



Children's encounters with urban woodlands, digital technologies and materialities

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Introduction:

It is often argued¹ that **children and young people are 'disconnected' from nature², technologies are often blamed**, while the cure is considered to be the **restorative property of nature itself**. A range of research highlights the benefits of woodland experiences; interventions, such as outdoor learning programmes, are increasingly being implemented³.

In such narratives, 'nature' is often depicted in a **nature/culture binary** - a pure, untouched, 'out there', innate, static site of discovery for humans⁴, and particularly the 'innocent' child. This neglects the ongoing, complex, uneven and non-innocent relations between humans, technologies and more-than-humans, entangled as naturecultures or commonworlds. **Post-human and feminist new materialist** research challenge the construct of the 'disconnected child', instead arguing for relational environmental education pedagogies⁵. Added to this, work within children's geographies emphasizes the socio-material processes of children's relations to place and materialities⁶.

In order to move beyond narratives of the 'disconnected child', this research therefore set out to consider the relational, socio-material, affective and intra-active ways in which children encounter and learn with digital technologies, places, materialities and natures.

Research assemblage

- This research was situated in an urban woodland and park in Birmingham.
- 18 children from two primary schools participated in the collaborative research.
- Over 6 months we inquired through walking in the park, with GoPro cameras on selfie sticks.
- We also held regular video editing and website creation sessions and two arts-based workshops.
- The research was non-outcomes based and open-ended; the participants led much of the inquiry and co-analysed the footage.

Research-creation process

The processes of filming and walking during this research are understood as research-creation. The embodied events and creative processes while walking encouraged a curious inquiry within the research assemblage. The filming and the footage is the work of this inquiry, co-analysed through editing workshops and the production of a website and artworks.

Findings

- Children and GoPros extend into tree canopies and underwater into rivers and ponds within the park, expanding encounters into unknown materialities.
- Children and GoPros 'become YouTubers', performing and narrating embodied and multi-sensory encounters with natures.
- Materialities entangle with children's bodies, submerging with water, sticking with mud, cutting with tree roots and dusting with soils, clays and sand.
- Through emergent and innovative methods, such as magnet fishing, children learn with geologic minerals and digital knowledges from YouTube.
- Through paying attention to diversity of children participants, including children often not included in research, and taking their contributions to the inquiry seriously, new learning processes and knowledges contribute to environmental educations.

Impacts:

- Contributions to growing academic debate concerning a) young people's engagement in urban natures and spaces b) alternative processes of learning.
- Contribution to new materialist theory application within children's geographies.
- Contributions to learning for Forest Schools practitioners, urban woodland management services, landowners and wider youth and community groups.



References:

¹Malone, K. (2007) The bubble-wrap generation: children growing up in walled gardens' *Environmental Education Research*, 13:4, pp. 513-527 ²Louv, R. (2005) *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder* Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books. ³See Children and Nature Network www.childrenandnature.org; see Forest Schools Association www.forestschooolsassociation.org ⁴For critique see: Nxumalo, F., Cedillo, S. (2018) 'Decolonizing place in early childhood studies: Thinking with Indigenous onto-epistemologies and Black feminist geographies' *Global Studies of Childhood* 7 (1) pp. 99-112 ⁵Taylor, A., Pacinini-Ketchabaw, V., and Blaise, M., (2012) 'Children's Relations to the More-than-Human World' *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 13 (2) pp. 81-85 ⁶Horton, J., and Kraftl, P., (2018) 'Rats, assorted shit and 'racist groundwater': towards extra-sectional understandings of childhoods and social-material processes' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36 (5) pp. 926-948.