

Changing environments

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Thinking materially: children, non-humans and Common Worlds

This part of the chapter discusses a final set of ways in which children's relationships with changing environments might be considered. It starts with a question, which is implicit in the rest of the chapter: What might it mean to *decentre* children from analyses of childhoods (Spyrou, 2017)? This is a question that has taken up a fair amount of discussion in childhood studies. It asks again about how children live their lives in relation to others – only in this case those others are not only other humans (i.e. adults) but *non-humans*. This means, in part, looking at how the animals, plants and materials that appear in children's lives might – in some times and places – be as important as the humans. This would, again, add complexity. Sometimes, this added complexity is required because in order to understand something that *matters* to children – a phenomenon like Murilo's solar irrigator – it might actually make most sense to start *not* by asking children but to look at how that phenomenon works, to only *then* ask what children think or how they use it. And sometimes, a decentring of children is a recognition that the boundaries between humans and non-humans are porous, unstable and blurry, and that it is virtually impossible to clearly define an individual human 'being' (Aitken, 2018).

My (Kraftl, 2020) research about plastics and other materials in the British city of Birmingham is an example of such approaches. Advocating an approach to childhood studies *after childhood*, I argue that, to better understand children's entanglements with plastics and other materials, children themselves must move in and out of focus. Take Figure 3: a totem pole created by 11- to 15-year-old school students, in collaboration with some local artists. The totem pole represented the final in a series of workshops about plastics. Although beginning quite conventionally – along the lines of more familiar forms of environmental education – a key aim of the later workshops was to unsettle the students' understandings of and relationships with plastics. This was because although it is important to know which kinds of plastics can be reused or

recycled, or what can be the effects of plastics on fish, plastics have what I call capacities for *synthesis* and *stickiness* (Kraftl, 2020). Plastics are synthetic because they can take so many forms and be melded with so many other materials: some with harmful effects, others not so. But, as they combine with other materials, plastics take on new lives – perhaps becoming entangled with other garbage in the great oceanic trash vortices that have been repeatedly shown in TV documentaries. Plastics are sticky because they will hang around for so long on earth – thousands or tens of thousands of years. We are stuck with them such that some theorists think they are a kind of indicator of a future ‘(en)plasticized world’, in which there is no escape from plastics and their ill-effects (Ghosh, 2019, p. 277).



Figure 3

The idea of the totem poles, then, was to unsettle the students from their comfort zones in terms of how they knew and related to plastics. A key part of this manoeuvre was to acknowledge the ‘lives’ of the plastics themselves. The artists collected a wide range of plastic stuff – mannequin legs, synthetic clothing, toys, packaging, plant pots, and way more besides. This plastic stuff was sourced from charity shops, skips and other places. Most of it was deemed ‘waste’ – until it took on a new although rather odd value when it arrived at the school. But I also spend time considering the journeys of *those* particular plastic items to the school (Kraftl, 2020). I speculate about how some of those objects ‘made it’ to the pile of stuff on the classroom floor that then became the totem poles. Thereafter, the discussion turns to the creation of the totem poles themselves and interactions between the students and plastics – for instance, as in Figure 3, how the students found different kinds of ‘value’ or affordances in different plastics (the watering can for sustaining life; the helmet for safety; the rose for emotional value; and so on). Only after considering the ‘lives’ of some of the plastic objects, and students’ interactions with them *as part of those lives*, does the analysis turn to students’ verbalised responses to the task, and to the plastics themselves. This kind of focusing away from and then back on to the children themselves is one example of ‘decentring’ that pays closer attention to how childhoods are constituted as what Prout (2005) terms heterogeneous assemblages (complex mixtures) of humans and non-humans.

I also consider whether and how more unusual forms of interdisciplinary collaboration – and of methodology – might be required to engage in ‘decentring’ children in analyses of childhoods–natures (Kraftl, 2020). The idea here is not to be ‘blinded by science’ but to ask whether involving techniques from outside the social sciences (which look at non-human processes) might somehow tell us *more* about issues that matter to children. My concern is with a range of metals and other elements that circulate around, into, through and out of children’s environments and their bodies. With debates about air and other forms of pollution being of significant import, it is arguably not sufficient to simply ask ‘what children think’ or learn about these pollutants. Rather, using a range of techniques from environmental nanoscience, and working with students at the same school in Birmingham, I determined relative levels of different elements in samples of water, soil, breath and urine. I look in detail at the

likely sources of some of these: aluminium, from smelting, antiperspirants and coal-fired power-stations; titanium (which will potentially be relabelled as a carcinogen in France), from food colouring, cosmetics and agricultural use.

Although the levels found in the samples were not dangerous, the challenge – as with nexus thinking – is how to analyse and visualise the tiny (micro- and nano-) and enormous (global) scales at which such elements circulate, and the fact that they only temporarily pass through children’s bodies and environments in *their* lives. Critical here, I argue, is the inclusion of interdisciplinary methods. Alongside the traces of different elements I used more traditional qualitative approaches (a mobile phone app, interviews and a mapping exercise) to generate a sense of students’ everyday routines and, therefore, what the likely sources of exposure were and how their interactions with plastics, metals and other stuff came about. These methods were just as vital as the bio-sampling, because it is rarely possible to be precise about the sources of elements as they appear in the environment (it turns out that one molecule of aluminium looks much like another).

The research in Birmingham is indicative of broader trends in non-representational, new materialist and posthumanist scholarship on childhood. As indicated above, all of that work seeks somehow to start elsewhere than with traditional methods for understanding children’s voices and agency, and seeks to *complicate* the picture by bringing in discussions of the vast array of non-human stuff – animate and inert – that humans live with. It emphasises how the ‘line’ between humans and natures is either blurred or virtually non-existent (hence the repeated use of the term ‘childhoods–natures’ in this chapter). Thus, ‘learning about’ the environment suddenly seems a rather inappropriate aim when we (human adults and children) *are* the environment. Instead, ‘learning about’ becomes replaced with modes of paying attention to and taking care of what some call the ‘Common Worlds’ that children, animals and others inhabit (e.g. Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018). Like the plastic childhoods research, these new ways of doing childhood studies constitute attempts to witness conjoined ‘childhoods–natures’ – with the hyphen between ‘childhoods’ and ‘natures’ representing all kinds of local, contextual, multiple relationships that cannot

be captured by the rather more simplistic notion of ‘(re)connection’ (see Kraftl *et al.* (2019) for a fuller discussion).

References

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