A “terribly inefficient” production: Unsettling methodologies with children through Deleuzian notions of time.

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Abstract

After Rhedding Jones’ Deleuzian approach to writing and her dedication to rethinking methodologies through affirming complexity and multiplicity, this paper explores what it might mean for researchers in the field of early childhood to work in ways that unsettle our taken-for-granted notions of time. The author brings forth examples from her own research enactments with young children which were deemed “terribly inefficient” by her university colleagues, which were judged through what Deleuze would call the artificial metrics of equal and substitutable exchange. In exploring how research practices might resist these metrics of generality in favor of the production and synthesis of multiple times, possibilities about what research might become are posited.

Key words: Deleuze, Post-qualitative inquiry, children, entanglement, time, unsettling

Introduction

This work is inspired by Rhedding Jones’ adept applications of Deleuzian thought, her dedication to the theoretical and practical ways in which research methodologies are conceptualized and implemented, and her general orientation towards complexity and multiplicity with regard to early childhood studies. Within this paper, I explore what it might mean for researchers in the field of early childhood to work in ways that unsettle our taken-for-granted notions of *time*. After Rhedding Jones’ (2007) Deleuzian approach to writing, this paper is structured in-kind as a “theoretical unfolding” (1993), moving between narrative, anecdote, transcript, and later, drawings and photographs, activating Deleuzian concepts along the way in order to argue that a reworking of time is necessary for moving towards a post-qualitative inquiry (Lather, 2011; St. Pierre, 2013) that grapples with the entangled nature of researching with children.

The first section of this paper re-constructs and contextualizes a conversation with a university colleague in which my dissertation research – a long-term inquiry with kindergarten children [1] that explored material-discursive entanglements within their classroom – was deemed “ terribly inefficient”. Next, the idea(l)s of efficiency hinted at in this conversation are further explored through an examination of competing conceptions of time in relation to the methodological assemblage the children and I enacted over the course of one school year. Herein, a Deleuzian notion of time as “a repetition of “non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities” (1994, p.1) is contrasted with a more linear,

quantitative conceptualization of time. Deleuzian notions of time are then activated through a multimodal excerpt of an “inefficient” research enactment with children. The paper concludes with rumination on the possibilities Deleuzian time(s) hold for unsettling research methodologies with children.

(Re)Constructing the ‘Terribly Inefficient’

We make eye contact and smile as we pass each other in the hallway of our department. She extends her arm and touches my shoulder, signaling me to stop.

“Tell me what’s happening with your dissertation... you work with the little kids, right?”

I braced myself. Being able to describe your work to an unfamiliar audience is basic researcher-in-training know-how. Part of being a doctoral candidate was demonstrating your linguistic savvy in relation to your research topic.

“I’m conducting a long-term inquiry with kindergarten children into the material-discursive entanglements in their classroom context,”

While certainly not a mainstream stance at my university, critically engaging in questions of relationality that push at the binaries between *material* (e.g., matter, nature, the non-human) and *social* (discourse, culture) were becoming a force within early childhood studies internationally (e.g., Lenz Taguchi, 2010, 2011; Blaise, 2013; Taylor & Blaise, 2014; Taylor, 2011, 2013, 2014; Taylor, Blaise, & Giugni, 2013; Taylor, & Giugni, 2012 Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). I was not only trying to describe my project accurately, but I was also selecting terms to hint at the relevancy of the work, as I was attempting “to make a greater contribution to broader ‘more-than-human’ or post-humanist conversations that have been gathering momentum in the social sciences over the last couple of decades” (Taylor, Pacini-Ketchabaw, & Blaise, 2012, p. 81). However, I could tell from her furrowed brow that this description, despite my carefully chosen vocabulary, wasn’t satisfactory and we would continue on to the part of the conversation about which I was less confident in explaining with precision.

“What’s your methodology?”

This question was certainly borne of genuine interest in my progress as a student, but it was also partly a quiz. It was a quiz I *should* have been able to pass easily considering my advanced candidacy standing. For several reasons, however, this question wasn’t easy for me to answer briefly if I wanted to be understood. The posthuman notion of *entanglement* (Barad, 2007) – the ways in which matter and meaning are mutually constitutive, affective and agential – was omnipresent; it was my research topic, it was my theoretical/philosophical frame, and it guided my ways of working in the field with children. This entanglement of being-becoming – how the human and more-than-human make themselves known to each other through various material-discursive events and how each emerge differently through these acts of *mutual intelligibility* (Barad, 2007) – did not lend itself to a quick conversation in the hallway.

“Well, it’s complicated – I’m working towards a post-qualitative inquiry. Within that frame, I both draw upon and dismantle elements of visual ethnography, and participatory “listening” approaches to researching with children from a posthuman perspective.”

And how are you doing...uh...how does that work?

Inherent to this post-qualitative mode (Lather, 2011; St. Pierre, 2013) was working through/with various tensions and contradictions between the posthuman onto-epistemological assumptions that grounded this project, and the more humanist epistemological assumptions about data and subjectivity that traditionally guide qualitative research methods. Dismantling these seemingly “settled places” (Lather,

2013, p.642) within established research practices challenged me to work with children to collaboratively generate, analyze, and re-present research in complex ways that didn’t follow the methods my textbooks had prescribed. In trying to communicate this complexity, I became overly descriptive. I tried to smooth the entangled endeavors of research into manageable talking points, but without the traditional methodological markers (e.g., observation, interviews, transcripts, codes, etc.) intact, I could see her skepticism growing– in her crossed arms, pinched lips.

“I’m spending 3-4 days in the classroom with children generating different layers of what most people would call “data” around our engagements with material agents. We construct representations, revise them, discard them, play together, observe each other, sometimes I take notes and at other times, I construct images –either still photos or illustrations, which I let children critique and modify. Children also construct photos through improvisation with cameras and other media...”

These enactments with cameras and other media drew upon Kind’s (2013) account of the improvised, “lively entanglements” of young children, researchers, and cameras that emerged in a long-term photography project. Within these entanglements, the goal was to “pay attention to what happens between child-adult-camera-photograph, and the movements of materials, resulting resonances, traces, and entanglements” (p. 434). The improvisational, “mutual responsiveness” (Sawyer, 2004, p. 16) of these research encounters was key. As the entangled nature of being-becoming was both a theoretical and methodological imperative, research was enacted as a creative composition and collective movement [2]. This way of continually (re)forming our research relied on “irreducible relations of responsibility” (Barad, 2010, p. 265) to the emergent process of researching together. I tried to communicate our collaborative responsibilities in executing the methods of this project, but I sensed that she was growing impatient.

“Sometimes we perform what could be considered interviews, but most of the time we improvise how data is generated. It’s important to me to give children ownership over the agenda and let the process expand and contract in ways that are unsettling. Some days I don’t ask or answer any “research” questions but...”

She interrupts me before I can explain further.

“Wow, I’m sorry...but that is just so... terribly inefficient.”

Although I use this particular conversation as a touchstone, it was neither the first nor last time this idea of (in)efficiency had been mentioned to In many conversations with faculty members and colleagues in which I described the ways in which my dissertation study was “working”, I received some feedback about the inefficiency of the work. My attempts to engage in ways of being that both honored the onto-epistemological grounding and made room for children to “share in planning, conducting and reporting the research” (Rhedding-Jones, 2005, p. 87), were often interpreted as unserious, too circular, or too messy. In further discussions with those concerned about my unwillingness (or inability) to focus, to strategize, or to otherwise plan and schedule appropriately, I realized that there were competing conceptions of “time” at work which enabled other’s to view this research as inefficient. In the section that follows, these differing notions of time will be juxtaposed within the context of more detailed methodological descriptions of this research project.

Competing Conceptions of “Time” in Relation to Research

The research that the children and I performed drew, at least in superficial ways, from critical visual ethnography (e.g., Rose, 2012) and multimodal approaches that aim to include children’s perspectives in research about their school experiences (e.g., Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark, Kjørholt & Moss, 2008) through

generating and discussing images. Traditionally, these approaches stretch on for relatively long periods of time in order for the researcher to “go inside”, to inhabit the lived experiences of those being researched through deeply engaged observation (Geertz, 1973). The time spent in the field includes gaining access to the research setting, establishing and negotiating relationships with informants/participants, making extensive visits to (or even establishing temporary residence within) the setting of interest in order to produce the thick descriptions necessary for a robust analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In multi-modal approaches to “listening” to children, extensive time is spent generating, discussing, and interpreting children’s drawings or photographs in order for the researcher to get closer to children’s true perspectives on their lived school experiences (see, Clark, Kjørholt & Moss, 2008). In the research project I was describing to my colleagues and professors, I was spending 3-4 days per week for the length of the academic year (9 months). This amount of time would not be an uncommonly long period of time within the ethnographic tradition and, indeed, these idea(l)s about the quantity of time spent on the research were not seen as a problem in terms of my (in)efficiency. When time is conceived as a line stretching from the beginning to the end of the research project, the duration of that line is the academic school year, and that “line” seemed to be about as long as it should be for these particular methodological reference points.

The ways in which we *took apart* and reassembled these more traditional notions of fieldwork, however, were the source of the trouble; what the children and I were actually *doing* in relation to the time we were *spending* was the site of the inefficiency. Although I had secured approval from the ethics review board of both my university and the children’s school, as well as written consent from parents/guardians to “observe”, “document”, and “interview” children about the material discursive relations within their classroom, I worked with the children themselves to (re)shape the ways in which these more traditional methods were executed. Within our *method assemblage* (Law, 2004), “a tentative and hesitant unfolding, that is at most only very partially under any deliberate form of control”(p. 41), we subverted “participant observation” in favor of something the children would come to call “being with me/you/us”. Instead of always observing with the intent to report and document, we agreed that I would function as any other adult in the classroom might until a child would invite me into a collaborative research “mode” by asking me to “be with” him or her. “Being with” meant that I would maintain physical proximity, usually by sitting on the floor, and enter into children’s play if they invited me to do so, either by verbal request, signal (e.g., a “come here” wave), or physical contact (e.g., a tug on my wrist). While “being with”, I would make images (photographs or drawings) and/or engage in ways that were outside of the theme of play only if children requested it. In these enactments of “being with” the making of images was a collaborative event, as children could compose, delete, or edit any photos that were generated. “Make a photo of this and give it to me” were often my instructions. Similarly, instead of executing ethnographic interviews about what these images “meant” or “represented”, the children scheduled time engage in something they called “doing photos”. The children, either individually or in self-selected small groups, would meet with me to review, critique, and modify the images we constructed “with” one another in the classroom, often making new images in response. We discussed different aspects of the image-making process, the relations that surrounded and impacted these images, and the ways in which this images and their web of relations should (not) be included and re-presented in the “research book” (i.e., my dissertation), but we also took up new *lines of flight* as our intra-actions with the “data” produced further material-discursive entanglements (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

I wasn’t studying children’s classroom “culture” as a discreet social entity that I, as the knowing researcher-subject could access, but rather I was attempting to tune into our child-researcher-material relations as entangled material-discursive phenomena through which all participants would emerge differently. I wasn’t “collecting” data in the traditional sense through (semi)structured interviews,

observational field notes, and images/artifacts that were catalogued and analyzed by theme. Instead of conceptualizing the collection of data as an analytic pathway for the knowing researcher-subject to reveal the meaning of children’s classroom life, this generation of data was nested within a series of improvised events that unfolded *rhizomatically* (Clark & Parsons, 2013) as we talked, played, noticed, drew, and photographed in an improvisational fashion. As we existed within the classroom’s material-discursive entanglements, our “data” was de/re/constructed within the flow of more-than-human agencies. Data couldn’t be discerned as discreet types or categories, but rather emerged as events or doings connected to multiple others. Therefore, the research became about what happened when we engaged “with” each other in our particular material-discursive context, what we did with/to data, what data did to us, and then how we might re-present those doings to others through collaborative drawings, stories, photographs.

Because I didn’t produce hundreds of hours of semi-structured interviews to transcribe or I didn’t produce thematically organized sets of images, I was seen as either not collecting enough research product (data) for the amount of time I was spending or I was producing a lot of data that wouldn’t be usable because it lacked focus. In this view, the linear movement of time across the school year represented a subtractive temporality. That is, as units of time repeat (seconds, hours, days, weeks, months) they do so in subtractive fashion, leaving the researcher with less and less time to spend. As time gets spent, an efficient researcher receives equal amounts of categorizable, classifiable data in exchange. This inequity that stemmed from a subtractive notion of time with a mathematical logic was the source of my inefficiency as a researcher.

When judged against the metrics of time described above, I’m certainly willing to concede that our research processes were actually quite inefficient. But as the fieldwork continued in its sprawling, invasive fashion, I had to entertain the possibility that “time” as a legitimizing notion needed to be undone, as well. Just as I had engaged with the concept and practice of the *rhizome*, *assemblage,* and *lines of flight* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in conceptualizing and enacting our methods, I turned toward Deleuze’s philosophy of time to temporally resituate these research practices. This kind of “plugging in” of Deleuzian thought to the posthuman, material-discursive notion of entanglement in relation to research methodologies is appearing with more regularity in the literature and has been explored recently by many engaged in critical exploration of what it means to research within the post-qualitative moment (e.g., Childers, 2013; MacLure, 2013a, 2013b; Lenz Taguchi, 2013, 2012; St. Pierre, 2013). Here, I employ Deleuzian conceptions of time in similar fashion.

Although Deleuze’s philosophy of time is too expansive to fully describe here some conceptual basics of this philosophy can be put to work in order to construct these research performances differently. In *Difference and Repetition* (1994) Deleuze posits that time is *made* by sets of interrelated syntheses. Instead of events occurring in Time, *times* are produced within events. Because times are produced in multiplicity, the past, present, and future do not stretch out in linear, backward/forward fashion, separated by symmetrical units. Instead, pasts, presents, and futures are continually (re)produced, taking up each other in asymmetrical, transformative syntheses. Times are multiple in relation to one another, but singular-in-themselves in that they are not reducible to a common law or overarching rule; they can never be replicated (Williams, 2011). Time, therefore, is not a flat, subtractive, unidirectional movement but an on-going synthesis of “voluminous, affirmed, and distributed differences” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 51).

The unfolding of a Deleuzian philosophy of time alongside the everyday practices of researchers-in-context opens possibilities for reconceptualizing research as a multi-temporal, “non-metrical manifold of coexisting syntheses” (Williams, 2011, p.140). I activate these Deleuzian notions of time through a vignette of our heretofore “inefficient” research performance. What follows is a multimodal constructed

cut (Barad, 2007) of an improvised research event. This particular (re)construction was chosen because it demonstrates the kind of “inefficient” improvisational practices of data generation that comprised this study of material-discursive entanglements in the kindergarten classroom. In the research excerpt that follows, the children and I contend with multiple layers of material and discursive relationality as we generate various forms of data. At the conclusion of the vignette, a brief application of Deleuzian time offers possibilities for recasting this “inefficient” event.

(Re)Constructing Research in Time(s)

(12:20)

Many children are finishing their lunches, others are making “quiet choices” until it is time for the class to go outdoors. A group of children, Paige, Petal, Clara, and Lauren, are playing with plastic figures on a wooden platform in the back of the classroom. Paige had scheduled time with me to “do photos” after lunch. I approached them on the platform.

Casey: *Are you ready to do work with photos?*

Paige: *Well, I think I’d just like to play a little more with these horses. It’s good to do horses now! But I am thinking about it in a little bit.*

Paige searches through a bin of plastic animals and begins to chant.

Paige: *Ba-by horse! Ba-by horse! Ba-by horse!*

She motions for me to join her and I do. Her movements – patting the ground beside her and chanting about the topic of play – had become her signature requests for “being with” her. I sit beside her on the carpet and put my bag with my camera and notepad behind me**.** She lays her head on my knee and she picks up a small figurine from the bin of plastic animals and begins to play with it, grouping and arranging seashells and small bricks in shapes around the horse.

(12:25)

She holds up a tailless horse figurine. Like most of the plastic animals in the classroom, some of his appendages are missing. Petal and Paige had theorized that the tails and ears were “chewed off” by younger children many years ago.

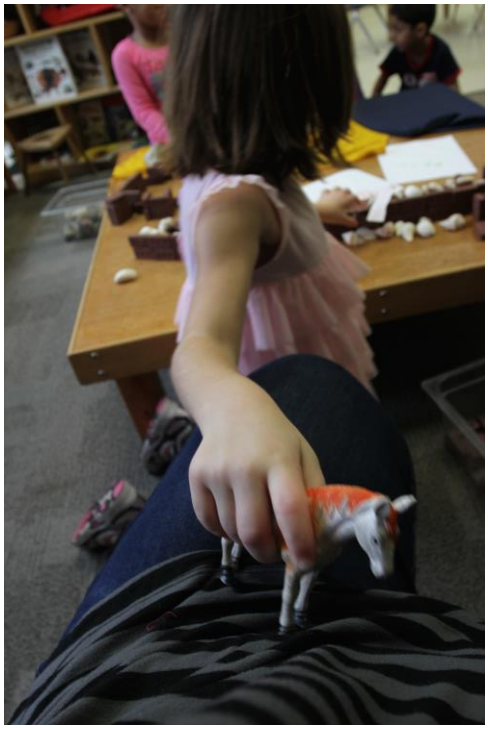
Paige: *Hey, remember when this baby horse would not stop following you around?*

Casey *I do…that baby horse used to come after me all the time when we played horses. Always on my leg!*

Paige: *Well, look what he’s doing now...he’s on there*! *Watch out…*

Casey: *Oh no! Leave me alone, horse!*

Paige: *But I need my mama! Some kid bit my butt off!*



This was a familiar way of “being with” each other. The horse seeking me out, my feigned terror at the horse trampling my body, and my becoming a “mother”/allowing the horse to rest on my leg had happened several times in the previous month. Paige makes the horse jump up and down on my leg, then allows him rest there as she continues to arrange the shells and bricks on the platform. At her request, I take remove my camera from my bag and make several photos of “baby horse”, just as she had asked me to do several times before. The shutter of the camera clicks as it opens and closes and she moves the horse to different positions on my body, and then lets him rest for a moment while she attends to her shell-and-brick construction.

(12:31)

Paige: *Can we make a little movie with the horses?*

Casey: *We could. But how should we make this movie?*

Paige: *Let me see...*

I hand Paige my camera and she looks through the viewfinder. She asks Clara to move another tailless horse back and forth while she presses the shutter, causing it to fire in burst.

Paige: *Woo! He’s speedy, speedy now!*

She reviews the photos on the LCD screen on the camera, flipping through them quickly to produce a sort of digital flipbook. The children pass my camera back and forth, viewing the “speedy movie” and laughing.

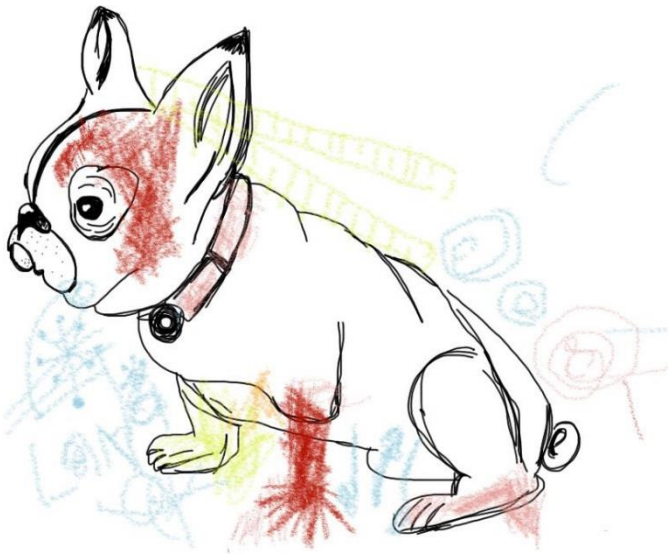
(12:47)

Paige: *Have you ever seen a horse like this, Casey?*

Casey: *Like what? Speedy?*

Paige: *No, with a missing tail!*

Casey: *Oh! Well...never with a missing tail. I’ve seen a dog with a missing leg, though*.



The children ask me to show them on my notepad what the dog might have looked like. I draw a small, cartoon dog (the only kind I can draw quickly) with a missing front leg. Petal reaches for a nearby canister of pencils and makes modifications as I continue to illustrate. She adds a bloody foot and long blonde braids as we talk about reasons why a dog could only have three legs. Did something or someone chew her leg off? Did a car run her over? Did she have a surgery? Was she just born that way?

(12:55)

Petal: *Did she know how to walk?*

Casey: *Yes, she kind of hopped, but she was able to get around and play with other dogs pretty well.*

Clara: *Like Old One Leg Hopster!*

Lauren: *One Leg Hopster! One Leg Hopster!*

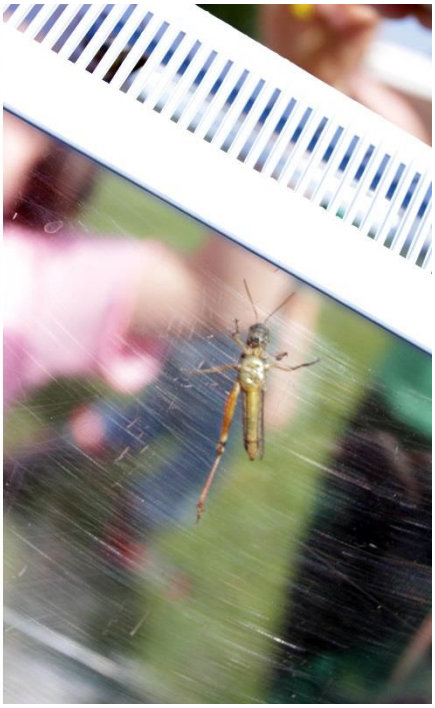
The children chant the name of the one-legged grasshopper we had found months earlier in the meadow outside of the school. One Leg Hopster had intrigued the children with his ability to jump despite missing one of his large “jumpers”. Hopping on one leg and crouching into insect-like positions on the floor, they request that I take photos of them “being Hopster” and want to see the photos afterward so they can continue to refine their grasshopper stances in relation to the embodied memory of Hopster-ness.

Paige: *Oh, can we do photos about that horse movie we just made and then draw about the grasshoppers for our work?*

Casey: *Yes, we can do that. Do you want to do it now?*

Paige: *How about later? I want to go outside and hunt for Hopster!*

Petal*: Yeah, me too.*



If I had scheduled an “interview” to begin when the clock read 12:20 or expected myself to produce field notes on a particular, coherent topic “worth” roughly 30 minutes of my researching time, the events above would likely seem very inefficient. It would seem that the children and myself did *something*, but we didn’t get closer what to was originally planned within any agreed upon methodological sequence. And, yet, measuring what the research “did’ against quantitative units of time does not capture the fullness of becoming that emerges across this vignette.

The entanglement of agents – the children and myself, our knowing hands and moving bodies, the plastic horse figures, the biting children from long ago, the camera, the wooden platform, the shells and bricks, the amputated and adorned puppy, the Hopster, our paper, pencils, and pen – resisted metrics of generality in favor of productions of both chaotic and contingent specificities. Whatever our *plan* for the research was at the beginning of our interaction (i.e., the doing of photos in a particular way) it was taken up by a variety of presents and transformed irreversibly. Paige’s engagement with the horses in these present times took up the plastic figure’s past as an embattled plastic body and its present as an tailless agent, folded into our past times with legless dogs and grasshoppers, and our knowing and wondering about animal limbs. This enfolding is what Deleuze (1987) would call an *synthesis* of times; it transformed our futures, as what we would become – a movie subject, a camera operator, a horse mother, a grasshopper (hunter), a particular kind of research(ing) participant – was taken up as dimensions of our multiple presents. Our time(s) as researchers were further synthesized as we would go on to discuss and critique the photos and drawings that were made in the vignette I just re-presented here, as they gave consent and feedback on which images might be shown for the purposes of this article in later enactments of “doing photos”. From this Deleuzian perspective, research time was not misspent on these doings at the platform, but new times were produced and the trajectories of the research were bound up within them through an *eternal return* of difference (1987). This continual transformative becoming quiets expectations for a linear progression or symmetrical cycles of “efficient” methods because “the only thing that remains the same is the return of difference and the only thing

that remains similar is the return of dissimilarity” (Williams, 2011, p. 115).

What might Research Become?

What might research become if we recognize that research with children exists in the production of times, not at the mercy of a singular time? In general, I contend that Deleuze’s conception of times in relation to research methodology aligns with a post-qualitative ethics wherein research enactments at all scales are interventions of consequence. Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) respond to this idea of the real consequences of research enactments as follows:

> What we do as researchers *intervenes* with the world and creates new possibilities but also evokes responsibilities. If we think in this way, we might not just *live differently*… but do our research and analysis differently, in order to perhaps make it possible for others (humans and non-humans) to live differently in realities yet to come (p. 540).

This intervention could come in the form of resistance to what MacLure (2013a) calls “the malign effects” of “deeply ingrained intellectual habits” (p. 626). In a post-qualitative terrain, the quantitative metric of time needs to be rethought, just as we are rethinking other inherited conceptual guideposts (e.g., subjectivity, data, interviewing, etc.). The predetermined sequence of qualitative research – the designing, the scheduling, the observing, the writing, the interviewing, the transcribing, the analyzing, the (re)presenting – has become so taken for granted “that it becomes possible to know it in advance” (Lather, 2013, p.635) what our research will become. And when its becoming doesn’t align with our predictions or others’ tidy notions of how research should move in time, our inquiries can be dismissed as disorganized, lacking focus, and inefficient. If we actualize research as a synthesis of multiple times, we might enable ourselves to abandon another malignancy and embrace research as an unsettling, entangled production.

With regard to the research yet-to-come, this unsettling, generative synthesis of time(s) holds great promise for collaboration with children. If we truly aim to be collective in our research practices and join with children to research in ways that allow our mutual becomings to expand creatively and unexpectedly, the temporal conditions we place upon these practices must be more fluid. With regard to the vignette presented in this paper, freeing myself conceptually from the notion that time was “running out” to employ a set sequence of research methods or that I had a certain amount of time to collect an equal amount of data, allowed me to collaborate with children to enact our diverse ways of “being with” and “doing”. Our existences as research(ing) participants within these multiple times became continually unfixed, playfully distracted, and productively multi-temporal. Of course, activating a Deleuzian conception of time cannot automatically make research relations more ethical, equitable, or egalitarian. However, undoing our expectations of what time will give (or take) from us *can* situate researchers and children within a temporal freedom of becoming, thus opening possibilities to affirm our many entanglements as we research together.

Notes

1. The 16 children between the ages of 4 and 6-years-old participated in this research project, which took place in one kindergarten classroom at a university-affiliated laboratory school in the United States. It was approved by Kent State University’s Institutional Review Board (Research compliance #13-362, LII, 6/7).
2. The notion of classroom interactions, whether they be teaching- or research-focused, as *collective* and *improvisational* is not novel nor does it belong specifically to post-qualitative inquiry. For a thorough review of collective improvisation in relation to classroom practices and classroom-based research, see Gershon (2006).

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