

nature, to a re-orienting of relations where the human and more-than-human world are recognised as existing in an ecologically 'messy entanglement'. By attending to Haraway's (2016) notion of relational natures of difference, I use a diffractive lens to be responsive to patterns that map not where differences appear but rather to map where the effects of differences go. Barad (2007) states that while diffraction apparatuses help us:

... measure the effects of difference, even more profoundly they highlight, exhibit and make evident the entangled structure of the changing and contingent ontology of the world, including the ontology of knowing. In fact, diffraction not only brings the reality of entanglements to light, it is itself an entangled phenomenon.

BARAD, 2007, p. 73

Difference, in this way also thinking with Deleuze, "is positive because life itself is differential and in a constant state of becoming or differentiation" (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 529). According to Colebrook (2002) lives differentiate differently, each becoming and knowing emerges as singular encounters. "Difference is thus caused by connections and relations within and between different bodies, affecting each other and being affected" (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 529). The methodological focus is congruent with these shared ontological and epistemological musings, the geo-storying of life within assemblages compels me to focus on providing an intra-active space for human/child/nonhuman/other encounters to be with and think through each other. Barad (2007) speaks of this type of intra-action as an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements, worlding reconfigurings. To rethink agency as central to this exploration of a relational ontology, is to distribute agency within an assemblage of humans and non-humans, naming and knowing beyond a humanist emergent intent.

I adopt a number of approaches to research that fit within the postqualitative/posthuman paradigm. According to Le Grange, (2018) (Post) qualitative research might be viewed as a "methodology-to-come" (Lather 2013, p. 635). There are no textbooks, no guides. These approaches acknowledge the world is 'in here' or 'in us' – data (if there is such a thing as data as we have come to know it) exists as a collection of everyday encounters of being with; and thinking through the liveliness and vitality of entities. Postqualitative research embraces the inseparability of ethics, ontology and knowledge – knowledge is no longer the main stepping off the point (Le Grange, 2018). The three to five-minute video captures gathered on mobile phones as Wren aged 2 years goes about her everyday activities are not

prompts for interview, discussion or analysis, they exist only as captures of walking-with. The video captures or moving images “generate a rich panoply of primary audio-visual data that bear witness to phenomena that often escape talk and text based methods. They also provide lively materials for subsequent presentation and evocation” (Lorimer 2010, p. 251).

Walking-with methodologies, taking from Aldred (2014), are ways to inhabit movements. “To move through a landscape is to dwell in the movement, occurring when relates to and reflects on the material world as it is experienced and moved through” (p. 31). The tracks and tracings of being ‘entangled’ in the landscape (Gans et. al 2017) become the meshwork through which the movements are in-becoming, Wren’s sensorial encounters as emerging imaginaries. I am walking with her, but we don’t walk together or experience the worlding as two separate bodies but we are an assemblage of bodies living with landscapes. I am borrowing the term meshwork here from philosopher Henri Lefebvre who speaks of meshwork ‘as the web of lines on the landscape’ – the lines *along* which lives are lived. Tim Ingold opens up possibilities for our walking methodologies with the promise that “everything tangles with everything else” and that meshwork starts from the premise “every living being is a line or, better, a bundle of lines” (Ingold 2015) and “the entanglement of lines, not the connecting of points, that is where the mesh is constituted” (Ingold 2007). Child walks, explores, encounters the entangled life of lines in the landscape unhindered, “parts are not components they are movements” (Ingold 2015, p. 7). Ingold (2015) alludes to the importance of considering the two types of lines that make up meshwork, traces and threads. Traces are formed on surfaces; threads are strung through the air. He encourages us to consider not limiting materiality to the surfaces of the landscape or objects but to acknowledge the centrality of the weather/ing of the world. The onto-epistemology informing sensorial ecological knowing adopts a sense of being in the world that “restores the weather to our conception of the material world, alongside the landscape and artefacts, without changing the whole way we think about this world, and about our relations with it” (Ingold, 2017, p. 70).

The camera as the eye, the tool for capturing the encounters is walking-with me but seems to be located mostly outside of the child’s attention who is attentive to the intra-acting with ‘objects and entities’. Lorimer writes that this use of the camera as witness sets up a complex set of relations and processes and as the researcher I am, “learning to be affected both by the camera and by those you are [I am] filming (with). This takes time, training and skill and involves developing a repertoire of techniques that will not be familiar to many cultural geographers” (2010, p. 244). He also notes that “the camera has

a presence. It draws attention to itself" (p. 244), and when I revisit the footage after the events I am aware that the both the child and objects of her encounters are for fleeting moments recognising the presence of the camera.

4 Childfish Kin Encounters in a Busy Urban Aquarium

The sensorial movement captured in a local aquarium evokes beings-in-encounter a relentless witnessing of companion species becoming-with fish. Haraway writes that in human-animal worlds, companion specie encounters can occur in a diversity of everyday encounters:

Companion species are relentlessly becoming-with. The category companion species helps me refuse human exceptionalism and invoke versions of posthumanism. In human-animal worlds, companion species are ordinary beings-in-encounter in the house, lab, field, zoo, park, truck, office, prison, ranch, arena, village, human hospital, forest, slaughterhouse, estuary, vet clinic, lake, stadium, barn, wildlife preserve, farm, ocean canyon, city streets, factory, and more.

HARAWAY, 2016, p. 13

The child-fish sensorial being-in-encounter was a momentary, fleeting encounter, ancient recognition of human-animal worlds captured on a short video capture. The camera following the child is set to record as a fish moves closer to the glass of the tank. Like all the video captures these moments of recording are spontaneous and are cued only by the possibility of an encounter. The recording becomes a temporal pause in the loud busy city aquarium where child bodies are being herded and rushed by adults and child bodies fly past fishy bodies with little notice or knowing.

recognition

*recognition can be fleeting
a moment where eyes meet eyes
entranced by the knowing
not wanting to look away
ancient time held in the longing*

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Do the eyes of the fish catch hers? A fish gaze intensely waiting; seeking her attention. Eyes fixed on hers. She watches the slow fishy body as it moves through the watery glass, as it moves to her, her body lowers closer and closer till only the glass separates them. Water, air, glass, bodies intra-acting.

Mesmerized, entranced both eyes are fixed; eyeballing; child-fish recognition; past tracings of ghostly beings passing through the clear glass watery spaces, separated bodies feeling all but heart beats. The fishy body moves ever so gently in the water currents but the eyes seldom leave the gaze. A flash does the eye for a moment glance to the camera than look away? As sensorial beings, they are communicating through their watchful worlding.

After a long, long holding of the two bodies in this temporality of liveliness the child stands up in order to pass her lips on the glass. A kiss for the fish. The fishy eyes follow the moving body. She steps away, turns to see the fishy eyes still seeking, she waves and runs off. Fishy eyes, fish body still paused watching the child body fade from view.

5 Worlding Companions: Human But Not Only

Noticing through sensorial video captures attunes me to worlds otherwise left as unrecognised and unwitnessed. The images of human-animal encounters, as Lorimer (2010) notes with his filming of elephant-human encounters, “images help witness bodily practice” bringing attention to “time-deepened, skilful modes of relating that enable inter-species communication” and that by capturing the gestures, the bodies and responses “(v)ideo helps document the material specificities of this communicative performance and draws attention to the haptic interrelationships” (p. 243).

And even though the intention is to interrogate human/animal binaries to problematise ‘human exceptionalism’ this witnessing is not about finding through representation ways for elevating the matter of all things to the status of exceptional human or de-elevating human to the status of things but to explore the biopolitical, bioethical, and ontological in order to pay attention to the subtleties of an ecological community that acknowledges new relational materialist ontologies (Malone, 2018). Ontologies where ‘vital’ and ‘lively’ materialism is emergent, it is conceived as an enduring structure of assemblages that are the product of their internal inertia. These bodily gestural encounters are becoming, what Jane Bennet might name, as an enchantment;

Enchantment consists of a mixed bodily state of joy and disturbance, a transitory sensuous condition dense and intense enough to stop you in your tracks and toss you onto new terrain and to move you from the actual world to its virtual possibilities.

BENNETT, 2001, p. 111

Like Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) I am looking for the virtual potentiality of the child-animal kin relation through the revisiting of the events, not for confirmation of what happened as representation of a 'reality' but to explore the enchantment of the event. The virtual world of moving image brings attention to Childfish bodies as tied together by a genealogy, a history held in their bodies. Through this connecting of bodies with deep knowing; there is what I am identifying as a sensing of bodies ecologically. This knowing entices me as researcher to engage in a new kind of relational ontology, to find places where the human is no longer just human, they are 'human but not only' (Marisol de La Cadena 2015). A human child thinking with and through a kin (fish) encounter, explores their own humanness by a virtual becoming-with animal (Chakrabarty 2009), a being animal. It is within this ancient thinking that this influence of de la Cadena's Andean philosophy of 'more than one – less than many' continues to be central in my thinking through children's sensorial bodies in moving image: "...despite the human predilection to reiterate human exceptionalism, including within many epic and heroic narrations of the Anthropocene", the fact is that our human lives are tied together in this 'but not only' spaces with our kin as worldly others (Malone, 2018, p. 171).

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