Prodigious performances, posthuman subjectivities: young children ‘imitating’ musical performers

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The paper explores the question of post-human subjectivities through a focus on performances by young children that unsettle notions of human subjectivity and development. These performances offer glimpses of affective connections that exceed and confound the centered, signifying subject of humanism. I ask who/what speaks in and through these performances, and whether they might help answer the question that animates this symposium: how to “write/speak the post-human subject into being?” The paper is informed by ‘new materialist’ theorizing of the posthuman (Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 2006) and by Deleuzian conceptions of affect (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). This work comprehends matter as productively haunted by the potentiality and chanciness of the virtual, and grants no a priori privilege to the human subject.

This theoretical work is brought to bear on a selection of on- and off-line videos of young children ‘imitating’ popular musicians and singers. The performances provoke strong affective responses, positive and negative, from viewers (and researchers), and also demonstrate a prodigious capacity to be affected: to allow the gestures, sounds and affects of others to ‘infect’ the child body to a degree that seems to exceed the bounds of imitation, becoming something more like shamanistic possession, or Spinozist ‘passion’. The ‘powerful body’ of the prodigious child (de Mink, 2011) challenges the binary architecture of humanist prerogative: adult/child, nature/culture, imitation/creativity, innocence/corruption. The affective power to conjure posthuman subjectivities is evident in anxious responses that associate such performances with animals, machines and monsters - parrots, puppets, automata.

I conclude that these performances should be understood, not as mechanical reproductions but as ‘machinic assemblages’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2003) of polymorphous, desiring connections. In such a view, imitation is not a degraded, failed or ‘empty’ performance of the less-than-human, but the expression of affective capacities that are always already more-than-human. I consider the implications for an augmented understanding of children’s capacities, for new materialist methodologies in educational research, and for a posthuman ethics that recognises the jeopardy of exposing the more-than-human affinities that precede and accompany the ‘autonomous’ human subject.

References:

Propositions for ‘more-than-human’ research: Enact thought! Give play to affective tendencies!

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There is a growing assemblage of texts that can be understood as “posthumanist,” which contribute to questions concerning qualitative research. Nathan Snaza and John Weaver (2014) note that posthumanist research is affected with more than just decentering the human “I” but “calls into question the entirety of the disciplinary structure, its segregations of fields, its methodological provincialism” (p. 5). Most current models of research separate matter from perception, which leads to a fragmentation between awareness and the activity that generates awareness. This disciplinary model in which the phenomena of research and the knowing subject are separated shapes knowledge as static, fixed and organized according to pre-formed categories. In other words, positing the conditions or terms of research before the exploration or experimentation “results in stultifying its potential and relegating it to that which already fits within pre-existing schemata of knowledge” (Manning, 2013, p. 4). Rather, what we need are ways of activating thought that is experienced rather than known, and where experience accounts for ‘more-than-human’ encounters. Feminist scholarship has been at the forefront of questioning the perimeters of understanding human and non-human transcorporeality. However, materializing these insights into qualitative research practices is challenging, particularly given the weighty legacies of methods that treat research practices as outside and already known. What practices can be engaged with to research and write the ‘more-than-human’? What are the epistemological limits that such engagements encounter? In questioning not only the “I” of posthumanist research but the very conditions of engagement, I turn to Alfred Whitehead’s (1978) work on ‘propositions,’ Erin Manning’s (2013) writing on ‘mobile architecture,’ and Deleuze and Guattari’s (1994) ‘affect.’ My paper will propositionally activate more-than-human research through an examination of a large school-based project on ‘pedagogical ecologies.’

References:

Philosophy as a method: de-writing ‘I’ in the more-than-human world

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This paper is concerned with re-thinking the human ‘I’ in the more-than-human educational landscape. Its aim is to decenter the subject, to explore the ‘death of the subject’, and to interrogate the ever-present ‘I’. The post-human ‘I’ is no longer embedded, performed or conceptualized in the subject-object binary, but becomes a part of an ‘in-between’. The in-between addresses the ontological, epistemological, ethical and political re-thinking and re-writing of the ‘I’ in the post-human landscape, dwelling in the ruins of the surviving modernist omnipotent ‘self’ and the post-modern troubled discursive ‘I’. The post-human ‘I’ is placed within the entanglements of subject-object, subject-matter, matter-matter, as both discursive and material inter- and intra-actions (Barad, 2007, Braidotti, 2013; Mol, 2002).

Philosophy as a method is the recent turn in post-qualitative thinking. ‘Post’ refers to the different ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political conditions under which qualitative research operates. In this sense, it is the more-than-human landscape and entanglements that have emerged since the linguistic turn. It shifts the post-human ‘I’ out-side of subject-object, or subject-matter relations. In a Deleuzian sense, matter becomes the embodiment of the sensations, affects and aesthetics, and in Bennett’s (2010) political ecology, the powerful cultural forms, the active role of non-human matter and things. The ‘I’ in new materialism shifts the attention to the non-human-centred world of things/matter. Things/matter speak to the ‘I’, and have agency that is both political and ethical in nature. How does it look, feel, if the human ‘I’ is to ‘write itself’ into matter in the time of the anthropocene? This paper embraces philosophy as a method, removing the subject, performing, living and doing, within and without the ‘I’. The concern of how to speak and write the post-human ‘I’ is a fundamental onto-epistemological, but also a political and ethical one, for qualitative research, that seeks to address human entanglements in the fate of the planet. This presentation argues for the vibrancy of the subject as the post-human ‘I’ in the more than human world.

References: