Documenting data-ghosts: Visualising non-human life and death through what is undocumented in early childhood education

Jo Albin-Clark[1]

Abstract

What happens with ethical response-abilities that linger in early childhood education documentation practices? Thinking-with research-creation, I problematise the human focus of three and four-year old children caring for eggs in a classroom hatchery. Foregrounding non-human life (and death) brings an ethical disquiet that sticks around. Instead, the past-present-future becomes blurred with ghostly matters. What is particularly haunting is the disposability of non-human life after human educational events are over. Haunting data that is not easy to think with and irritates through time is conceptualised as a data-ghost. Through methodological creative experiments inspired by digital visualisations of non-human data-ghosts, I ponder with the minor of what is unthought, half-said and non-documented when chicks are returned to commercial hatcheries. Posthuman praxis leads me to trouble the human-centric focus of documentation practices and wonder what new questions are generated for multi-species flourishing when the foreground slips and flips to the non-human.

Keywords: *Ethical response-ability; early childhood education; documentation practices; data-ghosts; posthuman praxis*

Introduction

Of lingering fascination to me are some photographs and narrative observations of three and four-year-old children's learning that were made into a teacher created book. Such documentation practices are an everyday occurrence in early childhood education (ECE) and this example centered on the learning experiences involving a small portable classroom hatchery (figure 1) (Albin-Clark, 2021). Teachers and educators use documentation for multiple purposes that involve making sense of playful learning, sharing with children and families as well as for assessment purposes (Alasuutari et al., 2014). The vitality of documentation encapsulates the liveliness and intra and inter-relatedness in-between the human, non-human, and other-than-human with the generative promise of posthuman related theories (Taylor, 2020). Yet in this visual essay, the child-centered book is not my focus.

---

[1] Jo Albin-Clark, Edge Hill University, UK. E-mail: jo.albin-clark@edgehill.ac.uk.

Figure 1. Hatchery

The original documentation is full of human-non-human enchantment (Bennett, 2010). As I turn over the pages, I sense the created knowledge in-between hatching, child, families, and teachers (figure 2); collaborative possibilities, caring and connecting in-between chick-child (Modi, 2021). Erupting from the documentation are material-discourses of care, young children questioning, observing, and gently cradling chicks. It is an ECE dream of real-life first-hand experience. Teacher-child infectious excitement, the wonder of birth, learning to care for new life, and the rich dialogue that swills and eddies around; ticking the curriculum boxes with hopeful learning experiences. Such pedagogy encapsulates current ECE debates in England that resist more formalised learning modes (Georgeson et al., 2022).

It is easy documentation to think with. It is all there, the multi-species care, the flourishing.

Speculating with posthuman praxis inspires me to "follow the question; what happens if?" (Taylor, 2020, 15). Documentation tells the same old human story and posthuman theories opens fresh possibilities in thinking-with documentation as something with agentive capacity (Albin-Clark, 2021). New story-making can conjure affirmative research practices with the more-than-human (Ovington et al, forthcoming). Re-turning to the documentation meant turning over (and over) affectivities and inspired fresh arts-based enquiries (Burnard et al., 2022). From there I shared the

documentation story with a 3D artist who composed digital environments to foreground the non-human traces and trouble typically human-centric documentation practices.

Figure 2. Hatching

Inspired by scholars like Renold and Ivinson (2022), posthuman praxis can nurture arts-based ethically response-able practices. Being ethically response-able involves an awareness and accountability beyond the human and is seen as integral to relational ways of being and doing (Bozalek, 2020). So, with and through the visualisations I wondered what could I do with such research-creation (Manning and Massumi, 2014)? What happens when attention slips and flips to the non-human traces absent from documentation (Albin-Clark, 2022)?

Yet, re-turning and visualising the non-human in the form of a pipping egg brings bother (figure 3). Shifting attention foregrounds a commodified political ecology (Braidotti, 2019). Each year, chickens are raised to be slaughtered in their billions, with long temporal repercussions imagined by activist artists the Pink Chicken Project (Nonhuman Nonsense, 2021). From the broader project of posthuman and feminist materialisms, worlding shifts human affairs to the background. A more relational worlding entangle memories as other and more-than-human, embodied, embedded, and on the move (Strom et al., 2020).

Figure 3. Pipping

Time is of interest in posthuman scholarship as such perspectives blur temporal binaries. The separation between what is present and absent comes into play (Varga, 2022). When I think back, my gaze softens away from human smiles. Time does things like that. Beyond that, a liminal and relational reading of time falls away from human concerns. Entwinements of time, space and materiality are encapsulated in Barad's term *spacetimemattering*: "the past was never simply there to begin with, and the future is not simply what will unfold; the 'past' and the 'future' are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetimemattering" (2007, 315).

What irritates documentation's *spacetimemattering* is a more blurred temporal story that strays from the cracking eggs outline (figure 4). Disquiet lives in the dissonance of minor gestures at work and what is almost imperceptible and at the fringes (Manning, 2016). Manning frames minor gestures as "[...] the activator, the carrier [...] it moves the nonconscious towards the conscious, makes the unsayable in the said, brings into resonance field effects otherwise backgrounded in experience" (2016, 7).

When I recall the documentation with the teacher who made it, nervous, complicit nodding, and laughter clusters around a certain phrase: *"They are going back to the farm."*

Of course, the farm acts as a metaphor for what happens when the chicks leave the classroom. Death is still very much a taboo subject with young children, even after the pandemic disrupted mortality's visibility (Ferrando & Datta, 2021). In educational contexts, death is rarely directly engaged with beyond a cursory reporting in subjects related to war and/or settler colonialism in later schooling. Once the chicks fulfill their educational purpose, they return to their fate at the commercial hatchery.

Figure 4. Cracking
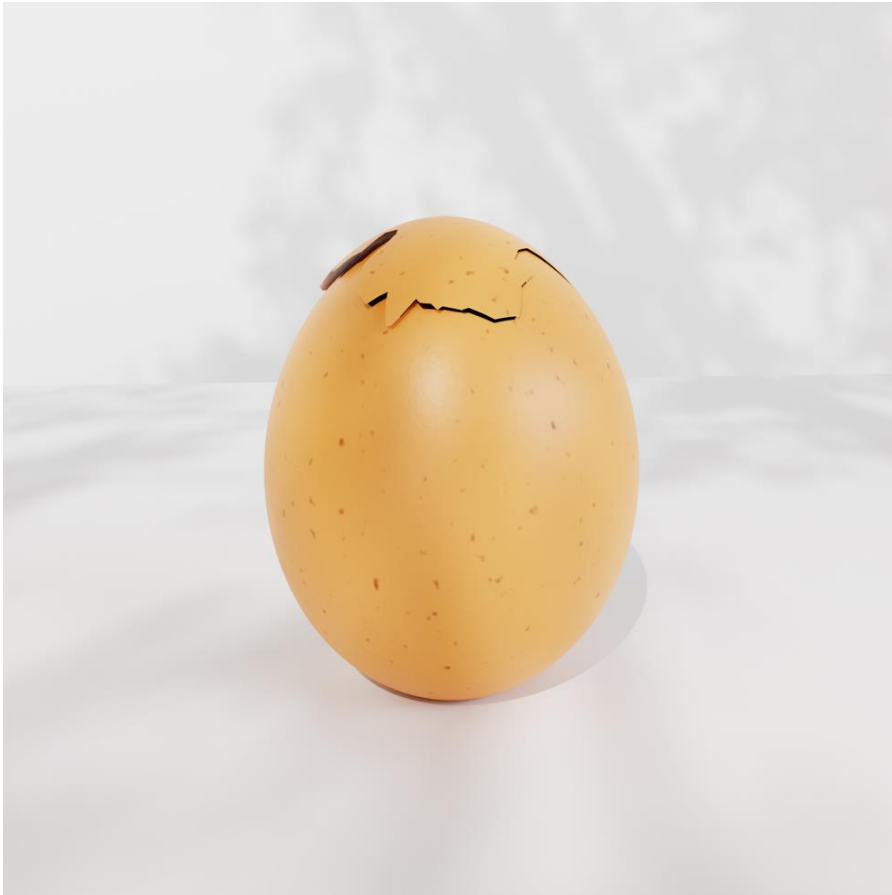
'Farm' summons romanticised scenes, with hens rustically living out their days. We tell ourselves this story of humans making kin (Haraway, 2016), but the reality is far from romantic. Posthuman theories illuminate the complexities nestled with the inter and intra-relationships between children, environments, things, and non-human lives (Hohti & Tammi, 2019; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019). Whilst some hens are rescued, commercial hatcheries often cull returned chicks because they risk disease to healthy flocks (PETA, 2022). Animal welfare organisations recommend that schools do not engage with hatcheries in this form (RSPCA, N.D.).

Rich, first-hand human learning about multi-species life has consequences for the non-human. But how did the death of one species become the consequence of human education? Building on Ulmer's (2021) recent photo essay, visualising the non-human life and death of chicks offers further

refocusing of the Anthropocenic gaze into the ECE world. Such refocusing conjures a richer, livelier assemblage of posthuman relationality between the human and non-human world to ponder beyond the learning child, along with further ethical responsibilities and accountabilities to bear. The Anthropocene describes our current time in learning to live a commodified life in an ecology altered drastically by late-stage capitalism (Braidotti, 2019). Seeking stories of survival and multispecies flourishing amidst the ruins (Osgood, 2022). Drought, wildfires, food banks and widening gaps between haves and have-nots. The breath the chick takes signals educational commodification (figure 5). It is the Anthropocene in motion with children's and animals' futures forever entwined in commonworlds (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019). Eggs sold to schools for educational purposes, then killed as chicks once their educational purpose is over.

Figure 5. Breathing

Originally, the documentation foregrounded human learning with lively and breathing chicks (figure 6). But through posthuman praxis, I seek the minor gestures alive in the more-than-human undocumented spaces (Manning, 2016). What is *not* documented renders me *uneasy*. Bone and Blaise (2015) write of the uneasy assemblage of ethical response-ability by drawing on posthuman theory. They employ ideas of being packaged to consider how refugees are caged, asylum seeking children are considered, and live animals exported for slaughter.

Figure 6. Live

From this position, the original child-chick documentation was a comforting and *easy* assemblage. Through visualising what is *not* documented, the uneasy and disposable nature of the chick comes to the fore. Disposability is what happens to everyone and everything other than an idealised human (Braidotti, 2013).

The disposable chick lingers in my memory as a ghostly matter considering: "matter is spectral, haunted by all im/possible wanderings, an infinite multiplicity of histories present/absent in the indeterminacy of time-being" (Barad, 2017, 113). Similarly, ghosts can be lost things that make themselves known in their own unknown ways (Gordon, 2008, 8). Ghosts linger in the notion of hauntology, where the past comes back as a specter (Derrida, 2006). Data-ghosts are bothersome bits of data that hang around and problematise ethical decision making and materialise in multiple ways (Albin-Clark, 2022). Data-ghosts are non-human formations of spectral data and scholars such as Nordstrom (2013) conjure similar ideas in her writings between those deceased and herself. The chick is a scrap of data-ghost, irritating, lingering, and disrupting time as a bothersome bit of data that hangs around and worries ethical response-abilities. Data-ghosts are sticky, data fragments that become stuck in memory (MacRae et al. 2017).

What happens when you are open to ghosts that hover in what is not documented (Varga & Monreal, 2021)? I wonder how it is possible to do something with something that is not there, to

generate with the minor gestures of events (Manning, 2016)? It follows and thus frames what hides in-between the pages, lines and photographs *as* haunting matter (figure 7). Now, I think-with the traces left by haunting (Derrida, 2006) and ponder what animating the ghostly mattering of the data-ghost of the ghost-chick has led me to.

Figure 7. Dying

Creating the disposable chick speculates with the art-based theory-practice of research-creation, that Manning and Massumi (2014) consider as concepts in-the-making. In contrast to the easy assemblage of smiles, care, excitement, fluffy chicks, and rich learning gains, a disrupted spacetimemattering illuminates a more uneasy troubling (Bone & Blaise, 2015). Notions of non-human life and death entwine a more relational ethical response-ability that provokes affective intensities from what was unthought, unsaid, unwritten and undocumented. Visualising and up-ending human events into more blurred non-human temporalities leave further enquiries for both ECE pedagogies and research practices. Not any of those ethical traces are comforting, familiar or easy ways to think.

I resist an easy conclusion as I am firmly uneasy in research-creation, so I finish with three theory-practice lines of thought.

Firstly, the methodological re-turn can be generative. New forms of posthuman knowledge nestle in troubling spacetimematterings at the edges of human concern. *What if* questions as methodological experimentation have animated non-human creative doings, but left uneasy residues (Taylor, 2020). Such refocusing opens the knotty nature of ethical response-ability and accountability to the non-human world. Doing and being what is just in posthuman theory-practice experiments with rebellious research seeks what is "wise, loving, relational and non-violent" (Burnard et al., 2022, 455). Look to what happens at the non-human beginnings and ends of educational events. Look to where the human is not. Attend to the minor gesture, take seriously what is more-than human and not quite perceptible (Manning, 2016).

Secondly, animating the disposability of the non-human in ECE educational practice brings our gaze to the uncomfortable realities of the Anthropocene (Ulmer, 2021) and how convoluted it is to live and die well in late-stage capitalism (Braidotti, 2013). There are layers of tension in-between children's learning with non-human life (Hohti & Tammi, 2019). How much can conversations about death be had with very young children, when it is a subject that requires sensitivity, care and preparation (figure 8) (Ferrando & Datta, 2021)? Let us look to other, slower and more complex ways of nurturing child-animal relationality that might benefit and connect living things (Modi, 2021; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019). Manning (2016) advises that research-creation is already wedded to political activism. That begs more questions, such as why can some schools be so inhospitable to some non-human animals (Truman, 2016)? Posthuman praxis inflects your ethical compass of becoming response-able beyond the human. (Barad, 2007). Then, why are hatcheries considered a way of learning about new life in classrooms when that very same life is a commodification that is consequently killed?

Last of all, playing with research-creation through visualising the ghostly matter of the chick exemplifies the potentiality of attending to the absences that hauntings leave (Varga & Monreal, 2021) and re-imagines sticky data (MacRae et al., 2017) as a ghostly matter. Although, how far my experimentations with research-creation have been illustrations rather than a cultural and integral research practice is something concerning.

Animating the ghost of the non-human chick blurs the distinction between presence and absence and exemplifies haunting concepts in-the-making (Manning & Monreal, 2014). Such conceptualisations are generative in educational practice according to Varga: "By adopting a posthuman and hauntological perspective, we (e.g. teachers, students, researchers) can keep an eye towards the future and begin to consider the implications of past and present human actions on/in more-than-human spaces and matter(ing)s" (2022, 26).

Shedding light on non-human data-ghosts (figure 9) makes it possible to glimpse what is not documented in documentation practices (Albin-Clark, 2022) and brings the non-human into notions of spectral data (Nordstrom, 2013). Furthermore, moving from the safety of the easy to the uneasy assemblage can illuminate educational justness (Bone and Blaise, 2015; Derrida, 2006; Zembylas, 2013).

Figure 8. Death

Figure 9. Data-ghost chick

Slipping and flipping the Anthropocenic gaze (Ulmer, 2021) sheds light on taken-for-granted ECE practices. Posthuman praxis leads me to trouble the humancentric focus of documentation practices. Animating the life and death of the chick builds fresh non-human stories (Non-human Nonsense, 2021). Being attentive to what haunts can signal what needs resisting (Varga & Monreal, 2021), in this case illuminating the fate of the non-human in the name of education. Animating the uneasy non-human costs of ECE pedagogy materialises when you follow ghosts as; "Hauntings are not immaterial. They are an ineliminable feature of existing material conditions." (Barad, 2017, 108).

In educational practices, we are ethically response-able for what we inherit (Barad, 2007; Bozalek, 2020; Hodgins, 2019). Minor gestures are traced in making hauntings perceptible (Manning, 2016). So, follow the data-ghosts (Albin-Clark, 2022). There lies the generative uneasiness of non-human inheritances entwined with what is *un*documented.

Acknowledgements

References

Alasuutari, M., Markström, A., & Vallberg-Roth, A. (2014). *Assessment and Documentation in Early Childhood Education*. Routledge.

Albin-Clark, J. (2021). What is documentation doing? Early childhood education teachers shifting from and between the meanings and actions of documentation practices. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 22*(2),140-155. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120917157

Albin-Clark, J., (2022). Becoming Haunted by a Data-Ghost in Early Childhood Education Documentation Practices [A Playfully Serious Five-Act Play]. *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, *14*(1), 35-54 http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/cpi/index

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2017). No small matter: Mushroom clouds, ecologies of nothingness, and strange topologies of spacetimemattering. In A. Tsing, E. Swanson, E. Gan & N. Bubandt (Eds.), *Arts of living on a damaged planet* (pp. 103-117). University of Minnesota Press.

Bennett, J. (2010). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press.

Bone, J., & Blaise, M. (2015). An uneasy assemblage: Prisoners, animals, asylum-seeking children and posthuman packaging. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 16*(1), 18-31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949114566754

Bozalek, V. (2020). Rendering each other capable: Doing response-able research responsibly. In *Navigating the postqualitative, new materialist, and critical posthumanist terrain across disciplines* (pp. 135-149). Routledge.

Braidotti, R. (2019). A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities. *Theory, Culture & Society, 36*(6), 31-61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418771486

Braidotti, R. (2013). Posthuman humanities. *European Educational Research Journal, 12*(1), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.2304/eerj.2013.12.1.1

Burnard, P., Mackinlay, E., Rousell, D., & Dragovic, T. (2022). *Doing rebellious research*. BRILL.

Derrida, J. (2006). *Specters of Marx*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203821619

Fairchild, N., Taylor, C.A., Benozzo, A., Carey, N., Koro, M. and Elmenhorst, C. (2022). *Knowledge production in material spaces: Disturbing conferences and composing Events*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003029007

Ferrando, F., & Datta, A. (2021). Dialogue on Posthuman Life, Death and COVID-19. *Journal of Posthumanism, 1*(1), 107-120. https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i1.1281

Georgeson, J., Roberts-Holmes, G., Campbell-Barr, V., Archer, N., Lee, S., Gulliver, K., Walsh, G. & Waters-Davies, J. (2022). *Competing discourses in early childhood education and care: Tensions, impacts and democratic alternatives across the UK's four nations.* https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/competing-discoursesin-early-childhood-education-and-care

Gordon, A. (2008). *Ghostly matters*. University of Minnesota Press

Haraway, D. (2015). A curious practice. *Angelaki*, *20*(2), 5-14.

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

Hohti, R., & Tammi, T. (2019). The greenhouse effect: Multispecies childhood and non-innocent relations of care. *Childhood, 26*(2), 169-185. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568219826263

MacRae, C., Hackett, A., Holmes, R., & Jones, L. (2017). Vibrancy, repetition and movement: Posthuman theories for reconceptualising young children in museums. *Children's Geographies, 16*(5), 503-515. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2017.1409884

Manning, E., & Massumi, B. (2014). *Thought in the act*. University of Minnesota Press.

Modi, K. (2021). Forms of intelligence: Co-species care in more-than-human worlds. *Journal of Posthumanism, 1*(2), 245-251. https://doi.org/10.33182/joph.v1i2.1346

Nonhuman Nonsense (2021). Pink chicken project: Coloring all chickens pink with a gene drive - Re-occupying the rock strata. *Journal of Posthumanism, 1*(1), 129-137. https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i1.1349

Nordstrom, S. N. (2013). A conversation about spectral data. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies, 13*(4), 316-341. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708613487879

Osgood, J. (2022). From multispecies tangles and Anthropocene muddles: what can lichen teach us about precarity and indeterminacy in early childhood. In C. Blyth & T. K. Aslanian (Eds.), *Children: global posthumanist perspectives and materialist theories* (pp. 51-67). Springer.

Ovington, J. A., Albin-Clark, J., Latto, L. and Hawxwell, L. (Eds.) (forthcoming). Disrupting qualitative research. A bag-lady-narrative-methodology. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Research Methods.* Routledge.

PETA. (2022). *Considering Doing a Chick-Hatching Project? Please Don't.* https://www.peta.org/teachkind/humane-classroom/chick-hatching-project/

Renold, E. J., & Ivinson, G. (2022). Posthuman co-production: Becoming response-able with what matters. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *22*(1), 108.128. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-01-2021-0005

RSPCA. (ND). Examples of fieldwork/investigations which involves the use of animals: Examples of alternatives to using animals in fieldwork. *RSPCA Education.* https://education.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494931/0/Examples+of+alternatives+to+using+animals+in+fieldwork.pdf/3858506e-8a20-6462-bc7e-9b0383dbdbf4?t=1558516983724

Strom, K., Ringrose, J., Osgood, J., & Renold, E. (2020). PhEmaterialism: Response-able research & pedagogy. *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology, 10*(2-3), 1-39.

Taylor, A., & Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. (2019). *The common worlds of children and animals.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315670010

Taylor, C. (2020). Knowledge matters: Five propositions concerning the reconceptualisation of knowledge in feminist new materialist, posthumanist and postqualitative approaches. In K. Murris. (Ed.), *Navigating the post qualitative, new materialist and critical posthumanist terrain across disciplines: An introductory guide* (pp. 22-43). Routledge.

Truman, S. E. (2016). School sucks for non-human animals. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy, 13*(1), 38-40. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2016.1138256

Truman, S. E. (2021). *Feminist speculations and the practice of research-creation.* Routledge.

Ulmer, J. (2021). Refocusing the anthropocenic gaze: A photo essay. *Journal of Posthumanism, 1*(2), 235-243. https://doi.org/10.33182/jp.v1i2.1727

Varga, B. (2022). Posthuman figurations and hauntological graspings of historical consciousness/thinking through (re)photography. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education. Advance online publication.* https://doi/org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2098402

Varga, B., & Monreal, T. (2021). (Re)Opening Closed/ness: Hauntological Engagements with Historical Markers in the Threshold of Mastery. *Taboo 20*(3), 80-97.

Zembylas, M. (2013). Pedagogies of hauntology in history education: Learning to live with the ghosts of disappeared victims of war and dictatorship. *Educational Theory, 63*(1), 69-86. https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12010