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Chapter for the edited volume: Post-developmental Approaches to Childhood Observation

Observing-without-reading; material attractions to stone and water

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Abstract:

Our chapter will take up MacRae and MacLure's (2021) invitation to see without reading, that is, to find ways to connect with the experience of being a young child without reading this experience according to dominant systems of meanings. Our intention is to resist making sense of the child, but instead, through the sensing of matter to find ways of foregrounding how more-than-human dimensions of events we witness can animate us as researchers rather than explaining child behaviour. We explore approaches that prioritise what cannot be seen with the human eye; haptic felt-sense, atmospheres and the alternative timescales and relationalities (commonalities) accentuated by stone and water (both elements that feature in the events). To explore the potential of this approach, we think with two events from recent research projects. Both of these involve young children in learning spaces; a child's play in a puddle outside a nursery and an encounter between a child and a piece of ironstone in a museum. We describe the way in which images, held in our mind's eye, productively unsettle the strangle-hold of observation as a practice of close noticing and swift reading for meaning. Inspired by Springgay and Truman's (2016) notion of a queer archive of feeling, we consider how these accumulating felt events of children / puddles/ stones can help us to foreground geo-political histories of matter that can be activated for us as researchers even though these are not literally performed by the child: they instead hover in the atmosphere. We also explore how material attractions can reveal the more-than-human logics of substance itself, and in the case of puddles, we ask what we could learn from what Neimanis calls 'hydro-logics' (2017a). The task here is to resist making sense of the child, but instead, through the sensing of matter, explore if this might help us to recognise invisible forces that resist human explanation but that animate children's common worlds.

We study children, we know how they develop, even from the embryo. We define and name characteristics, stages, constitutive aspects. We classify and categorize moments, behaviors and attitudes.... Paradoxically enough, our knowledge about childhood separates us from it.
Leal, 2005, p.116

In this chapter, we take up MacRae and MacLure's (2021) invitation to seek out ways to connect with the experience of being a young child without reading this experience according to dominant systems of meanings. We do this as a way of grappling with our concerns around relying primarily on what we, as researchers, are able to perceive and record, when doing research with young children. To explore where this thread might lead us, we think with two events that took place in our recent research projects. Both of these involve young children in learning spaces; a child's play in a puddle outside a nursery and an encounter between a child and a piece of ironstone in a museum. We use these two events as a kind of thought experiment in attempting to 'see without reading' (MacRae and MacLure, 2021). Our aim is to explore the possibilities of an eye that

"tries to avoid subjecting participants – human and non-human, virtual and actual – to observation's ambition to comprehend; to circumscribe and bestow meaning."
MacRae and MacLure, 2021, p.267

The task here is to resist making sense of the child, but instead, through the sensing of matter, to find ways of foregrounding how more-than-human dimensions of events we witness can animate us as researchers rather than explaining child behaviour. In this we will explore approaches that prioritise what cannot be seen with the human eye; haptic felt-sense, atmospheres and the alternative timescales and relationalities (commonalities) accentuated by stone and water (both elements that feature in the events).

In previous thinking, we have both struggled with trying to mitigate against the effects of the construction of subjects as distinct from objects through the God-trick of the distancing practices of observation (MacRae, unpublished; Tesar et al, 2022),

explored how our observation practices are already shaped by our ways of knowing (Jones et al, 2010) and aspired to interrupt habitual ways of seeing through defamiliarization and bringing to the surface the sticky data that forces us to think anew (MacRae et al, 2018). We orient ourselves very briefly by referring to some of the specific problematics related to dominant ways of observing children. Walkerdine draws from Foucault to give an account of the central role of observation in producing "'the child' as an object both of science in its own right and of the apparatuses of normalisation" (1984, p.165). Following on from a long-standing approach to natural history, she goes on to trace how the discipline of child observation has been based on the principles of a rigorous classification and empirically verifiable gathering of facts that are read in relation to the science of child development. Emerging in the context of the nineteenth century, this approach went beyond the grouping of aspects of observed nature and was concerned with underlying orders of evolutionary progress and hierarchies of knowledge. She charts how child observation becomes a site where "science and a pedagogy based on a model of naturally occurring development which could be observed, normalised and regulated" (Walkerdine, 1984, p.176). It is within this "scientization of the child' (*ibid*, p. 171) already well under way, that Walkerdine traces how this paves the way for child observation to become a tool that also naturalises pedagogy. Thus, child observation can be seen as "a technology of normalisation, related to constructions of the child as nature and as reproducer of knowledge" (Dahlberg, et al, 1999, p.146).

The revelatory impulse that can be traced through observation can be linked with a will to grasp and to understand the Other (Viruru, 2001); "the West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples" (Barthes, quoted by Trinh, 1991, p.50). Making children's learning visible is never innocent, it reads meaning making to their activity, so that practices of surveillance, elicitation and documentation constrain behaviour precisely by making it more thoroughly knowable or known" (Rouse, on Foucault, 2005, p.99). Reminding ourselves about the history of child observation reminds us that it is a practice that is perpetually in a state of being re-written, and that how we read observations is always a shifting site of interpretation. Yet at the same time traces of previous inscriptions always haunt more current observational practices.

In our experiment into trying to observe-without-reading, we are not claiming that we can escape the epistemological orders of knowledge that are impressed on how we see the world. Instead, we are interested in seeking ways of seeing that could perhaps change how we see children, rather than in a quest to better see the child. Viruru (2001) draws our attention to how the

> "the concept of understanding colonizes children since it
> assumes that they are transparent enough to be
> understood…we deny them the right to be 'opaque', and insist
> that they become transparent, so that we might on the surface
> 'understand' them better, but essentially, control them more
> and more" (p.38).

In using the term 'opacity', Viruru draws on the work of Edouard Glissant. Glissant uses the idea of opacity as a way to "resist colonising tendencies, a distraction from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be" (1997, p.192). He asks us to seek ways to relate to different others, but without *understanding* them, asking can we "conceive of the opacity of the other of me, without reproach for my opacity for him?" (*ibid*, p.193). He goes on to suggest that to feel solidarity with another, to build with another, and to like what another does, it is not necessary for us to grasp *them.* In this chapter we ask ourselves what happens when we take up Viruru's challenge to resist observing children to understand them better, but instead to register something we feel that is sensed beyond our compulsion to interpret and comprehend. We are inspired by MacLure's (2020) concept of a divinatory methodology that engages with the "queer temporality and spatiality of the Event" and that entertains "forms of relation and participation that are always to some extent inhuman" (p.510).

Reconsidering an observation of a child with stone (Abi)

A two year old boy runs down the museum corridor. His legs move so fast I am unsure his feet will keep up. The alternating colours of the striped corridor carpet flash by as I follow his line of movement. He stops abruptly at the end of the corridor, where a large piece of ironstone, bigger than the boy, sits on open display. It's grey

surface shimmers with rainbow minerals inside it. He gazes at the surface of the ironstone and places the palm of his hand flat against its bulky surface.

In my telling of this memory of an incident during some fieldwork, a small child is characterised by movement and (perhaps) wonder or interest is alluded to, as he encounters a large museum object, which seems characterised by its permanence and enduring nature. As Springgay and Truman (2016) point out, rocks are generally seen anthropocentrically, both as inert and in terms of their use value to humans. This is indeed frequently the case in museum collections, where objects are accessioned according to agreed collecting policies; in the case of local museums, the collecting policy often centres on the significance of the object to people from that local area. The ironstone on display in this museum was considered important and relevant for the museum collections because it is an example of the high-lime content ironstone on which the town is situated. The town in fact came into the existence during the 19th century as a result of the ironstone geology; once iron ore was "rediscovered" in the area by local landowners, iron works, mines and steel works were established. In both museum and early childhood spaces, objects are frequently codified according to, for example, the information they are intended to convey to the visitor (Dudley, 2010) or the learning they are supposed to make available to the child (Boomer, 2003). From that perspective, the ironstone is there to signify to the visitor something about the geology and history of the local area, perhaps connected in some way with their own sense of identity or local belonging.

In my mind's eye, I return to the small boy pressing his hand against the ironstone. There will have been a label next to the exhibit, drawing visitors' attention to the significance of ironstone for the town. The boy looks happy and engaged, although he is not old enough to be interested in the relevance of ironstone to the local heritage. Instead, he makes sense of the museum by moving through it, engaging equally with the stairs, furniture, lighting and windows that frequently captivate young children in museums spaces (Hackett et al, 2018), as well as certain of the objects and cases that make up the museum collection itself. Wallis and Noble (2022) describe a relationship between children's movement through and in the museum and their sense of belonging in the space, arguing that children enter into dialogue with the building through traces, movement and mark making, as a way of

developing a sense of belonging and ownership in cultural settings. This is a different kind of scenario to the one described in the paragraph above; rather than seeing objects and knowing the information about their relevance as a path to connection and belonging, fleeting movement and gesture via "footprints and pathways that the children (re)create, depict, extend and continue the dialogue with the museum space" (Wallis and Noble, 2022), enabling an attending to children's preferred modes of making sense of the space. Yet through these modes of meaning making, often preferred by young children, "meanings can solidify or slip-slide out of view again" (Hackett, 2021, p.154); observing children's learning / engagement via these kinds of modes creates uncertainty and questions, rather than evidence to buttress the observer's position and conclusions. Rather than viewing this as an inconvenience, or a methodological glitches to be erased (MacLure, 2013), in this chapter I consider the provisionality of what a child might *mean* when belonging, desire and energy are expressed through the body with few words, as an invitation to observing-without-reading.

Community biographies, atmospheres and unspoken stories (Abi)

Without the ironstone, this area would have been rural, rather than an industrial town; as a 'monotown' (a town relying economically primarily on one industry), communities here have been vulnerable to shifts in demand and profitability of iron and steel, as global economies have faltered or production moved overseas, for example. As the boy moves down the corridor, the mums on this museum visit walk behind, chatting, about their local area, and how it was recently featured on a TV documentary "Skint", one of an increasing number of 'poverty porn' documentaries that profile the lives and difficulties of those living in underserved communities or on low incomes. The families are very clear that their community was 'set up' by the documentary makers, who sought out extreme stories and, they tell me, paid young people to be filmed riding their bikes in a threatening manner around the estate.

The boy running down a corridor, the steel-working history, the families' critique of 'poverty porn', the small chubby palm pressing onto the museum exhibit, the neat Perspex stand and carefully written exhibit label, the way in which families express so eloquently their frustration and feelings of powerlessness to resist "damage

centred narratives" (Tuck, 2009) about their lives and their places. These things all hover in the air, yet it is hard to join up the dots. My brief in this research was to look at how children experience the museum, what they learn and how the museum could develop its spaces to better cater for this audience. As Jones et al (2014) have pointed out, in order to draw confident conclusions about what is happening and why, there is often a need in early childhood research to strip down, simplify and look for what can be observed and how a meaning can be convincingly attached to it.

> "Complexity, the 'thick of things', is not only lost, it becomes
> fundamentally threatening as it undermines the imposing
> edifices constructed from comparative data."
> Jones et al, 2014, P.64.

Here, this kind of straight forward observing-then-reading would assess the boy's engagement with the exhibit and then seek any evidence of connection between the intended significance of the exhibit (local geology, and its relevant to local heritage and life in the past / present) and the boy's understanding. Finding little there, such a practice of observing-then-reading might instead fall back onto an explanation of future intended benefits (supposing, for example, that creating museum-loving young children now will lead to museum advocates who appreciate their local heritage later).

Reconsidering a (non)observation of a puddle-jumping event (Christina)

In this section, the focus shifts from child/stone encounters in a museum to child/water encounters in a nursery outdoor space. I offer this event to keep to our shared question of *how can we see without reading?* I was struck by Abi's use of the phrase "in my minds eye" and it recalled an event that has equally produced an image in my mind eye from a recent research project. The image that was conjured for me was of a child making a big splash in a puddle, having jumped off a climbing frame. This was an event that was recounted to me over zoom during lockdown by the early years practitioner (Shaffan) in whose classroom I was supposed to have been carrying out fieldwork. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic I found myself instead communicating via e-mails and zoom calls as I was not permitted to go into the school itself because of social distancing regulations. During this point of the

pandemic, only the children of essential keyworkers were attending nursery school, and children were grouped into one room rather than according to age. To minimise viral transmission children spent as much time as possible outside.

During one of my zoom conversations Shaffan narrated with excitement and pleasure how much fun the children had been having jumping into puddles after a heavy period of rain. She spoke about how a heavy downpour had led to a section of astro-turf pooling into a large puddle, and how a child had started to launch themselves from a nearby climbing structure into the puddle. This instance has possibly particularly niggled at me, as I was not 'actually' there, but still it produced a strong minds-eye image that was full of vitality and movement: somehow this is unsettling. It confronted me with a realisation about my need, as a researcher, for the authenticity of the actual instance that I had documented as data. Putting this under suspicion undoes some of my long-held efforts to make careful situated phenomenological observations (and perhaps in the need for data at all). These practices of archiving actuality are ones that I have invested much time in, both as a former nursery teacher, and in my current position as a researcher.

So here, I am interested in trying to think of this child/puddle assembly that exists in my minds-eye in general and universal terms rather than within the context of the situated child. This means that I must try and give up my tendencies to try to explain or understand *why* an individual child is compelled to jump and *what* the import of this in terms of a child-facing pedagogy. This is work that goes against the grain, and yet it feels important that I try because of the way this child-puddle image resonates way beyond the actual instance (as does an image of a child running in a museum corridor). A child jumping in puddles is a ubiquitous and commonly held image: I only need to enter child/puddle into a web-based search engine to see how child/puddle images circulate in the virtual world of social media. It is not only that children are commonly drawn to bodies of water, but also that there is something that adults find irresistible about these moments which means that they proliferate and circulate. Thus, whilst each of the child/puddle encounters is birthed from the situated locale of the particularity of a child body and a puddle body (both bodies constituted in different proportions by water) - if we read this transversally we can see "the

connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible"
(Haraway, 1988, p.590).

Water: thinking-in-movement? (Christina)

Following Pacini-Ketchabaw and Clark (2016), I wonder what else might I be able to see in this minds-eye image of child/puddle if I try instead to 'think with water' (p.99)? What might I notice if I attend to what Neimanis (2013) calls the hydro-logics of water and the way that a body of water moves? I will very briefly open up a few lines of thought that might take flight if bring my focus to how the puddle water moves in response to the child, and the physics of the splash. When two small feet make contact with the surface of a puddle, a "crown splash" is produced. The dynamics of the splash are so complex they do not follow predictable laws. It is this very complexity that makes puddles historically one of the main fascinations of fluid mechanics (Deggan et al, 2007). Physics scholars interested in fluid dynamics find that while there are observable regularities in the symmetry exhibited by the corona shaped splash that extend outwards from the point of water impact, the rim and the peaks of this crown are in a state of perpetual and unpredictable change. The cylindrical symmetry is a regularity that is always in a state of decomposition in relation to instabilities of wavelength and drops that break off from the end of each jet, producing droplets that further introduce non-linear instability (*ibid*). So, there is something here that I could perhaps tune into about the ways that "water is always becoming" within the parameters of endless possibility. At the same time "it is always seeking out differentiation, even in its brute materiality, one might say,[it] seemingly repeats" (Neimanis, 2009, p.165). I am reminded that water's movement always escapes human capture – even if, in the context of the early years classroom, it predominantly figures as a resource to be "managed" in relation to what learning outcomes it might yield (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Clark, 2016, p.99).

What if instead of reading the child, I ask what might children have in common with water? Pacini-Ketchabaw and Clark (2016) suggest if we take up Nemanis' curiosity about water itself, this could offer new ways to approach the subjectivity of children. For example, what if I focus on the pooling qualities of all watery bodies, not just the pooling dimensions of puddles? This makes me wonder about the never settled

quality of a pool of water since all bodies of water are prone leaking and evaporation. At the same time, water attracts water by pooling and this gestures to a collective orientation. When Nemanis notes that water bodies always "seek confluence" and "flow into one another in life-giving ways, but also in unwelcome, or unstoppable, incursions" (2017, p.29)", perhaps this could help me to refigure child as also a body of water. This helps me to refigure children's situated knowledge as being "about communities, not about isolated individuals" (Haraway, 1988, p.590).

Reading mind's-eye images transcorporeally as queer archives

As we discuss together the idea of the mind's eye, we notice how invested we often are, as researchers and educators, in *being there*, and the specificity and accuracy of observing what *this particular* child does in *this particular* moment, in order to read for meaning and implications. We both have seen a child play in water, or explore a museum, or touch something that interests them, or jump for fun, so many times. In our mind's eye, just as in the search engine Christina mentions above, we imagine an archive of thematically similar images. A hundred moments of a child's legs pounding around a space. A thousand snapshots of a child's feet meeting a puddle. Each both generic and particular, (extra)ordinary. This is our archive of experiences, memories, stories and imaginings we draw on and recount when we write about children and learning.

Abi picks up on Christina's lament of not 'actually being there' during the puddle jumping incident, to reflect back on her own story of the boy and the piece of ironstone. It is a memory and a story to tell, squeezed through various iterations as time passes, publications from the research emerge and this one particular short incident, continues to stickily (MacRae et al, 2018) remain. Yes, Abi was there when that boy ran down that corridor. She observed with her own eyes as he pressed his small hand onto the ironstone. Does this matter? What difference does this make? Or to ask a more searching question, what difference does this mattering, this preference for 'real' and 'accurate' observations that can be repeated, described and read for meaning, produce, over time and in our collective imaginations?

Like museum collections, archives are typically collated according to a collecting policy and rules, with an attention to logic and completeness. In this sense,

> "The archive is a place of order ruled by inert, naturalized, and
> detached values that relegates feelings and experiences that
> that cannot be documented easily to oblivion (Danbolt, Rowley,
> & Wolthers, 2009)."
> Springgay and Truman, 2016, p.859

Similarly, observations of individual children, when made with an emphasis on detail and specificity, and recorded alongside a clear reading of the significance and meaning of what has been observed, enact a version of childhood that is capable of being interpreted, in which each moment exemplifies the child's intent according to a rational function or desire. Next steps to continue intended learning or development on an upwards trajectory are thus assumed to present themselves in a straight-forward way. Like a traditional archive, observing-for-reading creates an archive of observations of children that are "closed and limited, fulfils a scientific need, and its value is determined by normative historical or research truths." (Springgay and Truman, 2016, p.859).

Drawing on Cvetkovich's notion of a queer archive, Springgay and Truman (2016) consider the ways in which rocks can be considered an archive of geological history. Although rocks are often considered a chronological record of deep time, this is illusionary – in practice "rocks erode, melt, collapse, and invert." (p.861). This offers a possible starting point for conceptualising our own observations of children as a queer archive of feeling (*ibid*), rather than a coherent and accumulating body of expertise. A queer archive, (as proposed by Cvetkovich, 2003), has different principles for selection and inclusion, it

> "resists coherence in favour of fragmentation; it follows an
> archiving practice that is illogical where documents represent
> far more than the literal value of the objects themselves."
> Springgay and Truman, 2016, p. 860

Rather than completeness, coherence and certainty, a queer archive is "a form of counter-knowledge production" (*ibid.*, p.860). Inspired by the queer archive we

become aware of what gets lost when we observe-then-read children, because when events take place that are "not visible, given to documentation or sonic recording, or otherwise housable within an archive', they are lost." (Schneider, in Springgay and Truman, 2016, p.860). We ask ourselves (again), "what if"? What if we set out to create a queer archive: collections of found videos of children in puddles, illegible sounds (from a human perspective) and fragments of data that were not housable and did not fit within accepted pedagogical practices or qualitative research models grounded in validity and reliability? With a certain heavy-ness, we realise how much our research engagements and data collecting practices continue to centre and colonise the lives of children.

Concluding section

This chapter has been a conversation in which we made a commitment to ourselves (two early childhood researchers) to see children without reading them, and to think collaboratively with each other. Our aspiration has been to begin to delineate how paying attention to images held in our mind's eye could become a way to productively unsettle the strangle-hold of observation as a practice of close noticing and swift reading for meaning. We wonder what thinking of these universal minds-eye views of children with stone / water might do to further help us resist reading children through such literal observation. We hope that these universalist images we hold in our mind's eye be used to "cultivate ways of imagining our lived experience as decentred, if always transcorporeally implicated" (Neimanis, 2017, p.42).

Returning to the vignette of a child who presses their palm against a piece of ironstone, we are reminded by Springgay and Truman (2016) that "Stones are only inert when considered anthropocentrically" (p.857), prompting us to ask what might be possible if we instead attend to that which we are unable to observe with the human eye; "rocks' ability to move, quiver, and reproduce" (*ibid.*, p.852). The minds-eye (rather than the naked-eye) image of the child and ironstone also yielded racialised and gendered histories that hovered in the air circulating haunting and infected current reality TV depictions of the community who live there. None of these geo-logics are consciously at play in the child's compulsion to move toward the rock, but they are still dimensions of the event that matter. Moreover, the ironstone also

clearly matters to the child: the ironstone extends an invitation, even if this is not anything to do with past histories that haunt present-day lives.

In a similar way, if we observe-then-read the child jumping in the puddle, then perhaps we focus on what they intended, or what they were learning. However, by focussing our intention of this human-centric mattering, we all too easily underestimate the multi-form qualities of water and the extent to which we humans (child or adult) are also watery bodies. We also lose out on what we might learn from children's relationship with the more-than-human world. If we shift our gaze to the matter that matters to children, instead of reading children, we might perhaps simply engage more with the matter at hand, and where the energy is flowing – not as something we can observe, but as something we can sense. When we tune more into these material attractions, perhaps we also realise there are things that we also already know in our mind's eye, and that is why they leave such strong traces; they are not ways of knowing that we can name, but we are intimately familiar with them all the same.

The conversations that we have had in the writing of this chapter have drawn our attention to the risks that are involved when we site/sight children as bounded entities at the centre of our vision. Haraway tells us that,

> "Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; "objects" do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies. Siting (sighting) boundaries is a risky practice."
> Haraway,1988, p.595.

What we have learnt from our conversation is that the material attractions of both stone and water can teach us precisely about the riskiness of siting (sighting) when we observe children.   As substance both water and stone resist siting (sighting) because of the degree to which they are able to ultimately escape our human "taxonomic efforts" (Neimanis 2017a, p.55), and this unknowability "necessarily rejects total knowledge by any body" (*ibid,* p. 57). We realise that stopping ourselves from observing-then-reading it not a simple matter, as that is how we have learnt

ourselves as western, white, educated adults, to be human. However, by experimenting with our siting (sighting) practices then perhaps we can become more aware of our human worldly engagement rather than separating ourselves, or the children we see, from it.

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