

Coda

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(Special issue: Fabulous monsters: alternative discourses of childhood in education. Eds. R. Holmes, L. Jones, M. MacLure)

It would be out of place, if not monstrous, to subdue this lively assemblage of papers with critique or summary. So, rather than commenting on individual contributions, I will confine myself to a few thoughts that the papers provoked in me. Firstly, it is important to say that this is an important collection, both for its contribution to new and more generous engagements with children and childhood, and for the way the authors put theory to the test of the world. Most of the articles are animated by the ‘new’ or feminist materialisms; and they confirm my conviction (or prejudice, since I have a dog in this fight) that childhood research is making a particularly significant contribution to this emerging field.

This special contribution to new materialist thought and practice may partly be due to the relatively low status that early childhood education enjoys in the public and professional imaginary, affording a less closely policed space for the kind of serious play that we see in this collection. But it is also related, I think, to the uniquely constructive challenge that children pose to those who engage with them, if they are willing to try to see past the developmental and oedipal frames that contain and discipline children’s more-than-human capacities. Not yet fully subjected and stratified by the forces of grammar and the familial structures of oedipal logic, children are, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) noted, unruly subjects. They may ignore the etiquette that prioritizes linguistic over non-linguistic signs, or indeed humans over animals or objects, and instead consort according to the logic of the ‘pack’, which proliferates by affective connection – that is, through alliance, contagion and epidemic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 241). The Deleuzian child teaches modes of affective becoming that adults have forgotten; as Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 280) notes: ‘The child body is a fleshy pedagogue, building getaway routes and opening sensory realms through which one might escape stratification’ (see also MacLure, forthcoming).

The papers tap into those polymorphic penchants – into children’s monstrous appetite for ‘unnatural nuptials’, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 273) put it – and mobilise them as resources for more ethical and experimental (in the best sense) encounters with children. Running through all the papers is a sense of outrage at the ways in which children are forced into developmental frames and disciplined into normality. The contributors are very clear about the crimes that developmentalism and ‘adultomorphic’ thought (MacLure, 2001) exert upon those children who do not fit, and whose abjection is necessary so that the whole developmental edifice may stand. They also understand how the rage for meaning – the urge to render children legible and intelligible – itself exerts epistemic violence. There is a determined effort in many of the articles to relinquish interpretive authority, and a refusal to contain and represent children’s worlds through language alone. Bodily matter and troubling affects insinuate themselves throughout these articles.

As a result, the collection also pushes the question of how to think and do research differently. There are hints and provocations towards affective or non-representational ethnography. The papers experiment with ways of working inside material-discursive assemblages, despite the headaches that this creates for customary methodic practices in qualitative research. Conventional method is still primarily textual and assumes the interpretive prerogative of human subjects. It treats data as if they were either uncomplicatedly 'there'; or as mere social constructs and therefore not really there at all. It still occupies the position of the 'central point' or 'third eye' that floats or flies over the field, dispensing meaning and value (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.292). So I liked the sense of dogged persistence that comes across in many of the articles - the refusal to ascend to the lofty analytical viewpoint. The contributors forage, drag, stitch and curate. Concepts and objects are assembled from diverse disciplines and domains – art, Deleuzian philosophy, literature, mathematical snowflakes, mirrors, jeweled taxidermy, Justin Bieber, toddlers' legs, kisses, crushes, dogfights, pigeons, folk tales and Finnish jabberwockys. This struggle with both 'data' and with theory/knowledge produces a material and conceptual thickness in many of the articles – a commitment to staying with the data, getting entangled with it, alongside and amongst theory.

The monsters themselves shape-shift across the collection. In some papers, the monstrous is the normal, the majority, the status quo: those bodies and institutions – psychological, political, pedagogical - who, in the service of the majority, produce certain children as monstrous. In others, as already noted, the monsters are, in a positive sense, the children themselves; or at least the children are harbingers of the monstrous - gothic, queer or enigmatic figures who remind 'us' of what we have lost in the embrace of adulthood, and undo our humanist self-assurance with their indifference to our need to comprehend and judge. These are generative monsters and grievous angels, who inhabit the (non)place of the unrecognizable and the *informe*, beyond language and representation, where impasse is also the provocation to new thought.

There is always the question, of course, of whether we will have been monstrous enough. There is always the risk, as several contributors note, that our monsters will turn out to be pets, domesticated as Derrida warned by the very act of trying to capture them. We may claim to be unsettling, troubling, provoking and ruining the old edifices of qualitative methodology and education – indeed this has been a familiar trope of poststructuralist theorizing for several decades (MacLure, 2011). But the lure of 'creativity' as one of the hallmarks of humanism, and the sheer authority of the powerful, generous feminist voice, always threaten to pull us back into more familiar territories. We need to be aware of the possibility of merely redescribing old problems in new terminologies, or of mobilizing materialist or posthuman concepts to accomplish conventional humanist emancipatory projects.

On the other hand, there is the possibility that *we* might be monsters too – those of us who want to mix children with theory. As Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 276) points out, the child as a 'vector of affect' or deterritorialising force is a romantic and therefore a conservative notion, that risks diverting attention from the diverse and specific material conditions of children's lives. 'The child' (like 'woman') has been a pliant resource for thought across many different theoretical traditions. Do we need to worry

that we might be fattening children up for theoretical consumption? Where might our methodological fascination with prodigious childhoods lead, and at what cost to those that are living them? Mavor (2011) documents in chilling detail the consumption and repudiation of the child poet Minou Drouet by the French intelligentsia in the 1950s. Unable to satisfy the incompatible appetites of her public for child-like innocence *and* artistic genius, Minou was finally buffeted into silence by the frenzied disappointment of her (predominantly male) critics. Minou herself seems to have been aware of the danger of becoming an object of adult fascination. Mavor writes, quoting from one of Minou's poems:

Through Minou's own delectably violent words, we look at her with "greedy eye like children's eyes / who looking at pastries / undress the icing / from cakes all crackly with frost / mouth which nibbles with no respite / this tragic candy, time".

So, and in conclusion, do children need to be protected from our theoretical appetites for the monstrous and the prodigious?

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