Sheffield Hallam University

Too Much Kin in the Game? The Intimate Reciprocities Available in Not Speaking

CHURCHILL DOWER, Ruth <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8317-2646>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

https://shura.shu.ac.uk/36804/

This document is the Published Version [VoR]

Citation:

CHURCHILL DOWER, Ruth (2022). Too Much Kin in the Game? The Intimate Reciprocities Available in Not Speaking. Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry, 14 (1), 139-151. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html

Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive
http://shura.shu.ac.uk

Too Much Kin in the Game?
The Intimate Reciprocities Available in Not Speaking

Ruth Churchill Dower
Manchester Metropolitan University
ruth.churchill-dower@stu.mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

For young children, who do not usually speak outside of the home, humankind's expectations for verbal expression can reinforce an identity of immobilised silence. However, when these limitations are removed in favour of an expansive space for kinaesthetic, sensory attunement, it seems that young children diagnosed with selective mutism have an awful lot to say. This article explores how kinship is sparked through sensory and embodied relations with oddkin, and how this is expressed differently and generatively through movement. Posthuman theories of agential intra-action are put to work by feeling our way through diffractive cuts of video data gathered with four-year-old children, their parents and the researcher whilst playing-with improvisational dance. Thinking-with Haraway (2016), Barad (2007) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), I question how damage-narratives in early education that tie individualised, non-conforming identities of not-speaking to pathologised stakes could be untied through movement-kinships, such as the sensory-kins that emerge through the bio-sensory registers of dancing socks. These are multilaterally-triggered agencies that exist only in the moments of kinship-making through intensities that are often not available to child-sock-dance-joy through words with predefined meanings. I examine the contemporary biologies involved in touching-with and being touched, the affective charges that navigate the spaces of expressing differently and what might lay beneath and beyond the *skin as a site of possibility* (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In doing so, I attempt to imagine what architectures of care might lead to a more sustainable kinaesthetic reciprocity in educational environments obsessed with reducing movement to words. And I consider how this could help reconceptualise the idea of selective mutism as a new kind of Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016) that destabilises walls of words or fears of exposure by relocating the collective forces of the many within the one.

***Keywords*:** Kinship, sensory attunement, kinaesthetic reciprocity, dance improvisation, early childhood, posthumanism

Introduction

I, the researcher, enter the field with parents' expectations of an already transformational expertise, if not from the research, then perhaps from a new space, different objects, unknown relationships. Breaths held in eager anticipation of the possibilities of a different approach to unlock doors (or, perhaps, bodies), closely guarded by a familial patience that holds on to the frustration of not knowing when, or if, or why.

This paper explores the differences between non-human and human expectations of young children who do not speak in particular situations. Through a posthuman frame, I pay attention to

the intricate interdependency of human and non-human organisms (such as sock puppets, affect, movement, sensing, skin, electricity, temperature, sweat and kin), challenging orthodox concepts of the sovereignty and separation of the human body and voice. Such entanglement acknowledges new ways of knowing where many different expressions come to matter and share agency through their intra-actions (Barad, 2007). This has political implications for all the ways humans are categorized, judged and labelled (or "known"), especially through the identifying marks of voice, by other human and non-human entities (such as policies, languages, expectations and measures of normativity) that situate themselves as ontologically superior within colonialised and territorialising forces (Murris, 2021).

Through a diffractive look at video data generated as part of a research project where dance was a mode of intra-active correspondence, I foreground the tensions that arise from the hopes of parents for possible solutions to an issue that this research does not frame as a problem. Although some of these children begin to speak as the sessions progress, I consider the many different kinds of kinships created without words, and how the forces of oddkin (human/non-human) relations seem to accelerate travel towards more generative assemblages of being and becoming. I propose that, far from offering some kind of truth about one's identity, the voice often doesn't, nor can it, fully articulate sensory, affective, material or virtual experiences or the expressions of multiple non-human agencies involved in meaning making. As such, it is not considered in this research to be the powerful arbitrator of meaning that it is conventionally assigned (Murris, 2021). Neither is it my intention to give voice to the silent spaces that children sometimes occupy, or to the materials, imaginings and affects of their intra-actions, which would suggest one could observe and know these from the outside. Rather, bodies are foregrounded as relational becomings that may not become intelligible and whose marks/registers do not tell the whole story. Whether we, as entangled human/non-humans, can live with that is another story.

I juxtapose the tensions emanating from this epoch of the Anthropocene, which Haraway (2016) proposes is now "both too big and too small for most of the needed stories" (p. 174) with her version of a more apt possibility-world for what this research is trying to unravel. The Chthulucene, "a name for an elsewhere and elsewhen that was, still is and might yet be" (p. 31), seems a more appropriate space for exploring entanglements with those who would be considered the "unheroic, tentacular, dreadful ones" (p. 43) in the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, both concerned as they are with human-driven, finite and destructive economies of power. Instead, the Chthulucene is made up of "ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with" where "we are at stake to each other". It is "needed as a third story, a third netbag for collecting up what is crucial for ongoing, for staying with the trouble" (p. 55) which I will elaborate on later.

Starting Points for Not-Solving Problems

In the autumn of 2020, six families took up an invitation for a research project that aimed to explore the possibilities of contact improvisation (a touch-based, relational form of dance between two or more bodies) to reveal intimate and vital body languages that may otherwise be publicly closed or hidden beneath the performance anxiety experienced by their children, especially in early educational settings. These children, aged between two and five, were amongst the 1% of the population who had received diagnoses of Selective Mutism (SM), which is defined as having levels of anxiety so high that the body is rendered immobile and unable to speak when in unfamiliar environments (Poole et al., 2021). This rises to 2.2% in young children from culturally diverse communities (Elizur & Perednik, 2003).

Not-talking is often described in deficit terms as children being stubborn, uncommunicative, naughty, choosing not to speak or having a problem (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016; Hackett, et al., 2020; MacLure et al., 2010) and in need of remediation to *fix* their behaviour to become more socially acceptable. This trope is reinforced by education policies which pathologise not-speaking as an inappropriate, inconvenient, costly problem. Indeed, children with speech, language and communication needs have been defined as those who will "struggle to make an active contribution to society as adults", and who are considered to create an economic burden on the state, the severity of which "could cost an estimated £16.6bn a year" (I-CAN, 2018, n.p.).

Even silence itself appears to have become a problem, resisting as it does those wanting to analyse, control or make sense of it in their relentless search for rational meaning. MacLure et al. (2010) highlight this in their research on Hannah, a young girl who does not say her name during morning register, and whose silence "produces fear, perplexity, anxiety, excitement, and blame. It prompts diagnoses, for there must be something wrong with Hannah: she must be timid, or recalcitrant, or attention-seeking, or abnormal" (p. 493).

Some studies suggest that SM is an inherited biological trait, the aetiology of which passes across more than one generation (Stein et al., 2011; Wong, 2010). However, educational and healthcare architectures tend to ignore the his-, her- and their-stories of SM and situate it as a problem within normative concepts of what communication means, how it should happen and how a young child should be. This creates an unattainable language-based ideology which places the burden of responsibility to "get better by speaking properly" on the child and their family. By contrast, this research explores a different sort of response-ability where "accountability and responsibility must be thought in terms of what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad, 2007, p. 394).

I offer a diffractive cut from a study which attempts to shift awkwardly away from a spotlight on SM with a proposition that not-talking is not a problem, and therefore talking is not the solution. It is an awkwardness that "sensitises us to the challenges, risks and opportunities of thinking and living in multispecies worlds… [that] requires a mutual vulnerability and a sense of disconcertion" (Lorimer, 2015, p. 196).

Feeling my way through these senses, I explore a collection of improvisational movement *starting-points* through which the children and parents can expand and attend to qualities of their correspondence without reliance on words. I attempt to create spaces for an embodied exploration of the many other oddkin entwined and entangled in these worlds, staying, and playing with the awkward, unpredictable, physical and, sometimes hilarious troubles these produce.

These open, dedicated spaces, improvised movements and generative languages are gentle invitations to engage a "knowing co-presence or felt connection" (Lorimer, 2015, p. 196) to guide an architecture of care, sensitivity and trust-building with the research families. They are unspoken commitments to response-ability which emerge from having witnessed, over several years in the field, many non-speaking children spontaneously use their voices whilst immersed in moments of arts exploration. These are events that often occur when adults engage more with curiosity than compliance and "move their molecules" away from the centre, leaving space for relations of difference to emerge between oddkin (Haraway's wild category for kin who are not biogenetically related, 2016). According to Barad (2007), these diffractive spaces help us in

"rethinking the geometry and optics of relationality" (p. 416) and attend to how these matter in ways that might not be visible through pathologised frames.

Navigating Difference

But amongst these oddkin are unequal vulnerabilities and there remains an awkwardness in positioning myself as researcher in such a way with families whose knowing of (and dealing with) the ordinary affects of SM is always already greater. These families tell of their early sense of something being different and a search for what that difference might be, what might have caused it and how to solve it or adapt. The dawning realisation that this might not be a resolvable issue, at least in the short term, and the need to seek professional support, even though many professionals do not yet have any training or experience of SM, creates a series of costly challenges for navigating this unknown landscape. Indeed, these parents feel many tensions, such as in finding suitable Speech and Language Therapy support, knowing its limitations as a singular, biological, language-based solution for a complex, heterogeneous, anxiety-based situation. They describe their journeys through the proverbial desert, trying to harness courage, hope and responsibility amongst the unknowing; shifting to a place of acceptance that this difference is OK even when the nursery/school system suggests otherwise. This is what fuels their investment in this research, making huge efforts to attend so that not one session is missed.

From early on, as they share their own and their children's histories, the families seem to recognise a collective *insiderness, withinness* that comes from "refusing self-erasure of attachments and inheritances" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 80). They find new kin who share a similar genealogy, often feeling at a steep tangent to the norm, and struggling with the dichotomy of whether to continue applying for citizenship of this elusive and exclusive normalising world, or find another, or create their own, or…, or…

These families are well-versed in the having been of their children's experiences but seem less sure about the "being and becoming". Or how a reconfiguring of their identities might build a collective kinship-narrative which re-locates their children's present and futures into a reality that is alive with possibility – perhaps daring to take a few steps beyond the pathologised focus on what they cannot currently do, even though those damage-narratives might be the only available architecture of support. An architecture where educational or psychological adaptations are commercially designed for selective mutism and autism (with which SM is often comorbid), such as sensory equipment and furniture, language systems, speaking and listening apparatus, and the many toolkits, training, and resources that come with these approaches. It is not that these resources do not help a child adapt and function in the world – which of course is important – but, as Runswick-Cole, Mallett & Timimi (2016) establish, that this economic model sustains a globally pathologised notion of 'dis' ability, as if this is the only way to be and be known. Although this research does not suggest it could change the course of an industry heavily invested in pathologising conditions such as SM, it might help to reframe it "as *one* of the stories 'people tell' but not the only, or crucially, the most important story" (Runswick-Cole, et al., 2016, p. 26).

This tension to honour many stories lies at the heart of this study. It holds carefully the complex assemblage of cultural, gendered, inherited, pathologised affects which could never really be known by researcher or readers, or transmitted through such un-situated, temporal encounters offered by an isolated fieldwork programme. Nevertheless, the contact improvisation method continues to be used after the research, generating, as movement does, an intersectionally-

shared knowing about how to be together within, across and beyond the research group. Like the force of Hannah's silence, these are movements which help us to "trouble the notion of *voice* as an indicator of authenticity, immediacy, or narrative authority in qualitative inquiry" (MacLure et al., 2010, p. 498). Knowing the fears and inhibitions that silence and movement can rouse (mostly amongst adults) this approach requires *a politics of care*, according to Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), which "engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence" (p. 4).

Next, I will dive inside this speculative approach, feeling its way through some of these contradictions – not to flatten or correct them – but to create a more resistant, subversive narrative which speaks to the many that make up the one. Taking a diffractive cut, I attempt to reveal some of these narratives of difference, helping us to consider alternative identities to those that may have been inherited or enforced and reconfigure categories of kin and kinship. As Haraway (2016) points out, "If there is to be multispecies ecojustice, which can also embrace diverse human people, it is high time that feminists exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species" (p. 102).

The Many that Make-up the One

They (a sock puppet called Sockadoodledoo) are unravelling and stretching themselves onto the arm of a four-year-old human. They are many, made up of textures, shapes, relational affects, semi-fluid molecules whose physical properties (such as temperature) keep changing, and a heap of potential (as yet undefined) that we might call character. They enlist the help of mum by refusing to easily unfurl their creased folds, and then succumb to the muscles in her experienced, knowing fingers as they are pulled, lurching and sliding, onto the child's skin. A molecular kinship is formed as heat from the child's skin is transferred to Sockadoodledoo and their fibres relax and expand a little in response, with a promise to reciprocate the exchange in time. There are unequal agencies and vulnerabilities at play as the forces of push, pull, friction, resistance, magnetism and anticipation attract and give way to each other in each moment. The source of these forces is not a point of singularity – never owned by one or the other in each movement, but by all matter that are touching (whether physically, visually, emotionally or sensorially) and mattering in that space.

Perhaps a little overawed by the multiple sensations of fibres, colours, contours, eyes, tiny scratchings, resistance, and tightness, the child stares at Sockadoodledoo with a slightly incredulous look, tensioning, and making available his arm, as mum struggles to find giveness in between the frictioned bodies of clammy skin, rough texture, and delicate fingernails. "Can you open and close its mouth?" she asks. A sudden, funny idea seems to ignite and flow across the child's face as he tentatively places his other, ungloved fingers into Sockadoodledoo's mouth. He casts a humorous glance towards mum as he taunts and tests the possibility of having his fingers eaten alive. In a micro-second, Sockadoodledoo's nascent character is born as they gently and cheekily nibble the child's fingers. Fingers with a temporarily new assignment eating their own kin (right-hand gobbling left-hand) whilst skilfully pretending they don't already know each other. An assemblage of skin-muscle-bone-humour-brain moving inside the skin-fabric-thermo-dynamic-brain, creating an intra-active intelligence that gives birth to the animation of a non-human being and to a different story of multispecies kinship. It is an "ongoing flow of agency through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world and through which causal structures are stabilized and destabilized" (Barad, 2007, p. 140).

Later the researcher picks up an Italian rosewood violin with a rich heritage and many stories of its own. Shoulder, chin and violin are already familiar kin and have learned how to fit snuggly into each other's shapes. The sounds created by these bodies coming together are already well-known and deeply folded within the marks on their skin/synapses, even before a sound is made. But, mirroring the inquiry-with the child, neither body knows which sound will come first or last when improvising. It is a relational dance of trust that brings patterns and waves into being, akin to the *jump* that Maclure (2021), citing Stengers, observes, "an immanent or speculative practice [which] involves"… "a jump that demands trust but offers no warrant" (Stengers, 2008, p. 45) [and] "must be exercised in the absence of the usual guarantees afforded by logic, theory, superior judgement, or common sense" (p. 507).

Casting choice, control, and common sense aside, the rosined hairs of the bow execute their jump and slide across the strings in minute proximity. Their sticky friction causes vibrations, disturbing their metallic molecules and releasing a cascade of sound waves which travel to the ear in the same split second as the physical vibrations course their way through human and wooden bodies. Whether sound is felt first in the flesh, heard in the aural cavities, or transmitted via fingers on strings through the central vagal nerve to the synaptic receptors, is uncertain. But what is immediately perceptible is the affective intensity this arouses.

As an unusual, improvised pattern of minor chords are released from the string-kin, Sockadoodledoo (together with their new arm-skin-body-kin) jumps into the air, closely followed by the child's wide eyes, wonder-full smile, and jiggling torso. All body parts become deeply engaged in a frenetic dance that follows the rhythms and vibrations of the string-kin; material waves, brain waves, and sound waves crashing together as oddkin. The vigorous forces result in Sockadoodledoo's head flopping weightily off the end of the child's hand, and bouncing back and forth in opposition to the pull of the arm, now synchronously immersed in the violin's vibrational rhythms. The child's eyes are glued to the dancing sock-arm-collective even though the speed of their movements cause the video to blur, and his head darts in all directions, tangled up as it is with the flopping and flapping of Sockadoodledoo's head. Every part of his face is stretched to its widest proportions in sheer delight at the increasing-momentum-possibilities discovered through this animated alien friend. Such a strong sense of elation radiates from their dancing that both mum and researcher are utterly affected, entranced and touched by this performing-joy.

This author struggles to find words to describe this powerfully charged movement of moments, being so deeply embedded in the felt senses of that lived experience. There is too much kin in the game[1] to possibly extract one from another in time to know or articulate them before their relations and forces change shape again and again. The assemblage is performative as "a body that in its complexity never takes on a final or definite form or wholeness but engages in exploring new and other possibilities of what a body might be and become productive of" (Lenz Taguchi et al., 2016, p. 710) as in **Figure 1**. But there is never any doubt as to how real these indefinable and indeterminable multispecies kin are. Following Haraway (2016), these new worldy

[1] The paper's title, 'Too much kin in the game?' is a play on the phrase 'having skin in the game' which infers a high-risk investment that is made to achieve a particular goal (mainly used in the business and sports fields). A humanist interpretation might consider this as a metaphor for the position of the research parents. But I am attempting to reconceptualise the word 'skin' as a bounded human identifier, since what unfolds through the intra-actions with skin is the depth of kinship across many distributed elements and forces, human and non-human, that cannot be identified separately.

relations-in-the-making being discovered by such youthful explorers can only be described as a new kind of Chthulucene where "sowing worlds is about opening up the story of companion species to more of its relentless diversity and urgent trouble" (p. 118) and where their ongoing otherness creates a rich, new multispecies biography to counter the politics of exclusion and transform present and future histories.

The following visual assemblage attempts to reveal a few mo(ve)ments of this multi-species biography, attending to the authentic, entangled human/non-human identities. Whilst adhering to robust ethical practices, I try to resist the dehumanising trend and counter the pathologisation of our sometimes quiet child, by *not* blurring his face. With the informed permission of the research families, their desire is for their children's full body expressions to be known and seen as highly capable, viewing this as a positive contribution to the research. This exemplifies the excellent call by Nutbrown (2011) to rethink the distortion of data through pixelation which, whilst always keeping child protection as paramount, can lead to a reductive representation of child as always already vulnerable, at risk and whose facial expressions of affect, immersion and sensory vitality are insignificant, i.e., they become "voiceless" (Nutbrown, 2011, p. 8).

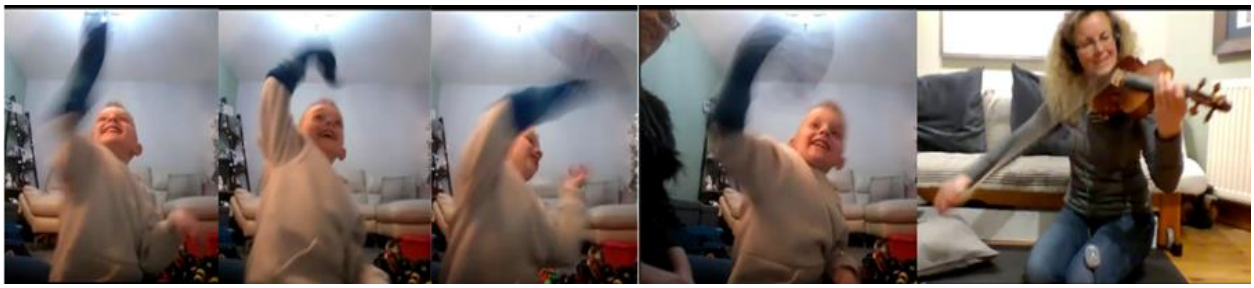

Figure 1
Mum, child, Sockadoodledoo, violin, music and researcher in a dancing-kin assemblage

What happened during the above events is profoundly articulated through Barad's concept of agential realism. This shifts the humanist notion of agency as a power that is individually attributable to each human/non-human thing and reconfigures it from a noun to a verb. According to Barad, agencies are happening in the very relation-making taking place in every moment. These do not occur through interactions that denote a cause and effect, implying one *thing* (often human) has greater power or agency over the other, or that every *thing* has a determinate boundary that can be changed by the dominating effect of something else. Rather agencies are encounters taking place through myriad intimate intra-actions that are constant and dynamic, and produce the ongoing reconfigurings of all matter in the social, cultural and natural world. They underpin Barad's (2007) theory of onto-epistemology where being and knowing is inextricably linked and "mutually implicated" in the matterings of the world (p. 185). In other words, agencies are incomplete movements of matter which cannot be defined by its constituent parts because "agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglements; they don't exist as individual elements" (Barad, 2003, p. 33) but as phenomena.

Becoming Absorbed

This troubles conventional science which holds that touch is simply a perception, not an actual experience, i.e., contact between two things can never actually take place. This is due, as conventional wisdom has it, to the electromagnetic repulsion (negative charge) of electrons which increases as you decrease the distance between the particles that are coming into contact so that, "all we really ever feel is the electromagnetic force, not the other whose touch we seek" (Barad, 2013, p. 2). Enter quantum field theory (godmother to Baradian posthumanism) which radically redefines conventional physics by suggesting that the electron is not, in fact, a sphere with a structure and a perimeter that repels other matter. But a single point with no structure, radius or surface with which to interact. Just a single particle which creates its own electro-magnetic field and whose electrons interact with their own such field, creating and absorbing themselves in an infinite, unmeasurable kinship.

Through this quantum lens, therefore, boundaries of phenomena become indeterminate – always becoming, always re-attuning themselves to their new/different frequencies, even calling into question "the givenness of the differential categories of human and non-human" (Barad, 2007, p. 66). The place where a child's skin ends and a sock's skin starts cannot be defined in the way traditional perception might, simply because they are experiencing many states of constant alteration. Acting together, these agencies alter the oddkins' specific physical properties (e.g., heat transmission, fibrous textures and molecular structure), bio-social properties (e.g., affective movements, gut feelings and sensory perceptions) and ideational qualities (e.g., purpose, intention, signification and values) producing different physical, bio-social and worldly identities, or how they exist in the world.

This onto-epistemology of simultaneous being and knowing has huge implications for collectives involving humans, especially in early education, where unequal agencies and vulnerabilities exist. Barad's agential realism challenges anthropocentric notions of benevolently *giving* agency/voice/power to the *vulnerable* by decentring the human as a dominant, subjective body to one that only exists in relation to the many bodies touching each other (whether material, visceral, affective, and so on). If bodies are intra-dependent on each other for their being and knowing then their identities and properties can only exist inside those relationships. Sockadoodledoo's dynamic character as a gentle finger-nibbler was born in a split second of relational ideation, nerve stimulation and affect between human and non-human in a way that would not otherwise have existed (nor had as powerful an impact) in that form. Leaning on Stengers, Lenz Taguchi et al. (2016) describe this force, or impact, as an *efficacy* crafted when each body in the filial assemblage is "becoming-imperceptible… in the sense that neither is the self-evident protagonist. Together in their interactions, they might have powerful efficacy (Stengers, 2008) … That is, the capacity to produce effects" (p. 708).

If humans can only know, or at least sense, this efficacy by becoming absorbed in dynamic apparatus that evoke diffractive patterns which disrupt or disturb the status quo (Barad, 2007), then an apparatus like contact improvisation is vital to enable a que(e)rying that helps us to see/feel/sense how our differences make a difference in the world. After all, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with… it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). Through these re-worldings, the unequal relationships between adult/child, material/human, sensory/physical that are folded into each other might be

reimagined as differentiated kin with related histories, that are not erased or generalised in some kind of utopian equilibrium-making but absorbed into many alternative futures.

In what follows, I will pull at some of the threads that unravel the complexities of how it might be possible to experience these transformations. I will look at relatedness through attunement, expression and touch for children who don't speak, identifying how, in posthuman terms, an individual, physical subject cannot exist in any other form than ideological (even if social separation tells a different story), and question if this renders the individualist, goal-oriented nature of early educational frameworks redundant.

Breaking Boundaries through Skinships

The case study above shows how human and more-than-human bodies are drawn magnetically closer together, playful kinships emerging through the affective charge of attunement as bodies begin to inhabit these liminal, entangled spaces. Becoming attuned, or in touch, with one another through movement seems to resonate at a deeper level than mere observation, perhaps because one cannot close the receptors in their nervous system as they can their eyes. The child in the above study did not easily sustain eye contact with myself as the researcher but could not take his eyes off the dancing-blur of sock-vibrations as they resonated through his core, already attuned through close proximity to each other's skin. In his case, there appeared to be a close correlation between what Barad (2013) describes as the *reversibility* of touch (where bodies that touch are also being touched due to the lack of boundary around the electrons that make up matter, as described above) and the nature of being in touch with, or attuned to, the relations in that haptic event.

This aesthetic openness to be present with the milieu of sensations is evident for all the children in this research who seem to become increasingly absorbed in something that matters to the collective involved (e.g., sock-arm-soundwaves-joy-child). In a similar way, Puig de la Bellacasa explores an onto-epistemological reading of the potentials of touch for blurring material and sensorial boundaries and helping to breach the limitations of language that seeks to name, contain and reduce touch. Attention to embodied listening, for Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), is "a sensorial strategy for perceiving the less noticeable politics in ordinary transformations of experience missed by 'optic' objectivist representation" (p. 96). In the case of Sockadoodledoo and child, touch trumps vision, helping us move beyond the often-dominant focus of subjective optics. Touch opens up space for what I call a *skinship* where multiple elements of bodies can interact with an affective charge and create intimate, situated visions of becoming across new and old geographies of kin, which become their own Chthulucenes. *Skinship* originates from the Japanese word *sukinshippu* meaning affectionate contact between two people, particularly a mother and a child, that arises through hugging, touching, and other forms of physical contact (Gregory, 2011).

So, if not by observation and interpretation, how do early educators or speech therapists approach these Chthulucenes to be touched by, and in touch with, different ways of knowing and being? The stories of children who do not speak show us that a shift from singular, skills-based, performative expectations towards a process of embodied experience unfolds infinite possibilities for different frequencies of knowing to be shared or transmitted through multiple body languages, like "Sheer Contagion. Companion species infect each other all the time" (Haraway, 2016, p. 115). These ordinary, affective intensities emerge not through words per se but from a *tentacular*

visuality[2] – a network of millions of nerve receptors/transmitters which travel across all matter connecting the sensorial, visual, haptic and somatic touches between bodies, and which create a *perception* of physical contact ev*en when we are not actually touching or being touched.* It is a process of creating a skinship, where everything is "permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future" (Barad, 2007, p. 393).

But flesh alone is finite and, in fact, skin is dead without this skinship with its counter-kin of blood, oxygen, membranes, muscles, follicles, cathodes and bones to give it an attuned form. Puig de la Bellacasa draws on the intelligent-robotic-skins research of Castañeda (2001) to illustrate that learning how to touch and be touched is a process, the experience of which "cannot be 'detached from its embodiment' but neither is it 'reducible to the body itself'. The skin […] becomes a 'site of possibility'" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 113, citing Castañeda, 2001, p. 232). Perhaps these speculative movements that reposition touch in lieu of talk can open up those embodied sites to possibilities of knowing and corresponding in nurseries, schools and other settings that would not be available through eyes and words, observation and conversation. As Barad asserts, "knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from a *direct material engagement with the world*" (Barad, 2007, p. 49).

Since the intra-activity and reversibility of touch troubles the notion of agency being attributed to a singular subject or object (if indeed these can even be defined in the context of touch), Barad's concept of agential realism becomes fundamental here. Touch is a transactional intra-action which reconfigures the traditional idea of cause and effect because it is not attributable to subject/object relations but entangled between all components in a limitless, ongoing and unpredictable metamorphosis. Therefore, a body cannot touch or be touched and come away the same body. They/we are *marked* by the effects of each transaction and, for these marks, we are accountable simply by being present. The mixing of molecules involves not only a physical but also an affective charge that cannot allow anything to remain unchanged by virtue of the chemical and electrical transformations within and around them/the world. That these relations are interdependent has significant ethical reverberations. Anything anyone or anything does has an impact and a consequence, whether conscious and intentional or not, as Barad (2007) summarises: "We are responsible for the cuts we help enact not because we do the choosing (neither do we escape responsibility because 'we' are 'chosen' by them), but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe" (p. 178).

Conclusion

As we have seen, contact improvisation sparks these intra-actions, creating iterative skinships that move, co-exist and affect each other. The challenge for educators, carers or therapists remains how to remove human-centred intention, leadership, preconceived outcomes or ideas as to what constitutes *value* and become more open to the flow of intra-actions without predetermined meaning.

[2] Referring to the Octopus, two thirds of whose neurons are located in its tentacles which can smell and taste as well as feel their way around their world, in isolation from the central brain. Hayward (as cited in Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) suggests this is a kind of sensorial ontology; 'they touch, therefore they are' Hayward, E. V. A. (2010). FINGERYEYES: Impressions of Cup Corals. *Cultural Anthropology*, *25*(4), 577-599. https:/doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01070.x

Therefore, I ask not, how can I know my research participants better or make a difference in their lives which presumes deeper knowledge or an epistemic privilege leading to greater impact. But rather, *h*ow can we collectively be and become-with humility, vulnerability, awkwardness and openness to the ordinary changes happening amongst our multispecies-kin in those moments? How do we speculate-together and build an attuned activism that troubles the notions of what we *should* become, acknowledging the historical, cultural and biological specificities each of us brings? These questions are important not just for the design of future research but for the ongoing implications for a re-worlding process that counteracts the sense of expectation or exposure which can emanate from childhood development processes. Ultimately, the response-ability comes in an awareness that proximity, touch, contact and movement may bring us closer to the *unknowability* of ourselves and each other, where "we learn that to speculate is also to admit that we do not *really* know wholly" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 117).

It is evident from the attuned dance of method, movement, bodies and affects that the positionalities and perceptions of SM as *lacking* can be disrupted, resisted, and perhaps not even touched upon, even though their invisible cloak haunts the context for this research. Instead, the vital relational attunements and agencies that are abundant between family-bodies are welcomed, foregrounded and reciprocated. And, in so doing, this community enacts an ethico-onto-epistemological movement of depathologising SM by attending to the embedded and embodied skinships in their everyday acts of expressing and caring together. It is an important way of re-worlding and re-seeding new Chthulucenes.

In these moments of being deeply within, and yet apart from, the world, small differences make themselves known. Attention is not *sought* in a singularity of intent but is *given* in the collectivity of kin. Sensations come to the fore that show their marks of effect and affect – and by all this *we know that something that matters has taken place*. It is not just that anxiety per se may have been reduced or that bodies feel more attuned, as if agency is some kind of momentary, isolated measure. But that an intra-active encounter has established a space for "the relations of 'intimate care yoking together… companion species' which can belong, flourish, act, resist, be affected, charged and power-full in sympoietic bio-diversity, and where 'there are quite definite response-abilities strengthened in such stories'" (Haraway, 2016, p. 115).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Christina MacRae, Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, for her tremendous support and insight during the preparation of this paper. I would also like to thank the parents and children involved in this research for their generous time and trust during the COVID-19 lockdown.

References

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *28*(3), 801-831. https://doi.org/10.1086/345321

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2013). On touching–The inhuman that therefore I am. *Differences* (Bloomington, Ind.), *23*(3), 206-223. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943

Elizur, Y., & Perednik, R. (2003). Prevalence and description of selective mutism in immigrant and native families: A controlled study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *42*(12), 1451-1459. https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-200312000-00012

Goodley, D., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2016). Becoming dishuman: Thinking about the human through dis/ability. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *37*(1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.930021

Gregory, C. (2011). Skinship: Touchability as a virtue in East-Central India. *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.14318/2fhau.v1i1.16

Hackett, A., MacLure, M., & McMahon, S. (2020). Reconceptualising early language development: Matter, sensation and the more-than-human. *Discourse* (Abington, England). Ahead-of-print, 1-17. https://www-tandfonline-com.mmu.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/01596306.2020.1767350

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Hayward, E. V. A. (2010). FINGERYEYES: Impressions of Cup Corals. *Cultural Anthropology*, *25*(4), 577-599. https:/doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01070.x

I-CAN. (2018). *Bercow: Ten Years On – An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England.* https://www.bercow10yearson.com/

Lenz Taguchi, H., Palmer, A., Gustafsson, L. [Stockholms Univ., Barn- och ungdomsvetenskapliga Inst., Samhällsvetenskapliga Fören.]. (2016). Individuating 'sparks' and 'flickers' of 'a life' in dance practices with preschoolers: The 'monstrous child' of Colebrook's Queer Vitalism. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education: Fabulous monsters: Alternative discourses of childhood in education*, *37*(5), 705-716. https://www-tandfonline-com.mmu.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1080/01596306.2015.1075710

Lorimer, J. (2015). On Auks and awkwardness. *Environmental Humanities*, *4*, 195-206.

MacLure, M. (2021). Inquiry as divination. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *27*(5), 502-11. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800420939124

MacLure, M., Holmes, R., Jones, L., & MacRae, C. (2010). Silence as resistance to analysis: Or, on not opening one's mouth properly. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(6), 492-500. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364349

Murris, K. (2021). *A glossary for doing postqualitative, new materialist and critical posthumanist research across disciplines*. Taylor Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003041153

Nutbrown, C. (2011). Naked by the pool? Blurring the image? Ethical issues in the portrayal of young children in arts-based educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *17*(1), 3-14.

Poole, K. L., Cunningham, C. E., McHolm, A. E., & Schmidt, L. A. (2021). Distinguishing selective mutism and social anxiety in children: A multi-method study. *European child & adolescent psychiatry*, *30*(7), 1059-1069. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-020-01588-3

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

Runswick-Cole, K., Mallett, R., & Timimi, S. (2016). *Re-thinking autism: Diagnosis, identity and equality*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Stein, M. B., Yang, B.-Z., Chavira, D. A., Hitchcock, C. A., Sung, S. C., Shipon-Blum, E., & Gelernter, J. (2011). A common genetic variant in the neurexin superfamily member CNTNAP2 is associated with increased risk for selective mutism and social anxiety-related traits. *Biological Psychiatry*, *69*(9), 825-831. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsych.2010.11.008

Stengers, I. (2008). Experimenting with refrains: Subjectivity and the challenge of escaping modern dualism. *Subjectivity.* https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.6; https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:1111-201606261306; https://d-nb.info/1104634457/34

Wong, P. (2010). Selective mutism: A review of etiology, comorbidities, and treatment. *Psychiatry (Edgmont (Pa.: Township))*, *7*(3), 23-31.