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Opaque reciprocity: or theorising Glissant's 'right to opacity' as a communication and language praxis in early childhood education

David Ben Shannon & Abigail Hackett

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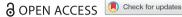David Ben Shannon [a] and Abigail Hackett [b]

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors argue for what Édouard Glissant terms the 'right to opacity' in teaching and assessing communication and language skills in early childhood education (ECE). We draw from Glissant's writing on Relation, and his interrelated concepts of 'opacity' and 'transparency', to consider two vignettes from sensory ethnographic research conducted in ECE settings: a special education classroom and a nursery. We contest the international emphasis on efficiency, clarity, and rationality in ECE communication and language provision as one informed by colonial and ableist logics of 'transparency'. Instead, we argue for an attention to moments of what we call 'opaque reciprocity': of (1) non-dyadic, non-developmentalist, more-than-human exchange, within which (2) authorship becomes distributed inter-subjectively, thereby (3) de-emphasising efficient, clear, and rational notions of meaning-making.

Introduction

In this paper, we think with experiences with young children that we describe as deeply *reciprocal* yet deeply *opaque*. In a national context in which the *transparency* of young children's communication seems increasingly reified in early childhood education, we argue for what Martiniquais philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant terms the 'right to opacity' (Glissant, 1997, p. 189; translated as 'obscurity' in Glissant, 1989, p. 2). We draw from Glissant's writing on 'opacity' and his interrelated concepts of 'Relation' and 'transparency' to consider two vignettes from research conducted in early childhood education (ECE) settings in England. We draw from these vignettes to contest the emphasis on efficiency, clarity, and rationality in communication and language provision in ECE as one informed by colonial and ableist logics of 'transparency'.

We are white, cis-gendered, abled scholars. Both our backgrounds are in early childhood education: one in primary and special education (David), and the other in

community ethnography and literacies (Abi). We propose the term 'opaque reciprocity' as a way of activating the anti-colonial impulses of Glissant's right to opacity in early childhood education settings. We follow others (Viruru, 2001) in arguing that the desire for transparency in communication and language is associated with neoliberal individualism, the parsing of body(mind)s from one another, and rationality, which reproduces whiteness through ideologically narrow expectations of young children's talk. We propose a response to Glissant's (1997) 'clamor for the right to opacity for everyone' (p. 194) by attending, in early childhood education, to moments of (1) non-dyadic, non-developmentalist exchange across a more-than-human network, across which (2) authorship becomes distributed in ephemeral ways that (3) de-emphasise efficient meaning-making.

Background

The 'quality' of young children's language remains a significant and enduring focus for teachers, scholars, and policy makers (Department for Education, 2021a, 2021b). However, in the after-lives of the COVID-19 pandemic, we note a renewed moral panic about children's development and futures, often specifically foregrounding language. Public-facing media outlets both in the UK and internationally run with headlines such as: 'Lockdowns hurt child speech and language skills' (Jeffreys, 2021), whilst the UK chief schools' inspector called the delay to young children's development 'particularly worrying' (BBC, 2021). At the time of writing, Speech and Language UK's (formerly ICAN) web site has been updated with the headline 'Stand up for young futures: 1.7 million children are struggling with talking and understanding words right now' (Speech and Language UK, 2022), following a series of press releases that posits 'nearly one in five primary and secondary children … at risk of being left behind' (Dowd, 2022, para. 1). Moreover, on 15 July 2023, they tweeted that 'Children who struggle to talk and understand words are much more likely to enter the youth justice system, develop mental health problems and be out of work as adults', invoking the image of a speech-and-language-pathology-to-prison-pipeline. In this context, 'quality' and 'proper' language development is narrowly defined as talk and, specifically, talk in Standard English.

Concerns such as those expressed by Speech and Language UK are animated by an effusive paranoia about how children might develop. Eve Sedgwick (2003) explains paranoia as a future-oriented affect, animated by a 'distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprise' that drives heteronormative reproduction of the status quo (p. 146). In relation to young children's language, this 'aversion to surprise' can be read in concerns that children might develop in unpredicted and unpredictable ways, coupled with a narrow and exclusionary definition of language centred on vocabulary, spoken sentences and turn taking (Henner & Robinson, 2023; MacLure, 2013). Surprise and unpredictability are seen as impeding efforts to effectively correct children's development in the present, and secure against further divergence in the future.

In this article, we explore the consequences of this intense and intensifying paranoia surrounding young children's communication and language development in relation to notions of *efficiency*, *clarity*, and *rationality*. In the next section, we frame these qualities using Édouard Glissant's (1997) concepts of relation, opacity, and transparency.

Transparency and opacity in Glissant's theory of relation

As a Martiniquais author and philosopher, Glissant's 'mother' tongue – his 'language of intimacy and friendship' (Wing, in Glissant, 1997, p. xvi) – was Antillean Creole. His thinking on opacity, and its related concepts of Relation and transparency, is animated by this language – a *creole* – and the process of its inception – *creolisation*. Creolisation is a complex hybridisation of several languages to form a new one: in the case of Antillean Creole, this includes French, the Indigenous South American language *Karìna auran* ('Carib'), and West African languages. Glissant and other Caribbean cultural theorists have taken up the hybridity associated with creolisation as a means of complicating any self-apparent (or 'transparent') delineation, such as between the social and the genetic (Wynter, 2001), or between humans and machines (Chude-Sokei, 2016).

Glissant's (1997) concept of Relation is heavily indebted to his theorisation of creolisation and its contesting of easy boundaries. Indeed, Glissant claims that creolisation 'approximates' the idea of Relation (p. 34). Consequently, Relation is highly specific to Glissant's geographical, social, and cultural heritage: like the visual metaphor of the Caribbean archipelagos – a scattering of islands through an arc of ocean – Relation is a 'limitless *métissage* [cultural and ethnic mixing or hybridity], its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable' (p. 34). These ideas have implications for how we understand communication in early childhood education (ECE) because Glissant's conceptualisation of Relation does not envisage interaction as between neatly parsed entities (e.g. an adult–child communication dyad); rather, each participant is constituted in Relation, a flow composed of innumerable encounters that are swept along, each as ephemeral as it is indiscernible.

'Opacity' builds on this concept of Relation by acknowledging the onto-epistemological certitude that an Other can never be fully known because of the complexity by which it comes to be constituted (i.e. through Relation or creolisation). As de Freitas et al. (2022) summarise: 'Opacity is the result of the accumulation of fragments from many journeys, crossings and remnants that configure colonial […] geographies' (p. 129). In other words, understood through Relation, entities and identities are *constituted* by everything they have encountered, as well as *mediated* through everything they continue to encounter. For Glissant, this ephemeral constitution and indiscernible mediation interfere with the white, colonial gaze and its claims to *Know*.

The colonial desire to *Know* is often presented as benign: by Knowing the other, we might better understand them. Yet, according to Glissant's concepts of Relation and opacity, it is never possible to fully understand or know the other. As Glissant (1989) writes, 'the attempt to approach a reality so often hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of *clarifications*' (p. 2, our emphasis). Thus, to fit the mould required by 'clarification', the white gaze instead simplifies whatever is being observed as a kind of *classification*. Glissant (1997) summarises:

> In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. *I have to reduce.* (p. 190, our emphasis)

In this way, understanding requires the reduction of the subject to fit the scale of the one who wants to understand. The idea of Relation – an irreducible complexity that cannot be

measured without eliding some aspect of that complexity – has implications for early childhood education, where practitioners evidence children's progress through observing and assuming underlying intent.

For Glissant, Relation is an onto-epistemological certitude, not something you have to (choose to) *do*. Thus, opacity is *not* an intentional obfuscation of the white gaze, which would just re-centre whiteness. Rather, for Glissant, opacity is an opening up of interpretation. Nicola Simek (2015) contends that 'opacity is inextricable from interpretation' (p. 369) as it 'motivates reading, approach and entanglement, rather than respectful and distanced separation' (p. 369). Similarly, Kevin Quashie (2021) theorises 'aliveness' as a 'term of relation where the focus is on one's preparedness for encounter rather than on the encounter itself' (p. 21). Opacity's anti-coloniality extends from insisting on having one's unmeasurable fullness recognised: it is 'not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy', a closing down through knowing or understanding, 'but subsistence within an irreducible singularity' (Glissant, 1997, p. 190), by which 'full existence becomes part of the universal drama of cultural transformation' (Glissant, 1989, p. 2). In the next section, we discuss how opening oneself up to the impossibility of accounting for 'full existence' might unfold in ECE.

Relation, transparency, and opacity in early childhood education

The assumption of, and desire for, a knowable subject is central to early childhood education (Canella & Viruru, 2012; Nxumalo & Brown, 2020; Viruru, 2001). According to this logic, a transparent child can be 'understood' as to what rational desires underpin their (in)action, (un)compliance or progress/regression, as well as enabling rapid identification and correction of the body(mind) that fails: consequently, this desire to *Know* children is often presented as benign. However, applying Glissant's notion of opacity reframes transparency 'as a problem rather than an unmitigated social or political good' (Simek, 2015, p. 363) by asking what is flattened, forgotten, or made formulaic in pursuit of an illusion of transparency, or, as Viruru (2001) asks in relation to the imbrication of power and knowledge in ECE, 'what is lost when language [or understanding] is gained?' (p. 31).

Transparent and easily codable communication is often framed as useful, presumed to enable children to express their (reasonable and responsible) needs, of which they are also presumed aware, and removing friction by cutting down on chaotic chatter or distractions. This careful plaiting of young children's communication into a framework of transparency – emphasising efficiency, clarity, and rationality – is exemplary of how children's learning, development, and needs are never neutrally constructed. Whilst offering a false promise of agency or autonomy ('express your needs and they can be met'), the goal of transparency in children's linguistic development remains filtered through hierarchies of embodiment (Chen, 2012), and progress narratives that serve a colonial agenda (Kromidas, 2019), through classism, racism and anti-Blackness, and normative configurations of 'ability' and 'disability'. As Baker-Bell (2020) demonstrates, clear use of standard English is insufficient to protect minoritised people from state-sanctioned violence. Rather than a route to autonomy, then, transparency has more frequently been operationalised as a form of surveillance and control.

In the coming sections, we think-with two vignettes of our interactions with young children that both involve movement, gaze, and vocalisations, but few easily recognisable

words. Both children are, for different reasons, positioned as 'non-speakers'. In ECE curricular and pedagogy, the 'not normal' state of 'not speaking' is often thought of as both transient, and in need of remediation on the road to the development of the transparent child. Consequently, the action of '*not* speaking' is subject to a variety of explanatory frameworks that make the '*non*-speaking' individual transparent to the practitioner (e.g. the English language learner's 'silent phase', non-speaking autism, selective mutism, or the language of developmental stages). Strategies such as talking directly to children, correcting pronunciation (when it appears), expanding word phrases, and asking questions (DfE, 2021b) seek to progress young children as efficiently as possible towards making themselves clear. Likewise, assistive technologies in the classroom, such as pictorial communication systems, Makaton signing, and computer-assisted communication, all impose means of making oneself understood on the non-speaking child. *We are most definitely not writing here against the importance of such tools*. Yet, in striving for transparent meaning, we risk missing out on the minutia of interaction: how a particular lilt, bum waggle, rock, or shriek are deeply meaningful to those intimately familiar with a young person's communication practices. Moreover, disability accommodations can often open up more opportunities for hilarious 'opacity' (rather than merely providing 'transparency'): children re-use the sign for 'toilet' because they enjoy the motion one moment, while in the next they are bursting for a wee. Or they collapse into peels of sinister laughter upon using Colourful Semantics vocabulary cards to make the (grammatically correct) sentence: 'The man is cooking the baby'. Similarly, for carers of infants, intimate bodily movements, glances or vocalisations can feel loaded with affect and meaning, yet are usually viewed merely as pre-cursors to 'proper' language.

In the coming sections, we propose our notion of 'opaque reciprocity' as a way of emphasising the openness of Relation in our interpretation of encounters with young children. Our proposition of 'opaque reciprocity' is not an invitation to indifference (e.g. the Other is fundamentally unknowable so we should just give up) but, rather, invites reading from a different starting point: one which deliberately makes space for a 'fundamentally unknowable kernel of difference' within every encounter (Simek, 2015, p. 369). It is from this starting point that we turn to two vignettes from our work with young children, asking of each what the implications of attending to opacity might be.

Methodology

In this paper, we analyse vignettes from two research studies: the first, a 14-month research-creation study in a special educational provision in an integrated primary school (funded by Manchester Metropolitan University); the second, a 3-year ethnography of early childhood literacies that included a nursery and playgroups in an urban community (funded by the British Academy), both in northern England. While both projects adopted distinct research praxes, they were unified by the extensive length of their commitment to a community and an attention to events oriented through queer-feminist theories of the materiality of class, race, and ability/disability. Both studies also took up a long-standing commitment to the priorities emerging within a site as part of what 'Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism' authors Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2021) might term 'being there'. Embedding within a research community is not to say that we easily overcome researcher-researched power dynamics: we remained embedded in our whiteness,

reified configurations of ability, and the privilege associated with adulthood, whilst engaging in intimate interactions with two young children from different backgrounds. At the same time, our commitment to opacity focuses our attention on site-specific rather than generalisable events.

Both vignettes were recorded as hastily scrawled field notes, written during and immediately after the event, and then nuanced several hours later. In writing and rewriting the field notes here, we made an ethical–political commitment to reading 'opaquely': attending to communication in all its forms, with human and non-human entities, as well as our own bodily sensations and what affected us, whilst trying not to encroach on the 'fundamentally unknowable'.

'Opaque reciprocity' in two vignettes

Our first vignette is drawn from David's 14-month doctoral research-creation with Pigeons class: a whole Year 1–2 class in an inner-city primary academy in northern England. The school community is diverse, with 75% of the cohort speaking one of 42 home languages other than English. The cohort also has significant rates of mobility, and a large proportion of children who are new to English. Moreover, the proportion of children with special educational needs is double the national average. As part of the wider study, David occasionally improvised with three children in an additionally resourced special educational provision adjacent to their main classroom. David structured these improvisations around the Intensive Interactions communication practice, which featured on all the children's individual education plans, and with which David was already familiar. Intensive Interactions is a communication practice for developing reciprocity; unlike most communication practices, Intensive Interactions does not approximate spoken language but rather teaches reciprocity through the attendant's echoing of the service user.

Moses and the chink of sunlight

'Moses' is black, and has attracted several diagnostic labels, including one of autism. He does not often come into Pigeons class. He does not use speech (beyond a few simple words) but is very vocal. The vignette that follows took place when Moses was nearly six, during one of his and David's earliest encounters. (Note that the details of some of Moses' behaviours have been altered slightly to protect his anonymity.)

> When I enter the room, Moses is watching *Pen Pineapple Apple Pen* on YouTube. When the video finishes, he jumps twice on the spot, saying 'Eh eh eh eh!' He flits across the room, takes my arm, and yanks it towards the interactive white board with me attached. He uses the arm to restart the video. 'Eh eh eh eh!' he remarks. Then, Moses frog-jumps twice, landing in the centre of the lurid polka dot carpet. I echo him, jumping too, and landing alongside him. Moses is seemingly unimpressed – instead, he's looking at something above our heads. 'Eh eh eh eh!' he remarks, again. I echo him: 'Eh eh eh eh!' At this, Moses glances at me, before looking back up at the something. He begins to frog-jump, touching the floor with his fingers before leaping straight up, his hands by his sides. I join in the jump. He giggles. 'Dooooooooooh!' I 'dooooooooooh' along with him. After some time jumping – I'm not sure how long, but long enough that my quadriceps start to burn – I notice that a chink of sunlight streams over Moses's eyes through the window above as he

rises and falls. His learning support assistant comments on it too, something about how 'he enjoys the light on his eyes'. I adjust my position slightly, so the sunlight passes over my eyes too. We jump and fall and touch the floor, quadriceps burning, while the chink of sunlight trickles over our faces.

Thinking back on this vignette, David recalls giggling at the unapologetic way his arm was yanked across the room, as well as wondering quite why he'd been chosen for the yanking (he wasn't the closest adult to the interactive whiteboard, and was the only unfamiliar adult in the room: one of the practitioners later suggested, cackling, that he 'looked the most draggable'). He remembers the accumulating burning sensation in his quadriceps. He also remembers a sense of 'realisation' as the sunlight passed over his eyes, confirmed by the comment of Moses' learning support assistant, that Moses must have chosen this spot to jump *because* of the sunlight. This 'realisation', as well as his assumption of Moses' being 'unimpressed', and the discussion of choice, is indicative of habitual leaning towards transparency: an epistemological perspective that assumes the white, professional gaze can fully com/ap-prehend the other.

Approaching this vignette from the perspective of developmental progress requires a reductive, 'transparent' assumption of what is unfolding. Because Moses is autistic, this might include reference to the Autism Education Trust's (n.d.) progression framework. For instance, the 'Communication and Interaction' aspect of the framework suggests that autistic young people might develop through four stages of 'Engaging in interaction':

1. Respond positively to familiar adults;
2. Seek attention from familiar adults;
3. Share attention focus with adults;
4. Engage in interactive exchange with adult.

Progression frameworks like this imagine a transparent child who is not yet here but who might, with appropriate remediation, one day arrive. Moreover, the child is already presumed to be transparent enough for the practitioner to be able to clearly read a 'positive response' or 'shared attention': for instance, was Moses' yanking of David's arm 'seeking attention?' We also note the tendency to hierarchise embodiment in these frameworks, encouraging a focus on humans and, in turn, a backgrounding of anything non-human. This is mirrored by the EYFS (DfE, 2021b) and Development Matters (DfE, 2021a) where, from birth, the emphasis is on orientation towards human dyads: seeking human faces, attuning to human talk, and approximating talk by babbling (DfE, 2021a, pp. 22–24). Moreover, aspects of the EYFS and AET progression framework seem to actively train children to background the non-human. For example, the EYFS listening curriculum emphasises being able to attend to what humans are saying, whilst disregarding irrelevant non-human sounds (irrelevant because they are presumed not to be concerned with meaning).

In this vignette, some of the choices behind each gesture are difficult to determine. For instance, Moses clearly initiated the jumping, but it's unclear how David's own jumping amplified or sustained that jumping. The choices behind authorship – the easy, *rational* brain–mouth link – are unclear. This lack of clarity gets to the heart of Glissant's understanding of opacity: it's never possible to truly determine 'who' is making the decisions because subjectivity accumulates across multiple body(mind)s. Moreover, we should not underestimate the role of the sunlight or *Pen, Pineapple, Apple, Pen* in any

consideration of 'authorship'. Indeed, even less is known about the role of the lurid carpet, or burning quadriceps. Eunjung Kim (2015) cautions against the compensatory affording of humanist traits onto non-human entities like these. Instead, the turn to the more-than-human should be understood as a commitment to making the absence of *humanist* traits irrelevant to recognising the 'ontology of an object'. Thus, to acknowledge how Moses's and David's decision-making was conditioned by the sunlight, carpet or music is not to claim that they are 'alive' or signifying, but rather that their conditioning is itself a kind of expression.

In summary, the AET progression framework is underpinned by an assumption that we can know what is being responded to, that what is being responded to must be human (i.e. David), and that what conditions the response is within the individual, rational human. This is indicative of the 'reduction' (to use Glissant's term) of a subject to fit a particular human-centric scale. In contrast, this vignette demonstrates how acknowledging a human or object's opacity might contest *reductive*, *rational* notions of authorship in communication, as well as how the communication practices of the (supposedly) individual, rational human might emerge across a broader network of more-than-human (id)entities. Importantly, this is not a compensatory affordance of humanist traits onto non-human objects (or, importantly, onto humans!), but a recognition of each entity's (opaque) ontology. Our next vignette pushes these critiques further by considering the assumptions of rationality that underpin a drive for meaning.

Duncan and the grassy hill

This episode took place at a local authority-run nursery, where Abi had already been researching for 5 months. The nursery had recently adopted an outdoors pedagogy, and Abi was interested in how the movement between indoor and outdoor spaces might shape the children's literacy practices. The centre served an almost entirely white British working-class former coal-mining community in northern England. Like many post-industrial communities, families were often positioned as in-need-of parenting advice and support, amidst general concerns about the development of children's language in relation to school-readiness.

On this day, the nursery had organised an open day during the summer holidays (for families attending or considering using the nursery), scattering toys, crafts and other activities around the outside nursery space for children to play with freely. Duncan, 1-year-old, came to the fun day with his mum and big sister, who attended the nursery. Whilst this was the first time Abi met Duncan, she already knew his sister, and went on to get to know Duncan better during the second year of fieldwork, as regular attendees of a nearby playgroup.

> I sit at the bottom of the little hillock in the middle of the outside space, watching the busy action around me. Duncan crawls up the hill, his body getting closer and closer to the grass as the incline gets steeper. The grass brushes his stomach, and he smiles and gurgles, lies fully down on the grass to bring his body closer. Slowly, Duncan moves down the hill on this stomach, stopping frequently to flatten himself against the grass and earth, press his cheek against it and declare 'aww!' I sit cross-legged at the bottom of the hill, watching him. At the bottom of the hill, he rolls and twists one way and the other, resting his cheeks on the grass and then on my knee.

As Abi retells this story, she remembers the slight dampness of the grass and how she twisted awkwardly on the sloping hill to see what Duncan was doing behind her. She also remembers secretly feeling pleased, as if Duncan directing his attention at her, and placing his cheek on her knee, indicated his approval or acceptance. Thus, just as with David's moment of 'realisation' regarding Moses and the sunlight, Abi began a habitual practice of attaching meaning to what was unfolding.

As scholars of multimodality have long demonstrated, children convey meaning across numerous bodily modes (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009). Here Duncan might be understood as employing modes (vocalisations, gestures, movement, and proximity) to indicate his happiness outdoors, together with a particular affection for the hill, declaring 'aww' and pressing his cheek against it. Our problem with this as a main or sole orientation to making sense of this incident is how it seems to reduce the whole affective, more-than-human milieu into something apprehensible. Within the EYFS, the meanings behind communication such as words or gesture take on a particularly utilitarian flavour, tending to encompass practical help and basic needs: for instance, requesting 'milk' or 'choos[ing] between 2 objects' (DfE, 2021a, p. 25).

As we have argued separately elsewhere (Hackett, MacLure, & McMahon, 2021; Shannon, 2020), an over-emphasis on the *meaning* of gestures, gaze, movement and so on can result in overlooking the ways in which bodies coming into relation through sound and movement always exceed meaning. An over-emphasis on meaning foregrounds human actions and relations, frequently positioning the more-than-human in the role of something the human child has an opinion *about*. Recall the role of the sunlight in David and Moses' interactions in vignette 1: David's realisation that Moses' eyes intersected the sunlight could easily be read as the *why* of his jumping: he jumped to meet the sunlight. Yet, often the act of observation is as much a projection of adult onto child; 'observation's ambition to comprehend' (MacRae & MacLure, 2021, p. 267) prompts an overlaying of transparency: to ask, 'what does it mean?' is to reduce Moses to fit our preconceived measurement scale. Considering the sun's role in coaxing Moses to (possibly) meet it, we might, similarly, understand the grass as drawing 'awws' out of Duncan, or stroking him back.

For Glissant, 'explanations' are politically undesirable because they map colonial gaze onto the marginalised subject, but are also onto-epistemologically impossible, because of the complexity of how (id)entities are constituted in relation. Just as developmental hierarchies map meaning onto development, centring humans and reducing the role of the more-than-human, so too does the requirement to draw out meaning or explain limit the action to what *can* be drawn or explained, codifying the observed object into some reflection of the one doing the observing. To paraphrase MacLure (2013), it sometimes appears that the purpose of asking 'what does that mean?' in relation to young children's sounding and moving is 'to contain, manage or forget the bodily entanglements of language, so that it can be freed to represent' (p. 664). As already stated, the reduction inherent to overlaying transparency is political: not accidental, nor benignly necessary. By way of a contrast, making space for opacity encompasses 'conviviality, fraternity, love, touch, flavour' (Liger, in Simek, p. 368). Glissant theorises attending though opacity as politically useful, in that insisting on its 'thickness and creative mutability' acts as a refusal of hegemonic rationality (Simek, 2015, p. 368): in the next section we trace this 'thickness' through our term 'opaque reciprocity'.

Discussion: deeply reciprocal yet deeply opaque

In this paper, we have drawn from examples of children who happen not to be speaking, in a political context infused with paranoia about the 'properly developing' speaking subject, to illustrate what it might be for an encounter to be both deeply *reciprocal* yet deeply *opaque*. Glissant (1997) writes that 'Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics' (p. 190); taking this as a proposition for reconceptualising communication, our term 'opaque reciprocity' hints at shared exchanges like those discussed here that, while 'meaningless', are mutually enlivening. Attending to opacity unsettles the registers of value by which we typically measure children's communication and language practices: specifically, against developmental hierarchies, where utterances are authored by a rational individual, and through easy definitions of clarity, efficiency, and meaning.

At first glance, the vignettes offered in this paper seem concerned with intimate dyadic interactions between one adult and one child. Such moments could be viewed as evidence of a child's communication development, for instance, 'taking "turns"' in conversations (through babbling) and activities' (Department for Education, 2021a, p. 21). They might also be understood as offering rich potential for 'high quality' language and communication, leading to, for example, the introduction of new vocabulary, or well-chosen questions picking up on the child's interests as an invitation to elaborate. Even in circumstances where introducing more language is not the primary aim (such as the 'Intensive Interactions' approach), the purpose remains to establish back-and-forth exchange, prompting a narrowing of focus: attuning attention primarily to the other individual involved for the purpose of moving the child towards increasing clarification or transparency. In contrast, our discussions have attended to a reciprocity that caught up human and non-human (id)entities in a non-linear, atemporal, more-than human rhythm that did not result in progressively more clarity, but in a kind of open-ended ongoing-ness.

Glissant's opacity is not a refusal that closes down but rather an opening up to 'horizons that are situated at one and the same time inside colonial experience, anti-colonial struggle, and post-colony cultural life' (Drabinski, 2019, p. 14). Across our vignettes, widening our lens of attention through 'opacity' illustrates some of this complex opening–closing: for instance, how grass and sunlight played an important part in the reciprocity, intensity, and joy that we experienced, ostensibly 'with children', but actually with (and within) the complex ephemerality that constituted both us and them in these moments. These un-anticipatable aspects resemble what Keeling (2019), drawing from Glissant, terms the 'errant, the irrational, and the unpredictable' (p. 32) that animate Black futures towards a 'blossoming in spite of what presently seems destined' (p. 36); this sits uncomfortably with the white paranoia about securing young children's language development we outlined at the start of this paper, opening our thinking to opacity's transformative potential 'but also its unpredictability and lack of guarantees' (Simek, 2015, p. 372). This, also, is where resisting assessments of authorship, a notion required in order to assess efficiency, clarity and rationality, together with breaking the action down into a series of discrete moments that can be temporally ordered, comes in. For instance, Moses jumped, then the sunlight hit, then he jumped again. This *post hoc ergo propter hoc* logic retains easy, discernible notions of intent but in a sped-up form

that assumes individual decision-making in quick, relevant responses. Opacity, then, names an inability to com/apprehend in the present but also a cloudy resistance to future-oriented, paranoia-infused pedagogical suppositions.

Opacity also involves dwelling in a highly tentative, ongoing negotiation of consent. As discussed earlier, this uncertainty calls after what Quashie (2021) conceptualises as 'aliveness'. Drawing from Glissant, Quashie theorises 'aliveness' as a 'term of relation where the focus is on one's preparedness for encounter rather than on the encounter itself' (p. 21). This is a preparedness without any intention to be understood, but instead consent to being constituted in relation: to 'consent not to be a single being' (Glissant, interviewed in Diawara, 2011, p. 5). Aliveness, then, is a consensual reciprocity that allows each participant their opacity while opening oneself up to be reconstituted.

This brings us to our final point: in turning to notions of transparency and opacity, in attempting to contest easily discernible notions of clarity, efficiency, and rationality, and even in storying vignettes in a so-called chronologically-linear fashion, we are conscious that we risk overlaying another set of meanings onto the interactions; this overlaying of meaning and reduction of the child to meet that overlaying is exactly what transparency does. As both researchers and educators, it's tempting to want to ask ourselves how to encourage, respond or make space for (more) opaque reciprocity? In response, we are reminded of Glissant's assertion that opacity is an onto-epistemological certitude: it's not something we do, control, or enact: Opacity just is! We do, however, think there's mileage in articulating these kinds of encounters outside of a framework of rational authorship by bounded entities. Our choice of the term 'opaque reciprocity' extends out of a concern for how to acknowledge or make space for the 'right to opacity' without attempting to 'do' opacity. In this sense, reciprocity acknowledges our own limitations in assessing 'Relation' – the opaque complexity of what comes to matter – without simply overlaying new transparencies, especially in interacting with children living at the intersections of disability, raciality, and hierarchies of social class, from our positions of power as white, abled adults.

Conclusion (reciprocate opaquely:: opaque reciprocally)

Thought through a politics of 'opaque reciprocity', an ongoing negotiation of consent to both reciprocate and obfuscate, our two vignettes have hinted how Glissant's 'right to opacity' might be activated in ECE communication and language provision. Moments such as those discussed in this paper do not provide strong and compelling evidence against the various assessment frameworks we are asked to employ as educators and researchers. Indeed, they run counter to transparency's useful tendency to provide neatly lined-up events, rationales, and next steps. Instead, we offer something else; an unmapping for how we might orientate to another – a child crawling or jumping – in that moment and absolutely no other. In this way, foregrounding a child's 'right to opacity' – to having actions or languaging taken at face value and not mapped to curriculum – disrupts the paranoid, future-focus of developmental documents. We call for an attention to moments of 'opaque reciprocity' in which authorship might be distributed in ephemeral ways that de-emphasise meaning-making, refusing dyadic, developmentalist, humanist hierarchies of exchange yet all-the-while acknowledging our own culpability in maintaining them.

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