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Unruly edges: Toddler literacies of the Capitalocene

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Abstract

By troubling notions of time-as-progress and human exceptionality, this paper considers what shifts in conceptualisations of children's literacies and futures might be possible in the context of faltering of capitalist logics of progress. The paper draws on a 3 year ethnographic study with families and young children in northern England, which asked what might be learnt about young children's literacies by starting with the everyday in communities. Arguing for the interconnection between notions of human exceptionalism, human/planetary relations and literacies and language, the paper offers some alternative directions for sorely needed imaginaries about the role of literacies in how young children relate to their worlds.

Keywords

Capitalocene, early childhood, environment, language, literacy progress, time

Literacies and language occupy a particular place in imaginaries of what it means to be human, deeply entangled with powerful rhetoric of the special nature of the human species (Finnegan, 2002). Similarly, time as 'progress' is tightly plaited into colonial notions of human life as exceptional, as distinct from other forms of life (Kromidas, 2019; Springgay and Truman, 2019; Tsing, 2015). In this view of time, there is a sense of accumulation, in which the human species becomes increasingly sophisticated as time passes, and an investment in humanity's role in predicting and shaping this progressive trajectory. As Tsing (2015) puts it, we imagine that

> "humans are different from the rest of the living world because we look forward – while other species, which live day to day, are thus dependent on us." (p.21)

Via their association with human exceptionalism, language, literacies and time-as-progress are central components of a way of thinking that denies human inter-dependency with nature. This abstraction of humans from nature problematically remains at the heart of inter-disciplinary conversations about the so-called Anthropocene[1], that is, an account of human-induced climate change, largely traced from the Industrial revolution to present day. In response, scholars including Haraway

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(2016), Moore (2017) and Malm[2] have offered compelling counter arguments for the 'Capitalocene', a lens that prompts a closer examination of capitalism as a more-than-human 'world ecology' (Moore, 2017: 595), driving long-established 'patterns of power, capital and nature' (p. 595), where accumulation of capital depends on the appropriation of 'cheap nature' (land and resources) and 'cheap labour', in the form of slavery and the expulsion of many from the category of fully human, both rooted historically in colonialism. From this perspective, an inability to escape the habit of considering humans as extractable from nature is both cause and consequence of a narrow analytic engagement with planetary survival (Moore, 2017). For Haraway (2016: 30) two 'old saws of Western philosophy', human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, sit at the heart of the problematic of conceptualising the current planetary crisis beyond anthropocentric and phallocentric narratives of what it means to be human. Thus, the core arguments of the Capitalocene add in important ways (as this paper will elucidate) to critical considerations of literacies, language and time as progress within early childhood, by creating new conceptual bridges between scholarship calling for human/planetary interdependency to be placed at the heart of early childhood education (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020; Dernikos and Thiel, 2019; Duhn, 2012; Myrstad et al., 2020; Somerville and Murris, forthcoming) and key arguments around how narrowing, hierarchical approaches to what 'counts' as a literate and speaking child are colonial, racist, and privilege whiteness and cultures of the industrialised west (Avineri et al., 2015; Tarc, 2015; Thiel and Dernikos, 2020; Wynter Hoyte and Smith, 2020).

This paper is interested in the figure of the child, particularly the speaking, literate child, in narratives of what it means to be human. Tropes of humanity as progressively forward looking (Tsing et al., 2017), rational and self-determining emerge from a colonial and racist historical context in which, as Sylvia Wynter importantly pointed out, certain forms of being human have been overrepresented (Kromidas, 2019; McKittrick, 2015). In this context, the figure of 'the child' is not a universal or neutral category but rather, as Kromidas (2019) the child as 'not-yet-fully human white modal child' (p. 65),

"has served as the counterpoint to the adult as independent, autonomous, rational human." (p.69).

Thus, this particular version of childhood serves as a counterpoint to the version of masterful, exceptional, individualised humanity conceived via the Capitalocene (Haraway, 2016; Moore, 2017). Education (including e.g. early childhood literacy curricula) frequently legitimises these versions of childhood through, for example, the depoliticisation of notions such as the achievement gap, and the continuous measuring and monitoring of young children against a white western benchmark (Brea-Spahn et al., 2022; Kromidas, 2019).

In dialogue with the Tsing's (2015) writing on 'progress', this paper considers the role of (assumed) human exceptionalism in conceptualisations of young children, and in particular, the ways in which early childhood literacies are co-constituted within this frame, via tropes of progress, mastery and the self-determining individual. Drawing on long-term ethnographic work with young children and their families in northern England, the paper offers some alternative imaginaries about the role of literacies and language in how young children relate to their worlds.

Time, childhood and capitalist logics

Within education, the equation of 'time on task' with increased and faster learning has a long history (Compton-Lilly, 2016; Jones et al., 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). Additionally, linear time-as-progress tends to dominate accounts of early childhood development, including, for example, a trajectory from the concrete/bodily towards the abstractable, and a growing accumulation of more

'advanced' adult-like skills. (Burman, 2019; Kromidas, 2019; MacRae, 2019). As MacRae points out

> "The problem with majoritarian developmental mappings is the way that they lead us to read backwards from the end point, of, for example, a play event, with an understanding that what composes the event is inevitably leading to the resulting end state."
>
> MacRae (2019: 5)

The straight-line predictable vision of time in relation to the developing, learning child is powerful, and 'draws other kinds of time into its rhythm' (Tsing, 2015: 21). Things can be overlooked when they do not 'fit the timeline of progress' (p. 21), and the politics of what gets overlooked or under-valued, in relation to language and literacies, is a key concern of this paper.

Literacies[3] of young children are often described as emergent; young children's noticing of and participating in talk, mark making or play that enacts literacies practices (Gillen and Hall, 2013) and creating of meaning multimodally (Kress, 1997)[4], are identified as the paths to reading and writing. Identifying the presence of literacies in homes and communities, scholars have argued that, from birth and well before they are formally reading and writing, young children are 'participants in such practices' (Gillen and Hall, 2013: 7), which are 'unfolding in babies' everyday experiences' (Flewitt, 2013: 4). However, pushing back against defining literacies by 'read[ing] backwards from the end point' (MacRae, 2019: 5) remains problematic (Hackett, 2021), leaving the researcher in an uncertain space where toddler literacies seem difficult to find or confidently define. In many ways, toddler literacies are different to adult literacies; young children usually do not read or write in the conventional sense; vocalisations can tip into words in a messy and provisional way; crafting or mark making can sometimes sediment into a declarative meaning (Hackett, 2021). This space of uncertainly defined toddler literacies is the location of the research in this paper, working at a fuzzily defined edge of attending to vocalisations, mark making and other forms of multimodal meaning making, whilst holding in tension the paradox of only being able to identify these things in relation to the adult-centric literacies they are believed to 'become'.

Noticing and challenging time-as-linear-progress within education is particularly apposite in the current context, in which there is an increasing emphasis within early educational policy on the take up of certain kinds of literacies as early as possible (c.f. ICAN/RCSLT, 2018; Law et al., 2017; Melhuish et al., 2008). Alternative imaginaries of time, childhood and development seem increasingly necessary since the onset of the Covid19 pandemic; educational discourses have intensified around concerns with what children have 'lost', and how they can 'catch up'. Metaphors of lost time and catch up are underpinned by assumptions about learning as progressive accumulation mapping onto time spent, despite the evidence for learning operating like this being 'tenuous at best' (Harmey and Moss, 2021: 3).

Nelson (2020) has described how the pandemic exposed 'fatal weaknesses of capitalism'; as concerns for profit hampered efforts to tackle the virus, the breaking apart of capitalist logics intensified. Such a stance echoes Tsing's (2015) (pre-pandemic) assertion that 'progress stopped making sense' (p. 25) as 'more and more of us looked up one day and realised the Emperor had no clothes' (p. 25). Whilst Tsing (2015) urges readers to seek out new forms of living well at the 'unruly edges' of crumbling capitalist logics, Thiel (2020) takes up this question specific to early childhood. Thiel (2020) points out that in the context of education, the progressive acquisition of easily codifiable skills maps to an 'investment' view of early childhood, in which learning produces,

> "a hyper capitalist mesh of pedagogy, policy, and practice that produce. . ...a body to be commodified, one that must be made "college and career ready" through early learning initiatives."
>
> Thiel (2020: 71).

In agreement with Thiel, this paper calls for a radical rethink of early childhood education, outside of (1) skills to be progressively banked inside the individual and (2) literacies as evidence of the exceptionalism of the human species. By troubling notions of time-as-progress and human exceptionalism, this paper considers what shifts in conceptualising children's literacies and futures might be possible through and beyond the pandemic, in the context of faltering Capitalist logics of progress.

Community ethnography and early childhood literacies

This paper draws on a 3 year ethnographic study carried out with families in northern England, which asked what might be learnt about young children's literacies by starting with the everyday in communities (Hackett, 2021). Through spending extended periods of time with families and children between the ages of 12 and 36 months in playgroups and other community settings, I became particularly attuned to the complexity and ambivalence of being with very young children. Focussing on a broad definition of early childhood literacies, I aimed to trace how children communicated through language, gestures, movement and so on; yet it became impossible to overlook the way in which young children's vocalisations, play, movement and other forms of meaning making unfolded within more-than-human assemblages and intensities; scattered objects, hopes, frustrations and anxieties, crayons, plastic figures and messy-play trays, sticky, leaky bodies, love, tiredness and humour. In previous writing about this study, I have drawn on the work of Kathleen Stewart to describe the shimmering intensity of what seemed significant yet difficult to articulate.

> "Little experiences of shock, recognition, confusion and déjà vu pepper the most ordinary practices and moves. Sometimes you have to pause to catch up with where you already are."
>
> Stewart (2007: 63)

The meanings that young children and adults made and took up in these spaces often seemed provisionally shared and unfolding, with multiple and unexpected directions of travel. Rather than neat trajectories of progress, through which individual toddlers gained and refined communicative tools, the situation seemed better aligned with Tsing's (2015) description of over-lapping more-than-human energies and rhythms, influencing and responding to each other in complex ways. As Tsing (2015) writes 'history without progress is indeterminate and multidirectional' (p. 23).

What might be surfaced about time beyond progress though community ethnography with young children? The impetus for thinking about progress within this study came from a conversation I had with one of the mums at playgroup, about her 2 year-old daughter E. I asked E's mum whether it would be ok for me to video her daughter. E's mum was happy for me to video, but worried E would not be a good subject for my study, as she was unlikely to say much. I assured E's mum that the research was not only interested in words, but in all the other ways that young children express themselves. This assertion that children's expression existed beyond words, seemed to create a spark between E's mum and I. 'Yes!' exclaimed E's mum. 'Before kids have words, they use all these little gestures. And then, when they have the words, they stop using the gestures. And then you forget them, don't you'. E's mum and her friend then went on to detail all kinds of bodily gestures and movements their children did or used to do, and their meanings. This conversation seemed to express an important and radical point; that young children's changing communicative

practices do not accumulate within an empty void, but rather jostle up against, sit in relation to and sometimes squeeze out, other ways of relating in and with the world. As Viruru (2001: 31) has importantly pointed out, in relation to her research in a nursery school in India, 'the question is rarely asked, what is lost when language is gained'.

Seeking out literacies *despite* progress

Progress, as defined by Tsing (2015), is a unified coordination of time, offering a single perspective. A key drawback of the dominance of this way of thinking is that it overlooks aspects of life that cannot be easily narrated in terms of how they contribute to progress. Tsing argues 'we were raised on dreams of modernisation and progress' (p. 20) and the categories and assumptions of the progress narrative can be identified in many different places. Tsing gives the examples of economic growth, advancing science and how we narrate history as examples of how notions of continuous unidirectional improvement and expansion undergird dominant ways of making sense of human life. I would add to this, imaginaries of the developing child, and of incremental learning according to time invested, also bear scars of their emergence within a context dominated by dreams of unificatory progress towards a 'collective happy ending' (Tsing, 2015: 21). Because our thinking is 'embroiled in these categories' (p. 21), Tsing (2015) connects thinking outside of a progress narrative with breaking habitual patterns of making sense of things by 'looking around rather than ahead' (p. 22) and paying particular attention to what Tsing calls 'unruly edges' (p. 20), aspects of life characterised by unpredictability and without teleology. Imagining early childhood literacies outside of a progress narrative could involve starting with messy, lived everyday experiences, and what unfolds between children, families and more-than-human worlds.

Through the heuristic of the matsutake mushroom, thriving unexpectedly in ruined landscapes, yet incapable of being cultivated, Tsing draws our attention to what is happening 'despite' capitalism (p.viii). Within an increasingly surveilled, structured and interventionist field of early childhood (e.g. Cameron and Moss, 2020), there is much to learn from what children and families are doing *despite* the pressure and influence of narrow curriculum frameworks that measure and assess primarily for schooled literacy practices and regimes of value connected to the progress narrative. What is happening at the unruly edges of the action? What practices and ways of being in the world endure and spring up whether they are cultivated or not, and, like the matsutake mushroom, how might these practices help us to shift our habitual imaginaries of childhood and literacies?

Tsing's advice is echoed by others who have argued for the need to reorientate how we relate to the category of 'human' and the world in which we are inextricably entangled (Haraway, 2016; Jackson, 2020; Quashie, 2021). Alaimo (2016: 169) critiques discourses of sustainability as relying on notions of the natural world as 'storehouses of resources to be consumed', unpinned by assumptions that human innovation will identify ways to keep the storehouse 'topped up', enabling daily life to continue as normal. Similarly, Moore (2017) describes the Anthropocene as,

> "a comforting story with uncomfortable facts. It fits easily within a conventional description – and analytical logic – that separates humanity from the web of life."
>
> Moore (2017: 595)

Dominant narratives of the Anthropocene erase unequal global power dynamics and the necropolitics (Mbembe, 2019) of when and how to act to save lives, via what Sultana (2022) has described as 'the homogenising "we" in climate discourses', which centres whiteness. In response, instead of teaching children appropriate knowledge and skills in order to 'fix' the environmental situation (Alaimo, 2016), early childhood education needs to radically rethink its conceptualisation of the

child and child/planet relations (Duhn, 2012; Somerville and Green, 2015; Taylor et al., 2012). The Common Worlds Research Collective have called for;

> "a complete paradigm shift: from learning about the world in order to act upon it, to learning to become with the world around us."
>
> Common Worlds Research Collective (2020: 2).

Like the matsutake mushroom and its accompanying economic activity, which is already there but largely ignored, life in community spaces of early childhood is already complex, more-than-human and operating outside of the boundaries of progress, development and bounded individual skills acquisition. Living up to the intensity, complexity and vibrancy of everyday life in community spaces of early childhood begins with noticing what is happening in these spaces of early childhood *despite* the dominance of the progress narrative; Tsing might call this the unruly edges of early childhood literacies.

The unruly edges of literacies

As part of ethnographic research with families and young children in community settings, I attended two community playgroups and a nursery setting, completing a total of 22 months of fieldwork across three phases[5]. Northwood playgroup was the setting I spent most time in, visiting a total of 23 times over a 2 year period. The playgroup was run by the local authority, near the centre of town, and attended by families with south Asian, African, Roma and British heritage, many of whom were managing on a low income. H, the 2 years old child in the below vignette, was one of the most regularly attending children; he came with his mum nearly every week. This below vignette took place during the second phase of fieldwork on a warm day in June.

> *The sun is out, and the staff have dragged little chairs and tables for snack outside this week. Now snack is finished and just H is left sitting there. H looks intensely up at the blue sky several times. I notice, look up too, try to figure out what he is looking at. H notices me following his gaze.*
>
> *H looks again, gestures towards the sky, perhaps he traces a line with his arm. Suddenly H stands up from his seat, and chants backwards from ten to one. I say "blast off", I suppose because H has got to zero, and this seems to make us both look up to the sky, perhaps we are imagining a rocket.*
>
> *H looks upwards again, he says "ahhhhhh" and looks at the sky. I still do not see what he sees, I gaze up, I feel bashful, I do not see.*
>
> *Finally, I notice aeroplane tracks in the sky. Oh "is it the aeroplane, they are blast off, wow!" words gabble out of my mouth. Then I fall silent and we pause together; perhaps there is a moment, not so much of agreeing and fixing a meaning, but of not being quite so lost and apart from each other.*
>
> *Blue chalks lie on the floor, their intense shade mirroring the clear sky. H gestures towards the chalk, I pick one up and try to draw an aeroplane with chunky blue chalk on the uneven concrete. It does not look like an aeroplane. But it has a sense of the intensity of the blue chalk and of multiple lines going in the same direction as each other.*
>
> *H also picks up and draws with the blue chalk, thick blue lines, all in the same direction, one next to the other to form a thick band of blue.*
>
> *"They go zoom" I say and add lines of 'movement' from the front of the 'planes' forward. H stares at the chalk, he gestures upwards and gazes at the sky.*

I have chosen to think with this particular vignette, because it offers a good example of the shimmering yet inchoate intensity of being with toddlers in community spaces that I described

earlier. This event had an energy that I noticed at the time and has stayed with me ever since. Whilst what happened between H and I involved words, mark making and shared meanings (key hall-marks of 'emergent literacies', as discussed earlier) these were characterised by provisionality. Were we even talking about the same thing? By the end, we had been making marks, gesturing and using words for several minutes, yet the meaning of the words, the gestures, the blue chalk lines, still did not seem to be fixed or agreed. They felt productively *unfixed*. Whilst I named what was unfolding with words such as 'aeroplane' and 'zoom', H counted backwards from 10. Whilst I drew 'aeroplanes' on the ground and H added blue lines, shared meaning remained elusive. H never did confirm whether this event, for him, had anything to do with aeroplanes, or rockets, or even the track lines across the blue sky. Yet H and I shared a sense of the blue-ness, and of some line of movement forward and across, traced through the gaze to the sky, the gesturing arm, the long declaration of "ahhhhhh", the mutual sweeps of the blue chalk. Instead of clear meanings, what we achieved or experienced was an atmosphere, a sense of connection that powerfully kept things in motion. Perhaps all of it was conjecture, or a rush to fixing meaning, on my part. This possibility leaves me, as the adult and supposed early childhood 'expert', in a vulnerable position of not fully understanding (Phipps, 2019).

In her account of multilingualism, Phipps (2019) describes spaces of partial knowing as a time for gathering 'the gist'. She describes how, at a point in language learning when languages are not shared, you understand some but not all of what is being communicated, yet the essence can be grasped. Whilst acknowledging the struggle this kind of situation involves, Phipps makes a com-pelling argument for the shifts in power and relationships that can occur when those who are sup-posed to understand, be in control and have the answers (such as, e.g. adults in an early childhood setting), instead are unsure and thus vulnerable, as

"language. . ...swirls and forms and falls around what is already known, and the desire to understand."

Phipps (2019: 43).

Badwan (forthcoming) points out that whilst vulnerability is commonly perceived as negative, it can also be a productive force, encouraging us to move from a stance of authority to a position of puzzling, wondering and being willing to listen to the voices of others. As such, it is a hopeful and generative position to think from.

"Vulnerability can teach us the virtues of questioning the forms of mastery we claim and the sources of knowledge we own - what we know, how we know, who benefits from what we know, who is harmed by what we do not know."

Badwan (forthcoming)

When made vulnerable by our inability to understand another (be that a lack of shared languages or a toddler choosing to communicate with few words), we can either fearfully reject those feel-ings, or informed by that vulnerability, open up to relating differently in the world (Badwan, forth-coming). For this reason, bodily knowledge, points of connection beyond words and ways of communicating that are only partially understood are important for 'changing the human relation-ship of power around speech and language' (Phipps, 2019: 26).

This appreciation of unfixed and partially shared meanings, and the relational shifts they can make available, sits in contrast to an increasing emphasis within global early childhood policies on narrow forms of literacies, particularly those that prioritise abstraction and the expression of indi-vidual subject positions. Reflecting on this direction of travel, MacLure (2013, 2016), drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of 'order-words', describes a 'pedagogy of order words' (p.

175), that is, language that is declarative, fixing and labelling the world, and articulating the speaker's position as animate surveyor and master of an inanimate world. Talk of this kind communicates to children,

> "what is normal and meaningful, and thereby demonstrates the very possibility of pinning meaning to the body of the world, and the body of oneself. . ...[It invites children] to think in terms of the fixed relations of similarity and difference afforded by the logic of representation. . .. At the same time [indicating] that it is possible to stand 'outside' this world in order to observe and comment on it."
>
> MacLure (2016: 176).

A pedagogy of order words thus works to reproduce the 'ruse' (Jackson, 2020) of bounded, self-determining human subject. As mentioned above, this figure of the bounded individualised child, who 'knows who she is, says what she means and means what she says' (MacLure, 2009: 104) is particularly valued in the UK early years curriculum framework, where for example, by the age of five children are expected to evidence 'a good level of development' via practices such as 'ask[ing] questions to clarify their understanding', 'offering their own ideas' and 'express[ing] ideas and feelings about their experiences using full sentences' (Department for Education, 2022: 10).

   Via the dominating position of white western middle class language practices (Avineri et al., 2015), 'certain modalities of speech. . .have been ignored as unintelligible' (Phipps, 2019: 26). Notable within this hierarchisation of languages and forms of speech is an enduring kind of 'disgust' for the language practices of those less powerful (MacLure, 2009). For example, MacLure (2009) shares a newspaper article in support of a government campaign to improve communication in which workers talking in a pub after work are said to 'shout, gurgle and gobble in a largely consonant-free stream of noisy and incomprehensible dipthongs' (Elkin, cited in MacLure, 2009). More recently, Jean Gross (former 'National Communication Champion' for the UK government) has asserted that language in many working class family homes amounts to little more than a 'daily grunt' (Grainger, 2013: 101). Gurgles, gobbles and grunts, distinctly bodily and animal-esque noises, are used to describe and criticise some forms of language; noticing how aspects of language that are not so easily understood by those in power become dismissed as less-than-human, brings into stark relief the importance of Badwan's (forthcoming) question 'who is harmed by what we do not know'?

   When childhood is positioned as a counterpoint to over-represented forms of (white, western, patriarchal) humanity (Kromidas, 2019), children's take up of literacies are supposed to move the child on a predictable, upward trajectory towards the kinds of practices classified as 'uniquely human'. The other parts of literacies, those shimmering moments of intensity, vulnerability and connection that fall outside of the dream of unified progress (Tsing, 2015) towards 'the end point' (MacRae, 2019: 5), are rendered either invisible or undesirable. Practices that create more certainty via the production of abstractable forms of communicating (e.g. declarative talking, labelling the world and expressing fixed positions of the speaker) are preferred; silence, bodily movement and vocalisations that cannot be easily heard by adults as words, are seen as problems to be resolved quickly.

   In a 'progress' orientated account of toddlers' ways of being, the abandonment of less adult-centric practices in the direction of more adult-like practices, is considered a cause only of celebration, not of loss (Viruru, 2001). In E.'s mum's account (above) of the barely discernible gestures, facial expressions and vocalisations E. used to communicate in infancy, mostly understood only by those adults who knew and loved her the most, I read a grief for that which it is usually taboo to grieve in western society; the acquisition of language and the loss for what it erases. In this conversation, E.'s mum draws my attention to the unruly edges of her life as the mother of a toddler, the

moments of intimacy and connection occurring despite the progress narrative (Tsing, 2015). Similarly, my interaction with H, the chalks and the sky, had an energy and significance that did not fit the progress narrative, and is not easily narrated through the lens of 'pedagogy of order words' (MacLure, 2013). Viewed through a humanist lens, acquiring literacies and language is uni-directional and faster is preferable, in the journey towards full humanity (Kromidas, 2019). From a critical post humanist perspective, the situation is more complex, as practices are viewed non-hierarchically, allowing a broader view of the multiple changes and iterations in how and why young children take up certain kinds of literacies, each with their own value and possibilities.

What would it mean to separate the value we attach to communicative practices from their abstract-ability and legibility? Or to ask this question another way, what would it mean to imagine language and literacies practices outside of the framing of human exceptionalism? From this position of puzzling (Badwan, forthcoming), it is possible to wonder what early childhood literacies have to teach us, silent (or loud), unclear, experimental, refusing and confusing as they can be.

Seeping out of the unruly edges; new directions for early childhood literacies

Singh's (2018) important work makes the case for *Unthinking Mastery*, that is, the need for postcolonialism to rethink the logic of mastery itself, including within education. She identifies,

> "mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate."
>
> Singh (2018: 19)

Thus, whilst having mastery of a subject or skill is usually regarded as both benign and useful within education, Singh argues that, in its need for something to be objectified (the object of the mastery), mastery always debilitates to achieve its masterful intentions. In the context of young children's literacies and language, we might begin to trace the locations of this violent debilitation; the disgust for 'animal-like' vocalisations that are not considered words, the desire for thoroughly transparent communications that render the speaker fully know-able, the drive for uni-directional 'progress' that renders toddlers' ways of being as pre-human.

As decolonial and anti-racist scholars have pointed out, this debilitation does not fall equally on all children (Burman, 2019; Cannella and Viruru, 2012; Kromidas, 2019; Nxamalo and Brown, 2020). Cannella and Viruru (2012) demonstrate how colonial thinking runs through constructions of childhood, 'reinscribing western colonialist ideology on those who are younger' (p. 85) through, for example, notions of communication as functional and transparent, body as separate from mind, and child development as 'an individual manifestation of progress' (p. 90). The notion of a 'good' childhood and 'proper development' is thoroughly raced and classed, with the category of 'proper' childhood long being denied to black children (Webster, 2021; Wynter Hoyte and Smith, 2020), Indigenous children (Nxumalo et al., 2011) and working class children (Gillies et al., 2017), amongst others. Kromidas (2019) analysis eloquently demonstrates how the articulation of 'the child' in education is not in fact a neutral and universal descriptor, but rather works to legitimise racialized hierarchies of what it means to have a good childhood and adequate developmental trajectory (including with regards to language and literacies). Thus,

"the white Western bourgeois child masquerading as universal child is key to reproducing our current hierarchical order by inciting the violence of continual measurement, evaluation and ranking, thereby legitimizing and depoliticizing the "achievement gap", and condemning Black, brown and poor children."

Kromidas (2019: 65)

Hence Viruru's (2001) assertion that young children can become 'colonised through language', when certain privileged modes of communication are imposed; forms of engagement with the world that emphasise abstract-ability and reproduce a separation between human and 'nature' that sits at the heart of the Capitalocene (Moore, 2017).

In a context in which children of colour are positioned as 'less than' and measured against framings and categories that centre whiteness, it is necessary 'to create otherwise worlds' (Thiel and Dernikos, 2020: 482). In their analysis of how 'white affect' can act as a pathologising backdrop to young children's meaning making, Thiel and Dernikos ask,

"How might we learn to think and feel differently about such liveliness once we consider the myriad ways some children's "animated" bodies become racialized, gendered, classed, and so on within educational and community spaces?" (2020: 483).

Along with decolonial scholars of childhood, Black philosophy and feminist scholarship are important voices in relation to the question of how to imagine literacies outside of the framing of whiteness and human exceptionalism. Thiel and Dernikos (2020) draw on Crawley's work to emphasise the importance of movement, breath and the body. Quashie (2021) similarly theorises alternative forms of world making via his notion of Black Aliveness, foregrounding 'capacities of knowing' (Lorde, cited in Quashie, 2021: 17) located in the body and in sensation. Quashie's (2021) engagement with the work of Martin Buber offers an explicitly anti-racist alternative to the subject/object divisions promulgated in a 'pedagogy of order words' (MacLure, 2016) that seem to continuously reproduce the mastery narrative that Singh (2018) critiques. Quashie draws on Buber to describe different modes of orientating to the world, including an 'I-You' orientation, in which the emphasis is not on understanding or knowing (e.g. about a tree), but an open-ness to the moment of being in relation regardless of knowing or understanding. Buber writes 'I can neither experience nor describe the form which meets me, but only body it forth' (in Quashie, 2021: 21). The notion of bodying forth that which is difficult to describe, connects to the provisional meanings and shared connections I experienced with H (in the vignette above). Such vulnerable moments offer the potential to unpick the position of the human adult as autonomous and abstractable (and of young children as 'almost there' counter points to this (Kromidas, 2019)).

Concluding section

Tsing et al. (2017) describe the power of imagined future 'dreamworlds of progress', for which, it appears, we are willing to damage the planet. As Singh (2018) has described, notions of human exceptionalism are central to these toxic dreamworlds; the goal of mastery has 'fractured the earth to the point of threatening destruction of its environment and itself' (Singh, 2018: 19), whilst we continue to dream that if we can just create a next generation *skilled* enough, *progressive* enough, *masterful* enough, *they* will somehow come up with the 'solution' to future challenges. In this way, the literacies of young children, already deeply imbricated in rhetoric around human exceptionalism and unending progress, seem to take on an even more urgent tone. The very survival of our species, warns the new narrative, relies on producing a future generation 'better' than the current

ones, clever enough to find a solution to the unending growth of the Capitalocene where the current adults cannot.

In such a context, alternative imaginaries of childhood literacies are sorely needed. Early childhood education, as a space historically loaded with racialised and colonial notions of good childhoods, individual development and satisfactory progress, seems an important space for allowing these imaginaries to flourish. If literacies are both implicated in 'civilising' projects of white colonial powers (Kuby et al., 2019; Tarc, 2015; Viruru, 2001) *and* co-constitute the world, we might ask; what kinds of literacies might support a better reckoning with the inter-dependency of human and planetary survivance *by* foregrounding colonial and racist inheritances of notion of literacies and childhood *and* actively working to disrupt rather than reproduce the 'ruse' (Jackson, 2020) of human exceptionalism? This paper has gestured towards some of these possibilities, including a deeper respect for vulnerability and provisional meanings in communicative exchanges, an attention to literacies that seep out of and occur despite the progress narrative, and a better appreciation of how early childhood literacies are implicated in the production of racialized hierarchies of preferred literacies.

Arguing for the importance of all children to experience themselves as vital members of a learning community, Boldt (2021) advises lingering with affective responses even if they seem to disorientate. MacLure (2010) celebrates the tendency for theory to offend, unsettle or promote wonder, when it rubs up against everyday practices and social lives. Searching for new imaginaries for toddler literacies for the Capitalocene is necessarily uncertain work, with no clear process or definite solution. Just as adults who work with young children must frequently work with 'the gist', dwelling in uncertain and vulnerable spaces of not being sure (what the child meant, whether meanings are shared, if they are interpreting the situation correctly), describing or proposing literacies for thriving in the Capitalocene, involves vulnerable and uncertain steps in provisional directions.

Funding

Notes

1. The Anthropocene is a wide-ranging concept that has been taken up in multiple ways including as a proposed new geological period characterised by the identification of human influence in the geological record, as a way of articulating debates on environmental sustainability and as a meta-historical narrative that tends to begin in the Industrial revolution of Europe (Haraway, 2016; Moore, 2017).
2. See Haraway (2016) chapter 2, footnote 50 for Haraway's comments on the shared origins of the term Capitalocene. With thanks to Jayne Osgood for directing me to this footnote.
3. The plural 'literacies' has been taken up by scholars who view literacies as social practices, carrying different value and meaning according to social context (and thus multiple) (Pahl and Rowsell, 2006).
4. See Hackett (2021) chapter 5 for an analysis of how Kress (1997) sought to ensure multimodality was taken seriously as an object of research by 'elevating' it to the status of other forms of adult human communication.
5. See Hackett (2021), chapter 2 for a detailed account of the fieldwork completed.

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