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Literacy and language as material practices: re-thinking social inequality in young children's literacies

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Sand. Where does it come from? Where does it go? Sand in the classroom, sand on the floor, sand in special sandtrays, sand travelling home under the fingernails. Is sand as old as coal? (from Burnett et al this volume)

Sand often appears in posthuman accounts of early childhood. It is a plaything in a classroom sand tray (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010), a surface for tracing letters (Hvit, 2015), it sensorially immerses bodies (Powell and Somerville, 2018), it provides a backdrop for imaginary play (Burnett et al, this volume), it squidges between parents' toes as their children play (Hackett et al, 2017). Grainy encounters with this definitely not-human substance enact a number of different cultural tropes including free play, organic matter and more-than-human encounters. It also carries worms (possibly) and has (possibly) been mined. MacRae (2019) urges us to consider the lively companionship of sand as a route to disrupting dominant narratives about early childhood. We can think of sand as apolitical, attending only to a suspended moment of child and sand at play with each other. Or we can pay attention differently, with what Tsing (2015, p.37) calls "arts of noticing", to the geo-material history of sand, or of its tendency to be domesticated into narratives of child development and human mastery, or of the lively way in exceeds these things (MacRae, 2019). How does sand interlace with such vexed issues as social class, race, gender, colonialism, the hauntings that accompany places, and the deep inequalities of people's lives? Is sand a majority world problem? What if sand gave up and was tired, how would children play?

The intention of this special issue is to start a conversation for re-thinking conceptualisations of the field of early childhood literacy through a serious and critical consideration of the possibilities and challenges confronting posthuman theory, if it is to build, contribute to and disrupt our assumptions about young children's literacy and language practices. In particular, we view these practices as always embodied, placed and deeply political; we consider the potentials of a posthuman reading of these moments and events from this starting point.

The application of posthuman, new materialist and affect theories is showing a lot of promise in terms of understanding young children's literacies in a much broader way (e.g. Boldt, 2019; Daniels, 2019; Hackett, and Somerville, 2017; Kuby et al, 2017; Thiel, 2018; Wargo, 2018; Olsson, 2012). Nevertheless it could be (and has been) argued that posthuman and new materialist approaches to early literacy lack transformative power, or have yet to fully address issues of power and inequality (Beucher et al, 2019; Peterson, 2018). Nicholls & Campano (2017, p. 249) write that "tracing material objects' trajectory around the classroom . . . does not, by itself, lead to transformation". Although this comment caricatures the state of the field, it points to a continuing dilemma: by drawing attention to the micro, the in-the-moment, the contingent and the situated nature of subject positions, posthuman and new materialist readings of young children's literacies risk separating the child and their immediate surroundings from the political, historical, biographical and intersectional elements with which we are all, always, inextricably tangled. Such critiques are not confined to early literacy; they have been levelled at new materialism and posthumanism more generally (e.g. Ahmed, 2008; Rowe & Tuck, 2017; Sundberg, 2014). Elizabeth Grosz welcomes the turn to materiality, but worries about a "reductive materialism" that has, in her view, diverted attention from the incorporeal forces that are always complicit in the coming into existence of matter. Grosz proposes an "*extramaterialism*" that attends to "the incorporeal conditions of corporeality, the excesses beyond and within corporeality that frame, orient, and direct material things and processes" (2017, p.4; original emphasis). It is in, and from, this entwinement of the material and the ideal, the corporeal and the incorporeal, that politics, power, biography and (in)justice issue.

As Alaimo (2016) writes, a "doubled reckoning with the local and the global, the immediate and the highly mediated" (p.3) is required in order to grapple with these concerns. Robinson and Osgood (2019) point out that new materialism needs to attend to and work hard at keeping its "political edge" (p.53). In response, this special issue seeks to contribute to a generative bridging of the concern for inequality manifested in the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Henning 2018) and a non-human-centric account of literacy (e.g. Kuby, 2017). Until these two orientations are bridged, the field will find it difficult to offer an adequate account of how materiality and inequality are entwined and mutually elaborated in early childhood literacies. The challenge is to follow the ramifications of these entwinements, without

retreating to a binary position that would once again champion the material *versus* the ideal, the political *versus* the personal. Or vice versa.

Our starting point for this work is the materiality of the body in place, yet following scholars such as Alaimo (2016), Neimanis (2017) and Grosz (2017), we understand the body as unbounded, leaky, vulnerable, and dispersed, yet deeply implicated in place - not just in the immediate moment but in the sense that place/body memories (Somerville, 2013), histories, hauntings (Ivinson, 2018), political discourses and historical trajectories, are not so much held *within*, but rather *constitutive of*, bodies. Our bodies, those of the children whose literacies we seek to describe, and the myriad of other human and non human bodies of the world. As such, this special issue grapples in a way with how the mind/body split inaugurated by the Enlightenment has played out in early childhood literacy, through the privileging of reason and cognition over sensation and embodiment. Understandings of literacy practices as uniquely human, rational, pre-designed, and guided by human mastery and intent, all carry the trauma of the Cartesian split, and the White supremacist, colonial past that informed it (Snaza, 2019). Whilst arguments based on rationality, pre-design, mastery and intent might seem good ways to advocate for particular children, doing particular actions, at particular moments, within literacy research, we need to ask serious questions about what we risk, endorse, condone or give up when we mobilise those arguments. The mind-body split continues to produce inequalities today, through the continuing erasure of bodies, sensation and affect in literacy research and policy, in favour of a focus on vocabulary, grammar and meaning. This has historically manifested itself in disapproval, bordering on revulsion towards the language habits of marginalised groups. With regards to young children this revulsion expresses itself particularly around children who are seen as more like ‘animals,’ which characterises them as non-human or pre-human. Rather than drawing on arguments of rationality, mastery and the uniqueness of human meaning making, we advocate instead for a questioning and troubling of the ways in which literacy is defined, particularly when those definitions split mind from body and human from nature. These splits, we argue, *always* end up by producing intense divisions and social inequalities.

This special issue traces some ways in which a sand tray, a red marker, an ipad or a game board can become an entry point for reconceptualizing the material-discursive entanglements of early childhood literacies. It responds to the need to broaden and widen the concept of the ‘human’ to include the non human or inhuman in order to find a new way forward for the

field of literacy research which is not just complicit in the reproduction of a social order. However rethinking the status of the human within a posthuman ontology is itself fraught with difficulty. If we are to engage with the posthuman, how do we then account for the human traces within interactions: with the fact that, as Truman (2019) points out, some children are enabled to be more ‘fully human’ than others. Many literacy scholars, including contributors to this volume, share this ethical commitment to ensuring that all children are recognized as fully human. Yet this aim sits uneasily with the posthumanist work of undermining the very notion of human prerogative in order to grasp the complicity of human and inhuman forces in the constitution of events and subjects. This dilemma again echoes wider concerns about posthuman theory expressed by feminist and decolonial scholars – namely, that the category of the human is being dissolved at a time when many are still struggling to have their humanity recognized. As Ahmed (2008, p.30) notes, “There is a politics to how we distribute our attention”. How, then, to mobilise posthumanism without eliding race, multilingualism, class and inequality?

Posthumanism is not *a priori* a positive or ethical position. Braidotti (2018) reminds us that posthumanism is neither progressive nor regressive in itself, and that critical and transformative practices need to be developed. It is not only posthumanism that taps into the pre-personal, pre-conscious dynamics of human bodies – their affective, fleshy and sensory capacities. These can be, and are being, harnessed to serve what Deleuze (1992), after Foucault, defined as ‘control’ societies, where the ‘affective resonance’ of bodies is monetized (Puar, 2007, p. 129), and the intact individual is disaggregated, datafied and dispersed, to serve the apparatuses of testing and accountability. The incursion of such apparatuses into early literacy is reflected in the intensification of language testing and surveillance of very young children, in the interests of “school readiness” (Hackett, MacLure and MacMahon, 2019). Snaza (2019, p. 73) argues that “We should speak less of literate subjects ... than of literacies that, jacked into state apparatuses of control, enable subjects to crystallize through the complex relations of more-than-human agencies and entitites dispersed widely throughout both space and time”. Given that the human is always in a relation of complicity and alliance with the inhuman, as both indigenous and Deleuzian philosophies recognize, the project of becoming “fully human” will always, paradoxically, also be a matter of becoming fully *less-than-human*.

It is important also to interrogate the legacy of colonialism and humanist privilege that lurks in our own academic literacies (including those at work in the genesis of this introduction). Tarc (2015, p. 10) reminds us that “language forcibly humanizes us according to particular forms of logos and cultural norms.” This inheritance is betrayed in the structure of our arguments; in the presuppositions about animacy, subjectivity, relationality and causality that are built into the syntax and semantics of the European languages; in the narrowness of our citation practices (Pillow, 2019). The necessary work of developing a ‘decolonial attitude’ (Figuro, 2015) that would allow us to read, write and interpret differently has barely begun.

Still, posthumanism is not a lofty theory, but “a materialized way of knowing/becoming/doing the world and (producing) literacies” (Kuby et al 2019, p.6). If we can unthink habitual western tendencies to separate body from mind and sort everything into a hierarchy, posthumanism could offer something more expansive, offering literacy researchers the chance to render unstable monolithic accounts of child development, and work in the fine grains of what there is, and what there could be. It offers decolonizing potential, in a world that continues to valorize particular pathways to success. It allows for a diffractive gaze and the queering of time and space (Newfield and Bozalek 2019). In opening up a world of hands, sand, sonic booms, and other materially situated non-human phenomena, this special issue therefore continues a conversation that has started but has by no means finished.

Overview of the papers

Beginning with the question of how we define literacy practices and the status we give them, **Jokinen and Murriss** problematise the idea of meaning-making by positing that “making meaning is ontologically already entangled with/in matter thereby queering Cartesian binary thinking (concrete/abstract, body/mind/brain) in literacy practices.” This queering of the field produces a very different account of matter, body and intentionality, and raises complex questions of who makes meaning and how. In this article, fuzzy edges and the experience of indeterminacy rock the boat of the settled definitional space that was meaning making. Things blur, are unruly, opaque, or lost in translation. This article pushes the material into complex geo-political spaces – child labour in producing the raw materials for digital stuff in the Democratic Republic of Congo is brought into the entanglement that is digital meaning making.

MacRae similarly urges us to begin these conversations with a rethinking of how we conceptualise and bound literacies. Working with two year olds, she argues for an understanding of pre-linguistic and non-representational antecedents of literacy, highlighting the ways in which embodiment, affect and the senses are crucial to the development of literacy (and to theorising about it). Continuing her fascination with the adventures of sand, MacRae exploits the haptic potential of acts of ‘tact’ and ‘tendering’ to develop an understanding of children’s ‘tactful hands’ at the sand-tray as “sense organs of thoughtful bodies.” Her analysis overturns conventional notions of agency, animacy, mind-body distinctions, and the position of the researcher, without losing sight of the fundamental ethical issue: namely the ways in which language-focussed theories of early literacy catastrophically misunderstand young children’s capacities as sense-makers.

Another way of beginning this conversation is with a reminder that children’s own participation in the world, including their literacy practices, are never neutral or apolitical. Children live in worlds where factories close down, where neighbourhoods are riven with racial tension, where advantage seeps into the objects they carry or the tools used to make meaning. **Thiel** addresses this point by drawing on Braidotti’s critical posthumanism to argue for the importance of unruly placemaking as a starting point for alternative narratives of early childhood literacy. She asks us to notice the unruly edges or what survives despite capitalism’s devastation, suggesting that it is easy to overlook the political and unruly in the minutia of everyday life. She wonders how to “generate new stories beyond the phenomenon of neoliberalism” – it is not just about scale or what we encompass in our researcher attention, but also about the kinds of stories we look for and tell.

Thus, place is never neutral, and as **Dernikos**’s paper illustrates, Whiteness is baked right into the sonic and affective rhythms of early literacy sessions. She uses some classroom data to start to “map out the ways white supremacist forces subtly moved with/in a primary classroom (NYC) through a host of bodies and sounds to reinforce processes of affective assimilation—or demands for first graders to “feel white.” This orientation offers some very promising pointers to how we might attune closely to the fine grain of multi-sensory and material engagements, and in so doing, register also how race, class and power are folded into these events.

Kuby and Gutshall-Rucker focus their energies on the question of pedagogy and classroom practice; how can posthuman theory rethink literacies, intervention and inequality in new generative ways, and what might the implications of this be for working with children in classrooms? The authors grapple with the question of how we hold on to and/or let go of, the category of human in this work, particularly when it comes to the question of intervention. Schooling / literacy can run the risk of acting as remedial work, to create changed or more compliant subjects that can be more easily accommodated in the narrow category of 'Man'. How then, if at all, wonder Kuby and Gutshall-Rucker might we think literacy otherwise?

Burnett et al address the challenge of numerous possibilities for how and what to attend to through their theorisation of multiplicities, thinking with Mol, Law and Deleuze to analyse how things "exist in relation to each other, but are irreducible to each other." Things such as what unfolds between a researcher, a tablet and a boy playing spiderman in a sand tray, alongside the marketization of 'what works' educational interventions, statistics on the markers of deprivation in local areas and the acquisition of the minerals necessary for the making of tablets and other digital devices. Thus, Burnett et al show how "the relational effects that produce educational encounters.....stretch beyond classrooms as well as those that operate within them" through a methodology of tracings, naming and attending to discourses, stories and histories that seem pertinent and present in the space, tracings that can be "hypothesised, suggestive, imaginary even". Drawing on Mol and Law, they describe this as "topological" writing, "laying out spaces, and defining paths to walk through", with the aim of disrupting the "apparent immediacy or 'givenness' of our classroom vignette".

What emerges in children's literacies *in spite of* hyper capitalism, in spite of the white supremacist forces that shape classroom materialities, in spite of our (adult) tendency to forget the importance of body and affect in literacies, and in spite of our tendency to artificially bound and neaten how to define literacies and what to pay attention to as researchers? These are different question that depart from the more familiar focus on asking what are children's overlooked and undervalued competencies? These questions go further, seeking to question the structures and measurements against which competency is being defined or measured in the first place (see also Hackett, in preparation). Can we rescue competency in relation to early childhood literacy practices from the clutches of hyper capitalism – can it exist beyond notions of function and usefulness?

After a time spent with these papers a sense of the burning injustices of the world come to affectively haunt the reader. Children who tentatively reach out into the world, who rock and make a noise in school, whose unruliness cannot be contained within the marked spaces of the neoliberal classroom, are cast out by an apparently benign system that categorises them as failing and other. The theoretical resources that these authors have used to point this out might be unusual, in that they are from outside the usual haunts of social science, from philosophy, anthropology and political science; but they combine with on-the-ground, pertinent and situated work to produce ground-breaking insights about the worlds children inhabit and their patient attempts to disrupt the thinking that surrounds them about who they are and what they can do.

Whilst engaging with the challenging, boundary pushing scholarship in this special issue, we encourage the reader to consider the following questions:

- How can we understand and take seriously the affective and the inarticulate in young children's communication? What happens to literacy as a category when we take affect and the body as a starting point?
- Literacy is sometimes described as a humanist project, in the sense that it contributes to mastery, ordering and a particular kind of orientating towards the world by humans. How can we think literacy otherwise?
- How can posthuman thinking on young children's literacies and language provide an adequate account of, or critical position against, the positioning, pathologising and inequalities families and young children live out in their daily lives?

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