

Becoming Haunted by a Data-Ghost in Early Childhood Education Documentation Practices

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Abstract

I am going to tell you a ghost story about ethics with a fragment of sticky data that continues to haunt me. I call it my data-ghost. I turn to notice what ghosts are doing in a study of documentation practices in early childhood education with ideas of hauntology, affect and sticky data to imagine the documentation as ghostly matters. With the aesthetic, ethical and artistic imagination in the form of a narrated playscript and accompanying visualizations, I unfold the data-ghost's before life, proposal, emergence and sticky haunting. Through this process, I illuminate how ethical response-ability with the non-human is returned to and became embodied into feminist and posthuman materialist research creation when you follow the scent of data. I have found that when affect is taken both seriously and playfully, it becomes possible to view ethics as a haunting, thicker moment with temporal and intensifying potentialities. Consequently, I argue that when what constitutes data is shared, control is lost and lets ethical uncertainty in that enlarges the gaze to a more affirmative ethics. From this vantage point, it becomes possible to see documentation practices dislocated from policy frames and within different spacetime-matterings. I propose that in matters of ethics, affective embodied knowing from what is out of control, unseen, sticky and vulnerable needs to be noticed. Data-ghosts as thicker moments are resisted at our peril, as they act as haunting reminders to tread more lightly in our becomings with non-human ethical response-abilities.

Keywords: Documentation practices, early childhood education, hauntology, affective sticky data, thicker moments, non-human ethical response-ability

Prologue

BECOMING HAUNTED BY A DATA-GHOST

A Play in Five Acts

By Jo Albin-Clark



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Agent Florence Mary Albin *Agent to the Stars*

Figure 1. *The playscript's title page* by Joe Albin-Clark
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I am going to tell you a playfully serious ghost story, but without various Scooby-Doo¹ tropes of ghoulish apparitions with clanking chains. The haunting is not a figure from the grave, instead it is manifested through my affective ethical entanglement with an unassuming book of data that has been bothering me for years. So, I call it my data-ghost.

Posthuman approaches mean that the human is taken out of the centre of the enquiry. Instead, ethical thinking becomes entangled with and in relation to the non-human and more-than-human as: “In the posthuman ethical frame, *all* bodies, not just human bodies, count and matter” (Taylor, 2018, p. 86). Nurturing the capacity and ability to be ethically responsible to the more-than-humans is the key here, what Haraway (2016) terms *response-ability*. Ethical response-ability involves obligations in human and non-human encounters (Taylor, 2018). Accordingly, being ethically accountable is not restricted just to human intra-actions (Geerts, 2016), as Barad (2014) says, “there is no getting away from ethics on this account of mattering” (p. 265). Consequently, posthuman ethics become affirmative and are enlarged beyond the human (Braidotti, 2013).

The focus of my story is how I made sense of the affectivities of posthuman ethics, as Taylor (2018) posits, it is not just hard work but unknown. For me, the nature of the unknown in ethical thinking has manifested as a ghostly matter:

The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. (Gordan, 2008, p. 8)

Here, I argue that ethical response-ability can be made sense of through affective intensities as a form of haunting. This proposal builds on Taylor’s (2018) notion of thicker moments where particular events are sensed as: “emergent spacetime-mattering productive of new possibilities, issue an ethical call to shift modes of being, doing and thinking in order that new mattering may take shape” (p. 95). I frame a thicker moment through the traces of a data-ghost, as it chimes with the notion of hauntology, where ideas from the past resurface (Derrida, 2006) and can return in unpredictable ways (Bone, 2019). Derrida’s (2006) idea is that a ghost can return as a specter or revenant and is “that which comes back” (p. 224).

In attending to my own data-ghost, I story affectivities entangled with ethical trouble with data that keeps returning to bother me: “For us, ‘sticky data’ sticks out, sticks to and often gets stuck in our thoughts, feelings, in our throat, on the page, in fieldnotes, camera lens or memory” (MacRae et al., 2017, p. 503). My data-ghost lingers, it has slipped beneath my skin, it resurfaces and pulls at my sleeve, demanding to be noticed. MacLure (2006) describes similar affects like a bone in the throat, where data presents an irritation because you do not consent to its presence. Yet the traces and possibilities of the data-ghost do not stay put in the past, the notion of *spacetime-mattering* acknowledges how time is entwined with both space and matter (Barad, 2007). Years later that data is not leaving me alone, the affect seeps through the past into the present as a rupture, as an interference of spacetime-mattering (Barad, 2007; Bozalek & Hölscher, 2021).

¹ Scooby Doo is an American animated cartoon involving solving mysteries with supernatural characters.

Here, I share the story of my data-ghost where I played in the methodological sandpit of posthuman and feminist materialist theorising (Strom et al., 2019; Taylor, 2016; Fox & Alldred, 2016). Inspired by Sidebottom & Ball's (2018) the notion of art as a "thing that does", I entangle humor and serious play (Haraway, 2016) through the multimodal structure of a five-act play (p. 173). In doing so, I weave theoretical threads, a visualized theatre set with imagined characters and related playscripts (BBC, 2004) to make sense of the before life, the proposal, the emergence and the haunting of my data-ghost. Through this, I wonder about what this data-ghost is doing and maybe, more importantly, what I can do with what it is doing (Osgood et al., 2015). Barad's (2010) thinking is my key, in how she diffracts ideas of hauntology (Derrida, 2006), with dis/continuous stories from quantum physics, philosophy and literature through the language of play acts. Barad's (2010) theorising with the spooky behaviours of atoms at a quantum level, lead her to consider that:

The difficulty here is the mistaken assumptions of a classical ontology based on the belief that individual determinately bounded and propertied objects are the actors on this stage, and the stage itself is the givenness of a container called space and a linear sequence of moments called time. But the evidence indicates that the world does not operate according to any such classical ontology, an ontology exorcised of ghosts. On the contrary, this is empirical evidence for a hauntology! (p. 260)

To begin with, as any play should, the front page of the playscript sets the scene with the main characters of my data-ghost drama. The actors are ready to enter stage left, visualized as playful characters that belie the sticky haunting yet to come (**Figure 1**). I am about to find out what happens when you follow a ghost (Derrida, 2006).

THE CURTAIN RISES

ACT 1: Before the Data-Ghost



Figure 2. *In the Seminar Room, listening to Pat* by Joe Albin-Clark
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ACT 1: INT. UNIVERSITY SEMINAR ROOM

JO and PAT

[JO Writes Furiously as PAT SIKES Lectures.
JO ALBIN-CLARK, Doctoral Student, Excitable.
Emeritus Professor PAT SIKES, Esteemed]

PAT:

"You must research what needs to be researched."

JO:

(Looks Up from Her Notepad, Attention on PAT)
"So, I don't have a choice?"

PAT:

"Often, I have not chosen a research topic, rather it chose me."

Before my data-ghost arrived as a bright jewel, a fragment of possibility, I sat in a doctoral seminar led by Pat Sikes, where she told us that some research demands to be done (Sikes, 2015). Inside, I thrilled at the thought that research could hijack me, and the idea took root that research practices are sometimes outside of researcher control (**Figure 2**).

My research enquiries have always circled back to my professional identity as a teacher educator and my intrigue in how young children's learning is observed and documented. Documentation practices are part of the everyday world of teachers and educators (Alasuutari et al., 2014) as the playful pedagogies that are inscribed into the field involve children making their own decisions about who, what, and how they learn in classrooms set up to enable sociability and agency. Teachers then observe this playful activity and document the learning for multiple purposes that involve making learning processes visible, sharing with children and families, and for assessment purposes (Fleet et al., 2017). Pedagogical documentation of children's learning is well-established in international early childhood education with influential iterations in Reggio Emilia in Italy, learning stories in New Zealand, and pedagogical narration in Canada (Edwards et al., 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2014). Documentation practices in England are heavily influenced by intense accountability narratives within agendas of school readiness (Cameron & Moss, 2020). I have been intrigued by how teachers of young children navigate the tensions inherent in observation and how they document to celebrate playful pedagogies whilst managing the demonstration of progress (Albin-Clark, 2021a).

To find a foothold in the research terrain, I explored the idea of documentation as intra-active and was influenced (and still being influenced) by the writing of Lenz Taguchi (2010, 2012). Intra-action is an idea borrowed from physics that troubles the inanimate and passive nature of objects and has been developed by the physicist Karen Barad (2007) who states "intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (p. 33). I put to work theories from posthuman feminist materialisms (Fox & Alldred, 2016; Strom et al., 2019) to ponder the human world of teachers, children and their families and the inter- and intra-actions with the non-human material of the classroom through perceiving documentation as a lively and agential matter. The intra-active nature of documentation is a growing field in education, with scholars such as Lemieux (2021) mapping relationalities in maker literacies as a process for debunking myths in teacher education. In the field of early childhood, Elfström Pettersson (2015) emphasized that the materials involved in documentation can condition narratives, Magnusson (2018) who attended to the agency of the children with cameras, and Merewether (2018) who found ways to listen to children with documentation practices in their outdoor play.

In my study, I had planned to work collaboratively with the research participants as a dynamic process (Strom et al., 2019). But what I did not do at this point was think about how my processes involved response-ability to the documentation itself, along with the implications of becoming ethically entangled with every intra-action (Geerts, 2016). Through a relational ontology, ethical accountability to others is a rich seam of study as there is much to learn from the non-human (Bozalek, 2020). I was learning, but not fast enough. My lack of thinking about the ethical entanglement of human and non-human found its affect.

Here it comes, and it came through a phone while I was on a hammock (**Figure 3**).

ACT 2: The Data-Ghost is Proposed



Figure 3. *In the hammock, Christine's call* by Joe Albin-Clark
(July 18, 2020; Copyright held by J. Albin-Clark)

ACT 2: EXT. GARDEN

JO and CHRISTINE

[JO in Hammock Rings CHRISTINE, Smiling.
CHRISTINE, Teacher in School, Research Participant]

JO:

"Hey bud, okay for this next week?"

CHRISTINE:

(Voice Heard Through Mobile Phone, Excited)

JO:

"Yep, that's good! What have you got for me?"

CHRISTINE:

"This documentation is special, you are going to love it!"

After my research was planned, I threw myself into data generation. I had designed my research so the participants decided what constituted documentation practices, so within the process I never quite knew what data would be generated. Christine (pseudonym) was a main research participant and I recall her phone call alerting me to documentation she knows will be of interest. Bennett (2010) describes similar posthuman approaches as following “the scent” of data (p. xiii). I did not realise it then, but I had created a fracture and that is where the ghostly matter (Gordan, 2008) of the data-ghost got in. I had created the conditions for haunting.

Thinking with ghosts is encapsulated in the term “hauntology”, a neologism coined by Jacques Derrida in his philosophical work *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 2006):

For Derrida, the ghost’s secret is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past, or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future. (Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 58)

Hauntology is concerned with how concepts from the past (such as Marx’s political legacy of communism) can haunt the present. In his text, Derrida (2006) draws on Shakespeare’s Hamlet being haunted by the specter of his father as a rupturing of chronological time: “A question of repetition – a specter is always a revenant - one cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (p. 11). Early childhood scholars such as Bone (2019) combined theories of hauntology and new materialisms to think with objects such as child-sized chairs and their affectivities in accommodating children, but excluding and discomforting adult bodies. Bone (2019) used the idea of the chair as a ghost and draws on memories from her past to think with the everyday materialities of early education classrooms. She posited that what constitutes a ghost is individual and hauntings are unwelcome and unexpected (Bone, 2019). Similarly, Gordan (2008) considered that hauntings call for you to notice and offer a way of identifying what is hidden. Likewise, attending to ghosts as a way of thinking about what is hidden, in the digital realm, is taken up by Blackman (2019) who uses the term *haunted data* to “follow traces, deferrals, absences, gaps and their movements” (p. 49). Hauntology can be useful when diffracted with ideas from posthuman and feminist posthuman materialisms as it illuminates how ideas from the past can help reimagine more socially just futures (Bozalek et al., 2021).

Now I look back, I sense the data-ghost creeping in through Christine’s phone call. I realise that when I shared control of what constituted data, I unwittingly created a fissure through which the ghostly matter emerged.

ACT 3: The Data-Ghost Emerges

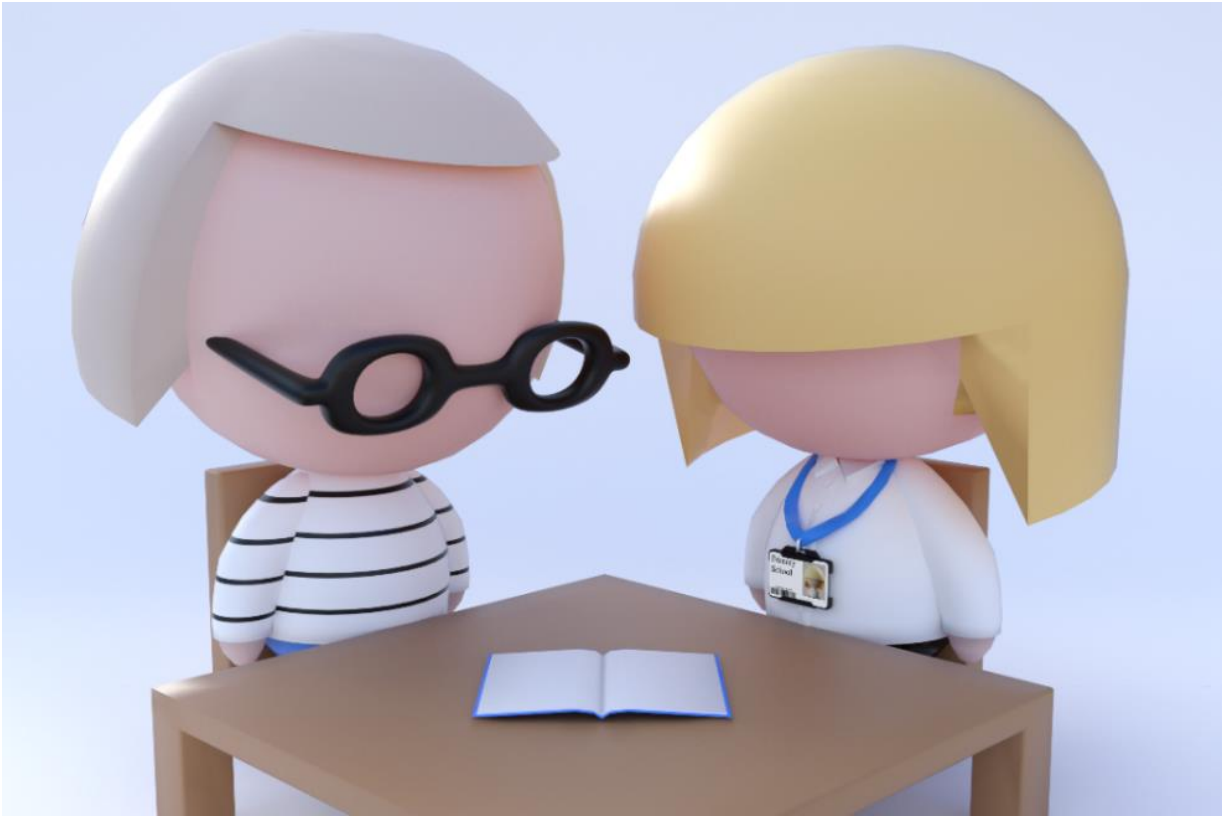


Figure 4. *Christine and I in school, looking at a thin blue book* by Joe Albin-Clark
(July 18, 2020; Copyright held by J. Albin-Clark)

ACT 3: INT. SCHOOL

JO and CHRISTINE

[Both Sit at Small Table.

CHRISTINE Gestures Towards a Small Exercise Book]

JO:

(Leans In)

"So, here it is?"

CHRISTINE:

(Excitedly Turning Pages of Book)

"Yes, I have been so excited to share this with you. It's good, isn't it? You can use it can't you?"

JO:

(Quietly Listening, Hesitating)

"Wow."

From the phone call's invitation, I went into Christine's school fizzing with expectation. I sat in a small side room, alongside a busy corridor, with the promised documentation there on the table in front of me in the form of an unassuming exercise book (**Figure 4**). School life bustled along – outside full of lively movements, inside the room was quiet and still. I learn to pay heed to embodied emotions, senses and experiences (Braidotti, 2011) that may acknowledge entanglement with the more-than-human. As I listened attentively, as the documentation was shared with me, it is indeed everything the phone call hinted at. I could have shifted on the halfpence of my study to become hijacked (Sikes, 2015). From the first page, I already knew I could not because my stomach brimmed with an embodied ethical uncertainty of concern materialised in that moment (Taylor, 2018). Immediately I know the book is deeply personal to those involved, and not meant for mine or other eyes. I was being affected as part of a relational human and non-human ecology between myself, the documentation within the book, Christine and the research process itself (Braidotti, 2019). Like Strom and Mills (2021), I felt affect as an intensive force that I needed to act with. But what actions I did not know, I could not ignore them.

As I leant my body into the turning pages of the book, I saw it as a “wonder of data” (MacLure, 2013, p. 223), as it held the generation of new thinking to come. This was something special, but it was laden with embodied ethical uncertainties that entangle and are inseparable to ethico-onto-epistemological practices (Barad, 2007). I checked and double-checked the ethical processes of consent, where it will go and what form it takes and the gently nodding head reassured me of understanding.

Even though all ethical processes were attended to with the humans involved, the ethical response-ability I had towards the non-human documentation data is the thing that troubles me still. I took the affect with me. It came home and it bothers me every day as an unwanted haunting (Bone, 2019). It became a ghostly matter, my data-ghost.

It did not hi-jack the direction of my study. With kid gloves, I placed it quietly into the analytical background. I rationalized that I could choose what more-than-human matter mattered in posthuman enquiry (Taylor, 2016). I reassured myself that I attended with ethical response-ability (Barad, 2007) towards the entanglement between the incongruous non-human exercise book, my hesitant researcher self and the participant.

But the affect lingers, for “years”.

ACT 4: The Data-Ghost Haunts



Figure 5. *I work at my desk. Ghost is there in bookcase* by Joe Albin-Clark
(July 18, 2020; Copyright held by J. Albin-Clark)

ACT 4: INT. HOME

JO and GHOST

[JO Sits at a Desk Beside a Tall Bookcase Filled
with Files, Folders and Books.
Bookcase has the Book with the Documentation In.
The GHOST IS There]

JO:
(Typing at laptop, turns head towards bookcase)
"I could write about you."

GHOST:
(Book glows)

JO:
(Shakes head, turns head)

It has been a few years since that data was generated and now I find myself embodied into an “AcademicPublishingMachine” (Osgood et al., 2021), in a postdoctoral world of expectations to publish, present, get funding grants, and carve a name for myself (Albin-Clark, 2022). Thus, it would be easy to return to that data-ghost, and be pulled back in order to dull its haunting and follow its bright cartography. As I plan each new piece of work, I turn to the documentation in that book and plug into the messy entanglements afresh and wonder, what would happen if I unleashed those ethical demons? Surely, as a slenderly more experienced scholar, I could embrace the data-ghost. Yet, I cannot find a way through the entanglement of ethical disquiet and uncertainty that lurks (Chesworth, 2018). Still, it feels like it is not mine to share even after adhering to institutional and national guidelines (BERA, 2018).

More recently, I have found thinking with feminist posthuman materialisms to be useful, as they offer up possibilities that are: “multiple, entangled, ever-shifting, difference-rich nature of processes of teaching, learning, schooling, and activism” (Strom et al., 2019, p. 3). Shifting my work to more activist frames feels more urgent, as my studies seem to involve women teachers working with young children whose stories are often neglected in the wider educational research field (Lenz Taguchi et al., 2020). However, the irony is not lost on me, the documentation and the data-ghost could help me out, as it would enable me to foreground those neglected voices (Albin-Clark, 2021b). Yet, my ethical resistance stalls attempts to tell that story and so it stays buried in bookcase folders and files.

Whilst Fairchild et al. (2022) proposes that playful collaborations are energizing, my play with the data-ghost remains debilitating. For me, art is not a “thing that does” (Sidebottom & Ball, 2018, p. 173) but rather stalls doings. As I am still resisting my ghoul, Ringrose’s (2011) work helps me see why resistance can be part of a larger ethical and political endeavor that I sense to be harmful: “We have to analyze what the affective capacities of assemblages are in political and ethical terms—are they ‘life affirming’ or ‘destroying’?” (p. 602). Not only do I sense my data-ghost to be harmful, but it is also one hell of a piece of sticky data that “hovers, gnaws, prods and teases” (MacRae et al., 2017, p. 2).

Thus, it stays right there on my bookshelf. I wish I could say it was the end of the story.

Postscript

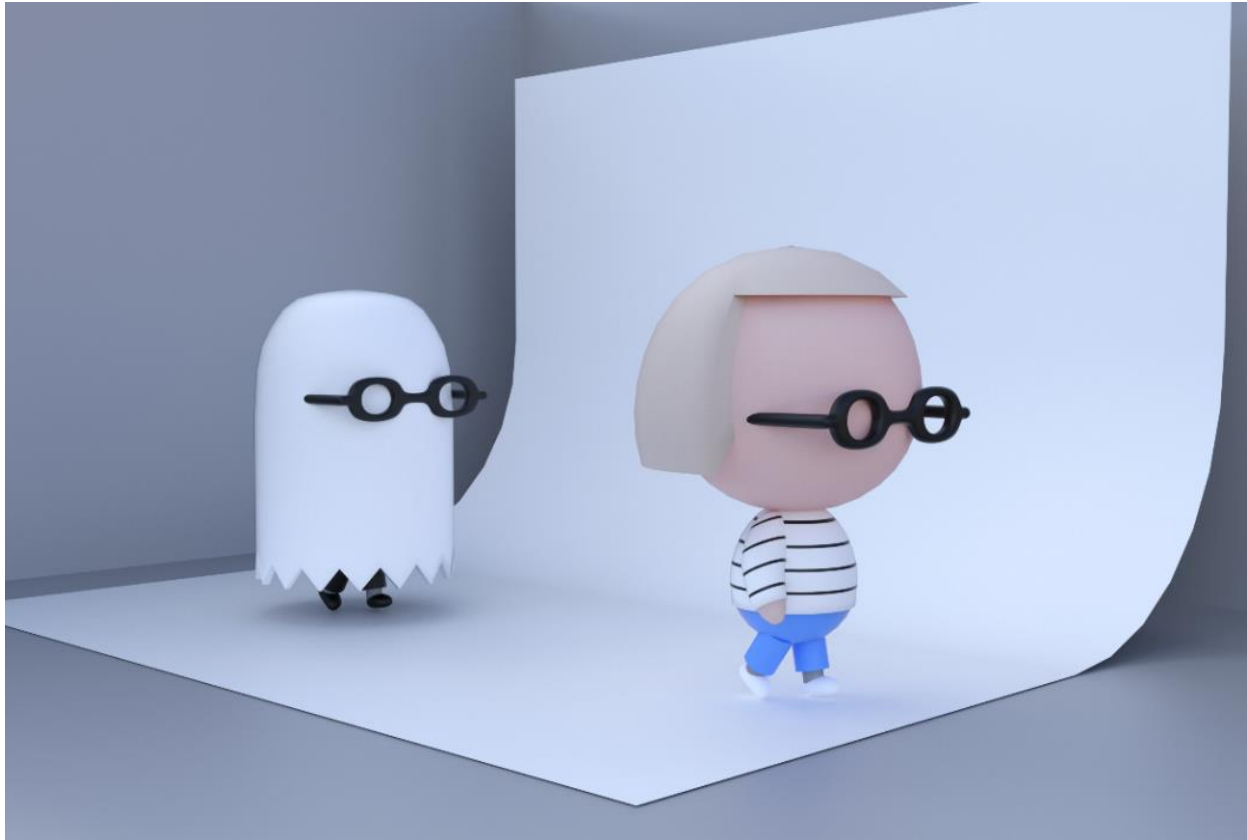


Figure 6. *The ghost follows* by Joe Albin-Clark
(July 18, 2020; Copyright held by J. Albin-Clark)

ACT 5: EMPTY STAGE

JO AND GHOST

[JO Walks Off Stage. GHOST is Centre Stage]

JO:
(Turns head to look back at GHOST)
"You coming?"

GHOST:
(Turns to follow)

JO:
(Continues to walk)
"Come on then, you were always going to."

The curtain is about to fall on my playfully serious ghost story and the mode of a play has provided “an experimental apparatus for spacetime-mattering *par excellence*” (Nye, 2017, p. 1). I followed the ghost as Derrida (2006) bid me to do. Yet the story is not at an end because hauntings bring what is hidden back into view (Gordan, 2008). Haunting exists outside and is disruptive of chronological time (Derrida, 2006). My research concurs that haunting is unpredictable, out of control and resistant to requests to leave (Bone, 2019). In addition, attending to ghosts means inheriting a response-ability:

To address the past (and future), to speak with ghosts, is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit. (Barad, 2014, p. 264)

While Blackman (2019) proposed that haunted data entangled “practices of memory and forgetting, and attention and inattention” (p. 31), contrary to this I found that forgetting has not happened. Rather, the data-ghost is still very much lodged in my memory and working away as a haunting: “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience” (Gordan, 2008, p. 8). I continue to find the stickiness of data unpredictable (MacRae et al., 2017) and the stickiness enmeshed with affect and ethics.

What conclusions do I draw? What advice slips from my ignorant lips? What do I do with the doing (Osgood et al., 2015)? Firstly, I have learnt that ethical response-ability with the non-human is not up for negotiation or afterthought, as Barad is “proposing an ethics that is prior to all judgment” (de Freitas, 2017, p. 744). Posthuman ethics are relational to the moment, being open and imaginative beyond the humans involved and shifting from noticing matters of care to acting on matters of concern (Taylor, 2018). The absences traced by haunting data (Blackman, 2019) could not be ignored in this mode of response-ability, the data-ghost acted to enlarge my gaze to a more affirmative ethics (Braidotti, 2013). The ghost reminds us that ethics needs to account for the absent as well as the present and even “such as those who are yet to be born, those who are no longer and those who may never be” (Henriksen, 2016, p. 14).

Additionally, research creation where participants generate what constitutes data needs accountability and ethical response-ability towards the human, non-human, more-than-human entanglement. Attending to the embodied, embedded affect at work in ethical relationality is a messy embrace of vulnerability (Cano Abadia, 2021). Within the documentation practices of early childhood, new possibilities emerge from enabling participants to frame and generate what constitutes documentation to them. Whilst I have found that paying attention to what documentation is doing has enabled sight of how teachers navigate accountability agendas and promote what matters concern them (Albin-Clark, 2021a), further lines of enquiry bring focus to the non-human stuff of documentation as it performs in and through spacetime-matterings. I propose there are other, longer, less visible and affective material vitalities at work, dislocated from policy frames in longer timespans with their own path to tread. Ghosts, books and data need attention as: “in a knotted web of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web, may very well be to harm oneself” (Bennett, 2010, p. 13). Being humble, treading lightly, slowing down to notice are behaviours that embrace posthuman affirmative and enlarged ethical concerns (Braidotti, 2013; Taylor, 2018).

Secondly, I have learnt to attend to those affective intensities that cluster around our embodied sense-making in research processes and those sticky fragments of generated data that do not seem to fit but instead linger and haunt. My research adds exemplification of Taylor's (2018) term of "thicker moment", by introducing notions of hauntology and sticky data into what is enfolded into these ethical affects:

a condensed instance in which capacities, affective flows, sense-abilities, and relational response-ability are enfolded in an entangled connectivity occurring across space and time. (Taylor, 2018, pp. 95-96)

Whilst McRae et al. (2017) found that attending to and re-turning to sticky data could be productive, instead I did not find productivity in the moment of data generation and analysis. I found affects that opened new modes of thinking about what non-human ethics means in different spacetime-matterings. It acts as a reminder to engage our learning with the "stuff of the world" (Bennett, 2016, p. 72), to embrace and make visible what is uncertain (Chesworth, 2018).

By contrast, a key argument in this article is that researchers have an ethical responsibility to recognize and make visible the elements of uncertainty in the processes through which participants' voices are produced, interpreted and re-presented. However, questions still linger as to what is engaged with and what is not, how much some data is jumped upon as its sense is clearer, yet the stickier, incongruous and dissonant seems to be less attractive, at least for me. On reflection, I took an easier path and this data-ghost is a haunting reminder of my inexperience and hesitancy in the quagmire of early career research.

I finish my story with a question for you, dear reader. I have found myself now unable to predict when my data-ghost might come into being again:

Haunting takes place in and through bodies and with and without bodies, and happens when something is both present and not present. It is not possible to foresee what is haunted or who is haunting. (Bone, 2019, p. 135)

You might well find your own data-ghost of ethical non-human affects are lurking, resurfacing, creeping out and getting back beneath your skin. I ask, are you like me, keeping with the resistant haunting? Or is your own ethical data-ghost materializing into research that chooses and hijacks you (Sikes, 2015)? If you are being hijacked by your data-ghost, I both envy and worry for you being pulled into that sticky vulnerability.

So, I do not exit pursued by a bear, but instead I exit (stage right) pursued by my data-ghost (**Figure 6**).

CURTAIN FALLS

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