Connecting with children: A Deleuzian contemplation of being and becoming
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Abstract

This paper contemplates the way children exist, interact and intra-act with their worlds. It seeks to think differently about data and engages with the work of Deleuze, particularly grappling with his conception of 'becoming' and the ways in which children name their worlds and intra-act with natural entities. The paper emerged from conversations that occurred within a research collective and is informed by this collective's broader research theme, world-naming. It also considers the Deleuzian notion of sense as it explores a single piece of data: a song created and performed by one child, recorded in her bedroom on the family iPad. The song is about the bush and the importance of trees.

Keywords

becoming; being; sense; Deleuze; intra-action; world naming

Introduction

Recently I became interested in exploring the nature of my children's existence and I thought of this as 'being'. What was it like to 'be' them and what was their world like from their perspective? I began listening to their conversations more, hearing their connection with the natural world, which defies separation between what I once would have considered distinct aspects of their everyday. Their drawings, paintings, games and comments, their thoughts about wildlife and nature, and, perhaps most interesting, their place within all of this fascinated me. Elements of their life seemed to blur, exist simultaneously, and yet, they existed discretely at the very same time. I began to collect bits of their life – sketches, photos, scrap paper drawings, paintings, craft constructions, musical compositions, unrecognisable paraphernalia, comments, communications of thought and ideas, and video recordings. To house all of this (quickly realizing that this was a near impossible task) I created a file on my computer entitled, "Patterns of Worlding". I acknowledge Haraway (2015) here for the term 'worlding'. It resonated so clearly with what I thought I was doing, visualising worlding as "ways of being and knowing" (p. 5) unique to the individual. At this time I was privileged to secure a role in a research project, which opened up new and exciting ways of thinking about research, particularly educational research. Subsequently, I have encountered new ideas, concepts, words, philosophies, challenges and understandings. This paper is an initial effort to explore a single piece of data, a song-video, informed by Deleuze's perspectives of becoming and sense, and incorporating aspects of my newfound theoretical understandings. I have been challenged by MacLure (2013) who asks "what will count as data" (p. 660) as well as St Pierre's (2013a) thoughts surrounding the appearance of data, "what data look like when it appears" and again, "what counts as data" (p. 223) and the questions about how to analyse such data. The complexity of concepts encountered has been overwhelming and yet St Pierre (2016) is encouraging:

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> But if we keep reading, the concepts begin to pile up and wash over us, producing a jamming effect that infiltrates and destroys the being we were told was real so we might be ready for another image of thought. That is the lure of their work, their invitation—thinking differently. Being different (St Pierre, 2016, p. 3).

This paper, therefore, seeks to think differently about data and its possibilities for the creation of meaning. It depicts its own inception, briefly outlining how it came to be. It discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the direction of thought, focusing on Deleuzian concepts. It presents a single piece of data, a child-song-video, and considers it in relation to Deleuzian notions of becoming and sense.

Becoming and sense

The idea of 'becoming' stands in stark contrast to representational, phenomenological and scientific perspectives that were fervently challenged by Deleuze during his career. He contested that things do not have an essence or a defining element that made them what they were, rather the interactions and connections that (re)create things are what constitute their being (or more accurately, their becoming). For Deleuze everything is always changing, always connecting and then reconnecting and things interact and relate differently on every encounter, every iteration. He rejected the representational notion of transcendence, which advocates a pre-existing definition, a condition that exists outside the realms of life, independent of that being. Deleuze argued that there is no "fixed centre or order" (Colebrook, 2003, p.xix) and proposed the more fluid, ever-changing, dynamic notion of immanence. Immanence is the meaning created within the conditions of life where "life itself is a creative power" (Colebrook, 2003, p.xxiv) and being is a result of multiple connections that intersect, connect and diverge. St Pierre (2013b) describes this as a flattening out of the hierarchy that has been imbued in the nature of being, reinforcing the idea that the world should not be considered a stable 'thing'. To ascribe it a 'givenness' restricts its multiplicity of potentialities. In this way Deleuze sees the word 'being' as final and indeed to say that something 'is' immediately limits or represents that thing, stripping it of its possibilities. In other words, "it stops thought" (St Pierre, 2013b, p. 652). Instead "all life is a plane of becoming", not "fixed or immobile" (Colebrook, 2003, p. xx). It should be said here, that whilst something can be or become many things, and in all different directions, it can also 'not be' those things (Colebrook, 2013, p.xxiii). Grosz (2005) talks about this as 'unbecoming', a crucial understanding that consolidates Deleuze's belief in an ever-changing, vibrant reality, "a real that…lacks nothing…generates the new, that continues becoming, even as it un-becomes earlier becomings" (p. 11). Objects or entities come into existence through the various ways they connect or intermingle with a range of other elements, a concept Deleuze called 'assemblage'. This continues to happen as context changes, as the objects shift, and as new objects and conditions come into play, all of which relate in new ways different to previous and subsequent iterations of becoming(s). Voss (2013) talks about this as "infinite becomings" (p. 10), where the forces created between interactions are never the same, but generate new meaning with each convergence. The entanglement of objects is another way to think about the interconnection and relationship between objects, matter, feelings, and contexts (St Pierre, 2103b; Barad, 2010). Barad's (2010) concept of intra-action is also relevant here. Intra-action goes beyond interaction, which implies the separateness of objects. Intra-action is the "threading through" of objects, their "joins and disjoins", a "single event that is not one" (p. 244). Thinking in entangled ways opens up endless possibilities for being and becoming, shifting away from the immobility of binary thinking, constricted by language, where something is or it is not. Such thinking proposes that everything is "always already entangled with" (St Pierre, 2013b, p. 655),

existing on an equal plane, not separate, and there is "no ultimate ground or foundation" in life; instead "whatever values we have are created rather than given" (Colebrook, 2013, p.xxxii).

These ideas of becoming can be taken further by looking at Deleuze's notion of sense. Whilst a somewhat elusive concept to define, Deleuze discussed sense in relation to events and truth. He argued that a thing, an event, a proposition, had truth if it had sense, however sense varied according to conditions and truth was only truth in that instance, again variable according to conditions. In the *Logic of Sense* (1990) he describes the structure of sense as a series of interactions and interconnections. Such relationships generate sense and thereby create truth. However, he also described his theory of sense as a "series of paradoxes" adding that "sense is a non-existing entity, and, in fact, maintains very special relations with nonsense" (Deleuze, 1990, p. xiii). Building on the Stoic idea of the incorporeal, Deleuze's notion of sense is a product of an interaction where that product (sense) has no physicality. An event or body connects with another to produce something without body, sense. In this way, sense is a way of being, rather than a being or body. St Pierre (2016) writes that "sense cannot be found in the realm of being where one must go deep to find its existence but in *extra-Being:* sense is derived from the incorporeal realm of non-existent somethings" (p. 4). Similarly, Voss (2013) describes sense as "the product of virtual Ideas or problems" (p. 11). The distinct elements of an event do not consist of sense on their own but rather sense is produced "through their reciprocal relations" (p. 11). Just as becoming has infinite possibilities, so too will sense be generated infinitely according to the circumstances under which it is created.

What is also generated by conceptions of both becoming and sense is the possibility of simultaneity and the challenge to traditional linear thought. Barad (2010) suggests that past, present, and future, exist together, "not in a relation of linear unfolding" but in the "nonlinear enfolding of spacetimemattering" (p. 244). She advocates a discontinuity that forces a rethinking of temporal, historical and developmental approaches. In Lewis Carroll's, *Alice in Wonderland* the reader is confronted by numerous depictions of simultaneous realities or non-realities. Indeed, Deleuze used this novel to discuss his logic of sense. In the story, Alice experiences events that seem nonsensical and yet real at the same time. Events that should not happen but which are happening, all of which she embraces. She is seen to become bigger and then smaller, then bigger again, which is smaller than bigger was originally. Later in the story she becomes bigger again and yet this time it happens without the eating of the cake or drinking from the little bottle. This time getting bigger is actually becoming normal-sized, and a resurfacing of the other, simultaneous way of being, occurs. According to Deleuze (1990) this is the "simultaneity of becoming whose characteristic it is to elude the present" (p. 1) all the while becoming, pushing and pulling, in "both directions at once" (p. 1). There remains a reality of being many things at once and a sense that is subsequently generated through such experiences or ways of being.

Methodology

This paper evolved as a result of conversations between members of a broader research collective. The group formed for the purpose of conducting a research project, awarded an Australian Research Council (ARC) competitive grant. The ongoing project investigates the way children name their worlds by considering multi-modal literacy and sustainability learning in early childhood settings. The international collective communicated via email discussing themes and topics that could form an initial conference symposium presentation. These conversations were then analysed according to patterns of thought,

common themes and subthemes, and the information arranged in a mind map format, offering a graphic depiction of ideas and the relationships between them. Three main strands emerged from the analysis, forming the basis of the individual presentations: connecting with literature, connecting with the world, and connecting with children. These are framed by the overarching theme: world-naming. Members of the collective were also grouped according to the themes they were most interested in or attuned to throughout the discussions. I partnered with a colleague to prepare a presentation on connecting with children because our interchanges focused on our children. We started to share our observations and stories of them, a walk along the swales, a bush walk at the Jellybean pool. We exchanged photos at times when a moment had particularly 'caught us' and we began to discuss how these events related to the child's presence in the world and their understanding of it. Whilst I have selected to use this piece of data, I believe it is more accurate to say that the data chose me. It was brought to me and demanded to be explored.

The following piece of data is a song-video created and recorded by my daughter, using an iPad. The lyrics tell a story about being kind to trees because we need them to help us breathe. The melody tells a story of musical conventions learned through violin lessons and favourite pop songs, heard with western ears. The context tells a story of home and bedroom-space. The use of technology tells yet another story of the complex intertwining of apparatus, human and thought.

My daughter shared her song-video with me, shortly after she had created it. She was pleased to share it, but ran into another room, self-conscious, as I viewed it. I could not help but smile and feel a pride and warmth for her creativity and innocence. She allowed me to use it for this paper. The question quickly became: how would I communicate this data? I would need to use the written language to depict a highly visual, aural experience. Such an approach changes the appearance of this data, giving it a new form. I grappled with the responsibility of providing as accurate an account as possible of the recording before I realized I did not need to. I am not trying to unwrap a 'given' nor tell you what my daughter's song means. Sense of the event is generated differently for me, for her, and, therefore, you, the reader. St Pierre (2013a) suggests there is a "freedom" (p.225) in thinking in this "experimental" (p. 226) way. "Thinking the world differently" (p. 226) challenges the binary of empirical approaches to research, inspiring a "belief in the possibilities of world(s) we haven't yet thought" (p. 226). I am also inspired by MacLure (2013) talking about the 'agency' of occasions, where "we have chosen something that has chosen us" (p. 661). That has happened here.

I started by analyzing the song-video. Tied to standard methods of analysis, learned in times past, I constructed a table with several columns: time cue; lyrics: description; and additional comments. I went through the recording meticulously, identifying and describing every detail and thought that came to mind. I have to admit that this was very helpful, possibly because of familiarity but it was never the intention. I became more despondent about this process, not wanting to give the data credence simply because I had analysed it 'properly', adhering to all the rules. It already spoke for itself. MacLure (2013) talks about analysis that "confound[s] interpretation" and how "data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us" (p. 660). I became more aware of the power of this data, the way it had chosen me and the way it would tell its own story for every viewer/reader.

Finally, I decided to write a story and so this is my story of my daughter's event, using text to portray the non-textual.

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The bush is really good

She sings the song in her bedroom. The iPad captures the view laid out in front of her. She is sitting on her bed and she is alone. Voices, noises can be heard in the background, her brothers, her cousin, the sound of post-school afternoon. A still frame shows the expanse of pink, patterned bedspread that leads to the bedroom door, and beyond, a pink toy stand in the partly visible hallway. To the right a dolls house and further, a white wardrobe. Between them sit two dolls, pink-purple-white, hand-crafted by her Naino, one in full view, the other only legs and hands. Her bed is cluttered with soft toys – a pink owl, a Cabbage Patch doll. Pink fairy wings balance on a pink princess-crown cushion and this sits atop an Olaf pillow-pet. More things litter the end of the bed – headphones, discarded red school uniform shirt, and a tie-dyed white-purple dress. A single pink texta.

The recording starts, the singing starts. The iPad moves and a black power cord appears. She sings, *"The bush is really good"*. There is a fleeting pause before 'good'. The melody is simple, moving only slightly in pitch. The phrase repeats but the end varies, ascends. The singing is sweet, the innocence of a six-year-old voice. The iPad is moving. The left side drops to reveal her right, bent leg. The screen quickly shifts back upward as a finger partially obscures the camera-view. A plain, beige wall to the left, echo-y, indistinguishable voices drift in from somewhere down the hall. Another line, higher pitch, *"The bush is really good"* follows a similar melodic contour. A new element added. 'Good' is broken into several melismatic syllables (go-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-ood), overall downward motion. Again the screen drops and a leg-foot is revealed.

Now a more dramatic melodic change. The notes are high, descending across the phrase. More melisma as 'really' is strung out in stepwise movement. A quick, almost imperceptible breath is taken between the final two syllables (ll-ly) before resolving tonally, satisfying to western ears. The iPad moves constantly, the image lost momentarily behind an obfuscating finger. A pause. An entirely new melodic idea, *"And I just wish you can be my friend forever"*. Obfuscating finger again, turns the screen to black before slowly uncovering the bedroom scene through pinky-orange flesh. Background voices break through.

"Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah ye-ye-yeah". Another tune. A slight American accent. iPad moving to giddiness. Back to the bush with, *"Yeah yeah yeah the bush is good"*. Now the iPad is controlled, slower, shifting only to the beat. More of the bedroom to the right, *"The bush is good because"*. Even more to the right, the dresser beyond the wardrobe, the power cord again, the bent leg, *"The bush is good because the trees help us breathe, yeah baby"*. The iPad moves left to right to the rhythm of 'yeah baby'. The accent emerges again with, *"Baby we should look after the trees the most"* and now the screen, almost wholly pink bedspread, shifts side to side with the word-rhythms. A sustained vocal sound from elsewhere. Brother playing the WiiU. *"Because trees make us breathe"*. iPad moves to word-rhythms. Sound obscured by hand over iPad mic. Power cord. Screen tilts, plunges to horizontal. *"Trees make us breathe",* the phrase satisfyingly resolves to the tonic, making musical sense.

"The end, but not the end yet". An embellishment of 'the' and the tune ascends, not finished. The mic covered, sound muffled. Microphone-stifled sound as she sings the next line, *"Nearly the end, yeah baby"*. Left wall, two crossed legs on pink bedspread. Melody becomes fragmented as a finish is built. The iPad motion slows down, moving in slow right-left arcs, not to the beat, not to the rhythm of the words. The final phrase, *"So be kind to them"* follows a western, conventional, descending, resolving melodic contour and the iPad becomes still, focusing ahead as it did at the beginning.

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Discussion

MacLure (2013) describes data that glows and suggests a similarity with Delueze's sense because it conjures up an inexplicable something, an affect, something created at that moment and unique to that moment. She says, "The glow seems to invoke something abstract or intangible that exceeds propositional meaning, but also has a decidedly embodied aspect" (p. 661). I choose to start here because that is how I feel about my daughter's song-video. There is something I cannot explain, something I feel when I watch it, something profound but indescribable. I can, however, explain many elements of what I see in her performance. For example, I can hear the musicality of the singing and the beauty, the quality of her 6 year-old voice. I can hear snippets of conversations exchanged between brothers and sister on a walk home from school - trees making oxygen for humans and humans making carbon dioxide for trees. I can see the digital native (Prensky, 2001) in the experimentation with the iPad. There is something else, though, a sense of something as I watch, but I struggle to articulate what it is. Deleuze's sense makes the most sense to me here because it highlights a non-existing yet existing something, an inexplicable something, a feeling that eludes language and as MacLure (2013) suggests, sense is "real but abstract, outside of determinate time and space" and may be depicted as "inhabit[ing] a virtual space" (p. 662).

Even more intangible to me is the sense that is generated for/by my daughter in this act of recording her song. As an onlooker, there is no way that I can fathom the sense of her experience, how she felt, what she was thinking, what inspired the song, how the process made her feel. I can only view from a distance, removed by a piece of technology beyond even her iPad. I see through her eyes, through the iPad, through my MacBook, three times removed from the origin. I want to know more about what this event was like for her but I can only view from my three-times-removed perspective and offer my own interpretation of her event. Haraway (2006) describes a similar phenomenon in her discussion of 'crittercam' where cameras were affixed to marine animals in order to provide viewers a glimpse of underwater life, not from a distance but as the creature lived it. Crucially, however, the technology becomes an integral part of the scene, not simply a tool. The apparatus cannot be separated from the actual observational act occurring. According to Barad (2007) "apparatuses are not passive observing instruments. On the contrary, they are productive of (and part of) phenomena" (p. 199). The movement of the iPad throughout is indicative of this. Sometimes the iPad moves to the beat, sometimes to word-rhythms, and sometimes it moves in long left-right arcs of free-time. The iPad is not only documenting an event or a performance; it is part of that event, an interwoven, essential ingredient of its creation. Without the iPad the event would be a very different one. The iPad insists on a connection, in a similar way to crittercam, exploring underwater animal life where the "human bodies and technologies cohabit each other" (Haraway, 2006, p. 18), creating and being created by each other in that circumstance. A child-iPad, iPad-child symbiosis.

She sits in her bedroom, a world that belongs to her. I see the messiness of her bowerbird habits, her room littered with all sorts of precious bits collected. I am sure she does not see this. Outside her bedroom the household breathes and lives a separate but concurrent life. Voices of brothers and cousins are heard in the background. She has taken herself to a pink corner of this life, and yet it continues around her and she remains an integral part of it. As she sings I am given a taste of what it might be like to see with her eyes. The iPad captures the scene in front as her eyes might see. Yet, it is possible that it has captured more (or less) than what she saw as she enjoyed this moment as the "technology adapts to human and vice versa" (Haraway, 2006, p. 18). As the viewer I assume I am seeing with her eyes, but the only evidence of her, aside from her voice, is the glimpse of a leg now and then, and a finger that intermittently obscures the iPad's camera.

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The bedroom world is accompanied by the natural world, brought into being, into consciousness, through the song. In many respects this feels like juxtaposition, an out-of-place-ness that forces me to listen. A pink bedroom. A song about the bush. Another distinct world superimposed on the pink and white of bedspreads and fairy wings. This seems natural, though, almost like a reflex. I cannot tell how much thinking has gone into this song. It seems spontaneous, and yet it has an innocent sophistication that suggests something else. Two worlds exist simultaneously, each making the other possible and present. This is striking since the bush is nowhere to be seen. Beyond the bedroom, beyond the house, the bush surrounds her, but it is more than knowledge or memory. As she sings she is in the bush and she is in her bedroom and she is in her family.

There is also the hint of another world, the world of learning, components that overlap with the worlds already mentioned. The song reflects a musical understanding beyond her years. Perhaps she has listened to enough popular music and played enough violin tunes to have absorbed western conventions of tonal resolution and the balance of melodic phrases. Whatever it is, her song is real. She injects the accent from a world far beyond and at that moment it becomes with her world. She tells a story through her song, crafting it with a beginning and a finish that makes musical sense.

There is something about this song-video that demands attention. It is "Remarkable, Interesting…Important" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991, as cited by St Pierre, 2013a, p. 226). It opens up new ways of thinking about data and about children. It unleashes infinite possibilities for becoming in and with the world in all its multiplicity. In this example alone there are numerous possible worlds apparent, all of which are real and exist for my daughter at that time (and quite possibly beyond, or not). They are real at the same time – each and one and together is occurring – one creating the other and being created by another. These worlds overlap and resurface at other times. Aspects of those other times emerge here too, reminiscent of a different iteration of worlds. Such an idea suggests a lack of temporal parameters, the eradication of linear, logical limitations of thought. It is possible to be and become many different things simultaneously. The song-video shows an assemblage of bodies, events, and places in a "process of connection and interaction" (Colebrook, 2003, p. xx) and it produces a felt response, an affect, sense.

She is singing in her bedroom. She is in the bush. The bush is in her bedroom, in her. She is home. She is at school. School and home are in her. She is sister, daughter, cousin. She is her own. She is inseparable from each and all and they are inseparable from her. Her song-video offers a new perspective, one that demands attention. There is a poignancy about this child-perspective, challenging us to think differently.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine children connecting with their world(s) and aimed to think differently about data. It heeded St Pierre's (2013a) exhortation that, through this thinking, it is possible to "get free of ourselves and the old concepts that weigh us down even when we no longer believe in them" (p.226). It allowed the data to be chosen and to choose, consolidating Colebrook's (2003) belief that concepts are not made to "tidy up our ideas but to transform life and complicate our ideas" (p. xix). The song-video shows the inseparability of the natural world, the school world, the family world in the life of a child. It depicts multiple forms of literacy – verbal, musical, physical, technological – in a simultaneity of becoming(s). It is data that works through us to disrupt what we already know, challenging us to think differently and become with the world and become with children. It opens up infinite possibilities for educational practice and educational research.

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