“True geography [ ] quickly forgotten, giving away to an adult-imagined universe”. Approaching the otherness of childhood.

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Abstract

In this paper I seek to explore the idea of the otherness of childhood. I suggest that there are considerable differences between the becomings of children and the becomings of adults. In the face of these a number of questions need to be asked about adult - childhood relations in society and about academic approaches to children and childhood, particularly in terms of representing childhood and the implications of such representing. The paper sets out the idea of otherness, locates this within current debate about the crisis of childhood, and then argues that non-representational approaches might be particularly relevant to progressing children’s geographies. These approaches stress modesty, practice, experimentation, messiness, creativity and openness.

As we age, childhood becomes another country, a disputed territory of memory and meaning. Its true geography is quickly forgotten, giving away to an adult-imagined universe.

The contemporary adult vision of childhood has become so distorted as to render it opaque, and this opacity is seriously affecting how children grow up today.

(Brooks 2006: 4 - 5).

Introduction
This paper explores the idea of the otherness of children and its implications for the academic study of children’s worlds, and wider political questions about child – adult relations. The idea of the otherness of children is about the way children differ from adults in quite profound ways, and importantly, the extent to which the becomings of children are not fully knowable by adults.

This is a large, uncertain terrain which stretches far beyond easily knowable horizons. Thus I do not offer any kind of comprehensive thesis, but rather a foray into it. The terms ‘other’ and ‘otherness’ are used in a number of ways within philosophy, ethics and the social sciences. Its use here has shadings from two such usages. Firstly I mean other in terms of *alterity* as in the work of Levinas and Derrida, which is about the unbridgebility between self and other. If it is so for all being, it might take on particular forms and distances between aspects of adult and child becoming. Secondly there is the sense of other in which the other is made in relation to the same through uneven power relations. This is akin to Said’s (1979) use of other in *Orientalism*. There are of course linkages between these two ideas of otherness - we cannot truly know the other, and within that void we can construct the other through/in our own matrix of power.

I feel the question of the otherness of children is very important. Firstly, within children’s studies/geographies, there is a need to address this question in the context of non-representationational approaches to children (Harker, 2005, Horton and Kraftl 2006, 2005). Secondly, it is pertinent in the context of a fresh wave of anxiety about childhood which has washed through UK public debate and media in 2006. This in particularly so terms in of adult agendas which seek to colonise and control childhood (see below). This is a question of human/children’s rights.

Brooks (2006:18) points out that throughout history, ‘the story of childhood has rarely been well told’. I feel this is because notions of otherness – the mysteries of children’s lives - have been underplayed. The stories of childhood that adult societies have told have often been about trying to write (right) childhood into one form of space or other. This might be so for, say, religious, state, educational or consumptionist capitalist accounts of what children are and what they should be. But it is also so for
academic treatments of children and childhood as it is a key part of the background field of ethical, methodological and ontological fabric of any academic endeavour. Here I am trying to bring it to the fore.

There is not a simple division between children and adults, there is much commonality of humanity between them, but this is not to say there are not profound differences. Children are in particular forms of becoming which includes processes of growth and development. The nature of otherness will vary within childhood and between children. The otherness of infants, for example being pre (adult) language and ability to walk seems profound. It is tempting to say that the degree of otherness lessens as children grow towards adulthood. But this is not straightforwardly so. Older children’s and teenager’s worlds have other strangenesses to them (from an adult perspective).

This is not biological determinism or cultural determinism. It is all the things that shape us - the embodied, the genetic, the cultural, folded together into the searingly dense and complex formations that are lives. There are differences within childhood – but they are just that – within something that society has felt the need to mark as different from adulthood. The question then is, what is the nature of these differences between these worlds, and what manner of trade can occur between them?

What children’s and adults’ worlds are; and what can, does, should and shouldn’t pass between them is central to academic research into children’s worlds, particularly social science and humanities based work. This basic question is not debated that much. In opening this up I am trying to put people on their guard about this question and unsettle the ‘new paradigm’ of childhood studies. A settled paradigm soon solidifies, then ossifies. This paper joins Matthews (2005) and Horton and Kraftl (2006, 2005) who are also trying to challenge children’s geographies even as it ‘grows from strength to strength’ (Matthews 2005: 271).

The most important question is the extent to which any adult thinking about, acting on, children and childhood, including research into children and childhood, is a form of what Thomas and Hacking (2003) term ‘colonisation’. After Furedi, they see colonisation not only as specific adult interventions in children’s lives, but also a
more pervasive process - ‘wider forces in wider society [] intruding more directly into childhood experience’ which ‘ultimately [] reduces the child’s opportunities to control his or her own relationship with time and space’ (23). I am very aware that this paper is also part of adult discourses on children and childhood. But my basic claim is that some aspects of children’s lives are very different, or other to, adult experience. These other spaces might be central to what it is to be a child, and indeed, are why we need the terms children and childhood. These other places cannot be easily colonised or known – research has its limits – and we should always ask ourselves if we have the ability, the need and the right to venture towards these other lands.

Otherness, as I will discuss, does not just mean simple separation and unknowablility. It is more subtle idea of the knowable and unknowable, the familiar and the strange, the close and the distance, being co-present in adult child relations. (I speak as a parent, as well as an academic, throughout this piece). The otherness of children is the (more) unknowable reaches of the relationship. To repeat a key point, otherness is not only healthy for children and for child-adult relationships, it is essential to what children are. It should be central to ideas of childhood too. If the aim of research is to investigate, discover, disclose and make visible, then there is a tension, a risk and a conundrum here. Research into children’s lives, and adult knowledge of them more generally, should acknowledge that some things cannot be (fully) known about children’s worlds. This left space for children is politically and ethically vital. This is not to say that aspects of those worlds, say, children’s access to public space in city, cannot be investigated, but research which has the ethnographic bent of revealing the world view of the subject, or ‘seeing through the eyes’ of the subject, is inevitably trying to enter the other space of children’s worlds and needs to recognise the limits.

This paper, as one referee points out, is full of quotes from other people. I can’t deny this. What I would say is that I cannot do this on my own. In what is a pragmatist approach (see Wood and Smith 2008; Jones 2008) I am seeking to deploy, and develop, a collective consideration of this issue by bringing in the work of other people and hoping that others will subsequently join in.

**Childhood in Crisis?**
Today’s society is anti-child. Children have no space, they have no time, and they are sent to child ghettos called schools which are deliberately separated from society. (Germaine Greer speaking on BBC Radio 4, *Any Questions?* Friday 24 February, 2006).

Affluent, child-centred Britain is rearing the unhappiest generation [of children] in modern history (Mary Riddell, *The Observer*, 19/03/06, p 31).

Germaine Greer’s curt assessment of society-child relations was put in a stridently ear-catching way on a radio programme designed to bring such forth. But it is of note to those involved in children and childhood studies that such an acute observer of society can offer such a bleak summary. The similarly gloomy assessment of the journalist Mary Riddell may be even more sobering because her article was in response to recent reports on the high prevalence of depression and self-harming in young people.

More recently the concern about contemporary childhood has been voiced again and again and action called for. One crescendo was a letter published in the Telegraph newspaper (12/9/2006) which was signed by over 100 academics, educationalists, authors, childhood ngo leaders, and religious leaders. See (Abbs *et al*, Telegraph Newspaper, Letters, 12/9/2006)

These sentiments were soon endorsed by The Archbishop of Canterbury. (BBC news 18/9/2006), and Bob Reitemeier of the Children’s Society who agreed that ‘there is clearly a mood in the UK that as a society we have got some important things wrong about childhood’ (Redhead, 2006). This was followed by a UNICEF report which placed Britain at the bottom of a league table of the world’s wealthiest nations which measured the ‘physical and emotional wellbeing of children’.

Are things so bad? In many ways more attention is paid to children than ever before (including in academia). The ‘century of childhood’ (i.e. the twentieth century) (Humphries *et al* 1988), was, after all, the era in which romantic ideologies which celebrated and valued the child came into full bloom. So called child-centred education became ever more the norm. Children’s rights were enshrined in the United
Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child Charter and this is now ‘the most ratified human rights treaty in history’ (Brocklehurst 2003: 1). Children have a whole series of ‘spaces’ set aside from them in terms of play, communication, entertainment, and commodities (television, books, toys, cloths, playgrounds). The physical spaces are often made as attractive (bright colours) and as safe as possible (playgrounds surfaces coated with spongy rubber to protect from injury). Crimes against children are reported as the most heinous and unforgivable of all.

Could it be that within all these pedagogic, economic, legislative, technological and emotional interventions and investments in childhood, society has somehow missed what children really are, and what they really need, as Brooks (2006) suggests? Greer’s concerns, and her attack on today’s schools in particular, can be seen as an extension of a long running, radical, left inspired, critique of children-society relations (e.g. Ward 1978, 1990; Berg 1972; Holt 1975; Illich 1970) particularly as expressed though the institutions of education. It is interesting how much of this post 1960s radical focus on the basic mechanics of children – society relations has dissipated and been replaced by concerns for children which don’t challenge our view of what childhood is. Schools’ roles within childhood-society relations can be analysed in a Foucauldain sense as the sharp end of moral and social regulation, discipline, and the reproduction of subjects (both adults and children) for the techo-capitalist war machine of modernity which both frame and echo wider childhood-society relations (Ball, 1990).

**Power and Knowledge**

Where do children’s geographies and other social science studies of childhood stand in regard to these broader dynamics of childhood-society relations? Research within geography and beyond can be represented as ethically and politically empathetic insights into the worlds of children and the predicaments they face. But to what extent does such research operate within established imaginations and power relations about what children are, childhood is, adulthood is, and what childhood-society relations are? It is difficult to see outside them.
As Ball (1990) points out in relation to education, knowledge and power, ‘Foucault seems extremely pessimistic about the possibilities of resistance and deinstitutionalising knowledge because we seem so enmeshed in power processes that we are hardly conscious of’ (26). This view is echoed elsewhere. Matthews (2005) suggests that well-intentioned research can become so as it ‘promulgates and perpetuates a particular way of seeing, which is often adultist, exclusionary, and oppressive’ (272). And Kellett (2003: 5) suggests ‘adults simply cannot become children again because they cannot discard the adult baggage they have acquired in the interim and will always operate through adult filters, even if these are subconscious filters.’ As older and newer notions of childhood fray, we need to re-examine what we take children and childhood to be (Higonnet, 1998). I think notions of children as other can help in this regard.

Consider this passage about Foucault, the other, and rural geography by Chris Philo:

The focus has been [] on the devices of thought, language and discourse which serve to spread the hegemony of ‘the same’ (at bottom, Western reason) while fixing, diffusing and reducing to silence and nothingness all irruptions of ‘the Other’. Foucault would claim that all Western intellectual endeavours are implicated in this action of conceptual oppression, even if there is scope for resistance, and I would thereby acknowledge that the specific corner of the intellectual division of labour know as ‘rural geography’ must itself be so implicated as well (1997: 23).

Philo’s concern, as also explored in his famous paper on rural others (Philo 1992), is that rural geography has been indifferent to various forms of difference within rural socio-spatial formations notably, though not exclusively, to the difference that is manifest in children’s lives.

It can be argued that children’s geographies/studies are excused the charge of blindness/hostility to the other that Philo sets out because they have, by definition, a concern for the marginal/different/other group that he was so concerned for. But this could also be considered in another way. Are children’s geographies/studies (as appliers of reason based on (adult) knowledge of one kind or another) an active
frontline of the same working upon the other? The fact that we work in an area which
has a basic focus on the other, does not mean that we can be easy and content with our
stances of power, knowledge and so on, but rather that we need to be extra vigilant
and reflexive about how we approach, engage with and render the other in our
research accounts and or conceptualisations of children/childhood.

There are many adult ‘systems’ for engaging with children - families, schools,
research, television output, children’s books. Within these there are marked variations
in how children are understood and approached. For example, within education there
is a spectrum from very narrow, strict and directed curriculum to the much freer
systems such as those of the Free Schools or Steiner schools. I don’t suggest these are
equally incapable of ‘reading’ children and their needs. The latter, I feel, are much
more likely to be genuinely empathetic and child friendly. The same kind of spectrum
might apply to research into childhood. The freer education systems deliberately leave
space for the otherness of children, they do not attempt full colonisation, what is the
academic research equivalent of this?

There are on-going discussions within childhood studies about methodologies which
include issues of power relations (e.g. Christensen and James, 2000). But I suggest
these not only operate within pretty stable notions of what childhood and adulthood
are and what can and can’t pass between them, but also that they do so by extensions
of methodologies initially designed for inter-adult research and which have been
designed to represent what could be called samenesses. The whole basis of this
approach within geography and beyond is now been challenged root and branch by
non-representational theory (NRT) and this should be of particular concern/interest
for those studying children/childhood (see below).

There is a desire to do, as Horton and Kraftl (2005) put it, ‘useful research’ as many
children face unjust circumstances in some form or other, or whose world views are
very poorly understood or represented. They rightly point out that we need to keep
pressing on with the questions of how to conceptualise childhood and adult – child
relations, how research operates within and intervenes in these borderlands, and how
we construct and reconstruct research orientations in relation to these questions.
Gagen (2004) makes the very interesting point that geographies of children/childhood need to penetrate yet further into the worlds of children, including child-child relationships, through, for example, considering ‘the many ways children inflict harm and hurt on each other, and indeed on adults’ (415). This, I think, poses even greater challenges to research about when and how to enter and represent these very other emotional, physiological and psychological life worlds, without killing the life of them through our adult logics of knowing and telling.

The somewhat paradoxical movement enmeshed in the above is nicely articulated by Castañeda (2002). After citing Jacqueline Rose’s notion of ‘a knowing ignorance’ where ‘if we do not know what a child is, then it becomes impossible to invest in their sweet self-evidence’, Castañeda asks, what are the responsibilities we have in making claims about the child? She concludes, ‘I wish to suggest that worlds could be made otherwise, precisely through some form of un-knowing’ (10-11, my emphasis).

Of course such statements, and this paper, are yet further adult pronouncements on the lives of children and thus a continuum rather than break from adult (academic) discourses. But I feel the idea of otherness is a way of ‘un-knowing’ which allows children space and autonomy, which acknowledges limits and could even lead to situations where it is recognised that the best thing might be just to leave children alone by engineering spaces, of various types, which are ‘adult free zones’.

**Children as other**

As I have stated above and elsewhere (Jones, 2007a/b), my pursuit of the idea of the otherness of children is not to say that there is a simple, unbridgeable gap between adulthood and childhood. Rather my aim is to destabilise and challenge notions that adult research into children’s worlds can quite straight forwardly, or at least, through relatively standard social science methodologies, gain access to and represent key aspects of children’s worlds. There is a great intimacy and interdependency between children’s and adults’ lives, and, at the same time, vast distances in knowledges, needs, modes of being and experiences.
The distances – which are the heart of the matter – stem from a whole ecology of related factors about children’s lives. Starting with the body - children are smaller, growing, sexually immature, generally have less physical power. Their stocks of knowledge, experience and memories are also very different to those of adults. Younger children may not, for example, have a clear concept of death. Their engagement with the world is correspondingly different. Children’s lives are routinely and coercively ordered by adult authority. They have to live in a world generally not scaled and ordered to their needs. They are not so easily independently mobile as most adults. They are excluded from mainstream forms of political participation. They have forms of power but not as many adults do. Adolescent children may be closer to adulthood in some ways (e.g. knowledges) but this too is a very other state to that of adulthood (Guattari, 1996b).

Children are people as adults are, in terms of basic social, physiological, psychological functions yet at the same time these formations are in set in these very different affective processes of body, memory, power, knowledge, experience and so on. If the affective, the emotional, the body are so important in the productions our becomings as Thrift (e.g. Thrift, 2004a/b, 2005) and others have repeatedly argued, then the fact that children are so different in many respects would imply that their becomings are very different - or other - to that of adults.

The meaning of affect is contested and diffuse. But I take it to mean all the bodily systems pre and beyond reflexive consciousness which makes life possible and through which we live as beings-in-environment on a moment to moment basis. Memory, emotion, motor movement are key but not exclusive parts of affect. As I will discuss later, Thrift sees these ‘other intelligences of the body’ as key political and ethical grounds. Expanding our considerations of being back into the body to the fullest extent possible is a general ‘rule’ of NRT and thinking about affect. This should be particularly so when thinking about children, as James (2000) asserts, ‘with respect to the study of children, embodiment, or more precisely this neglect of the embodied nature of human action, takes on a particular poignancy’ (23).

Such basic substrates of being and their affective intelligences cannot be easily or straightforwardly revisited by those who have moved/grown on. Adult research can
‘represent’ those aspects and experiences of childhood which overlap with adult experience (the sameness of childhood) yet at the same time find the otherness - the stranger, more distant aspects of children’s lives - much harder to reach (and thus miss out on much that makes childhood separate from adulthood in the first place).

The intimacy and interdependence of child adult relationships is illustrated by parenting, family relations and the needs of children in terms of stable family (and other) relations (both of which can come in a number of forms). To flourish, children, (as do most complex living things) need empathetic nurturing (love), affection, caring for, interaction (physical and psychological).

Yet children are always, in some respects, on their own, in other places, and need other places and other spaces (as in the other spaces of solitude, solo play, dens and such like, Ward 1990). Riddell (2006 31) talks of ‘the tribal cruelty, companionship and wonderment that makes children’s lives as separate and as magical as they have always been’ (my emphasis). In other words, distances and intimacies are simultaneously present within child adult relations. It is the affective geographies of their distant, other worlds which I feel are vital to what children’s lives are. They are thus vital to children’s geographies yet also very difficult to address.

Childhood has been constructed in many ways. Notably, as Jenks (2005) shows, as Apollonian (innocent, natural) or Dionysian (evil). With these come regimes and spaces of control, care and provision and assumptions about what individual children are and what they need. For example the vulnerable, incompetent notions of childhood can lead to children’s lives being highly restricted in terms of autonomous engagement with the environment. So too can ideas of children as wild and transgressive (Valentine, 2004). Conversely, the notion of the innocent/natural child might counteract the confining tendencies of some other notions through parents’ desire to allow children some degree of freedom (as in ideas of rural childhood idyll) (Jones, 2000). All these adult constructions of childhood (and others) play to adult desires and agenda and can be restrictive of children’s lives in terms of identity, space and practice.
A turn to the notion of otherness, in complex relation with other conceptualisations, opens up constructions of childhood into an acknowledgement of the mysteries of childhood. It is an attempt at a form of ‘un-knowing’, an attempt to de-represent, to decolonise children and their worlds. Insights here can be gained from poststructuralist engagements with children.

The celebrated poet Rilke (a focus in Heidegger’s work) drew a distinction between the becoming of humans and the becoming of plants and animals. The latter he suggests, has continuity with the ‘open’ of the world, whilst humans were trapped in self, closed off from the world (not least by representational thought and language). Children however are not (yet) closed off to the open (Santer, 2006). It is this presumed becoming beyond self which has made the child a trope in poststructuralist thought.

Castañeda (2001, 2003) shows how

the child is the embodiment of becoming rather than being (in Deleuze and Guattari), the site where thinking becomes possible (Foucault), the condition that throws ‘man’ (sic) off course (2003, 47).

‘Thinking’ here however might need to redefined to incorporate ‘other forms of intelligence’, to include the body for example. Childhood becoming is such an important site for such poststructuralist thinkers precisely because it is seen as other to, or at least pre, that of the subjectified adult being. The technologies of the subject, as Foucault shows, not only coerce being, but coerce and confine knowledge, practice, ethics, politics and imagination and this is imposed from an early age. But for a time the child is feral, untamed and thus a possibility for alterity and futurity.

Guattari (1996a) is scathing of the dominant power of subjugation, the capitalist system, including institutions which enframe children;

in all its forms (family, school, factories, army, codes, discourse…) it continues to subjugate all desires, sexuality, and affects to the dictatorship of its
totalitarian organization, founded on exploitation, property, male power, profit, productivity…

Tirelessly it continues its dirty work of castrating, suppressing, torturing and dividing up our bodies in order to inscribe its laws on our flesh, in order to rivet our subconscious [into] its mechanisms for reproducing this system of enslavement. (my emphasis, 29).

And Guattari points out that these technologies of subjugation start on children at the very earliest age, ‘in a capitalist society, initiation starts with the pacifier (the mother)’ whereas ‘in archaic societies, the child was relatively free in his (sic) movements until his initiation’ (72). But in both cases children begin as outsiders to (adult) subjugated subjectivity. The rendering of them as insiders Guattari feels is a violent process.

It is interesting to put these theoretical accounts within the context of the concerns about children’s wellbeing discussed earlier. Because of the way society considers children as natural and vulnerable, the violence that they, and all, are exposed to is more visible. Children can be treated as a kind of capitalist commodity. Take for example the practice of ‘helicopter parenting’ (Katie Taite, Daily Telegraph, Weekend Section, 1-2, 01/04/2006) in which she asserts ‘parenting in Britain is treated like a job, which in the end has to get a result’ (2). In today’s climate of globalised capitalism, celebritocracy, and the (related) education cultures of curriculum, targets and assessments, it is hard for parents and other adults responsible for the care and education of children not to push them in certain directions.

Very dark views can be taken of children being pushed into adultist, capitalist systems via education, such as the celebrated animations to the Pink Floyd song, Another Brick in the Wall, drawn by the graphic satirist Gerald Scarf. This had teachers morphing into hammers to smash children, and part-morphing into magnifying glasses to gaze intently at children begin rammed into old fashioned meat mincers. Extreme interpretations, to be sure, but such extremes usefully serve to signpost questions, challenges and horizons which might become invisible in the everyday of the ‘middle ground’.
The poststructuralists turn to the otherness of children in the hope for alterity to the subjectified samenesses of life, a futurity of creative radical becoming. This supports the idea that children are in some ways, pre or beyond adulthood. But the poststructuralist turn to childhood can be questioned as yet another colonisation of childhood space by an adult agenda. It may not mark a proper engagement with the all the richness, strangeness and diversity of children’s worlds. Indeed Castañeda points out that some critiques of poststructuralist appropriations of child becoming, notably (Wallace 1995) do not offer an alternative theory of [ ] the child-subject because ‘is is difficult to imagine how a theory of the child-subject might proceed’ (33). Castañeda is rightly concerned that in all these accounts, the child remains a ‘theoretical resource’ and with the question of how to deal with this problem in a feminist orientated search for theories of the other which don’t inadvertently make the other the same – to use Philo’s (1997) terminology.

As Guattari says of the eroding capacities of modernist/capitalist ideologies, ‘Otherness [l’altérité] tends to lose all its asperity’ (2000: 27). While it would not be reasonable to straightforwardly accuse research into childhood of homogenising out the roughness, the edge (asperity), of children’s lives, this is at least, I suggest, a live question within childhood studies (and in caring for children in families and institutions). Not only is the asperity of childhood vital to it, but as (Jenks 2005) suggests, it might, through its transgressive capacities, offer important counterpoints to the striations of adult society.

**Researching children’s other worlds: non representational theory**

If children are taken to be other, or even in part other, to adult subject positions, then how are we to consider and approach this in conceptual and methodological terms? I do not want to propose that there is one ‘solution’ as a response to this question. What I want to explore here are the possibilities of NRT as one possibly fruitful orientation. The reasons for doing so are as follows. Thrift (2004a) has made it very clear that his reason for developing NRT is deep dissatisfaction with current social science practice. He feels many of the richesses, vitalities, ecologies and movements of the becomings of everyday life are simply missed by established social science ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. They are too static, and seek to represent
apparently settled structures of social life which are mainly articulated in obvious conduits of rational thought, language, culture, economy and Political power. There is a direction of simplification, extraction, reduction, explanation and representation. NRT moves the other way. It is ‘a machine for multiplying questions and thereby inventing new relations between thought and life’ (2004b:71, emphasis in original).

NRT is influenced by poststructuralism and other legacies (Thrift 2004a/b) and has a number of preoccupations. These include interests in emotion, embodiment, relationality, ecology, complexity, affect, movement, practice, performance, play and excess. Rational thought, language, culture, economy and Political power are not ignored but seen as emergent from, and embroiled with, all these other key life energies. Much of what life is in practice lies within these life energies. Knowledge production is not outside looking in, or back, but is a part of these ongoing streams of becoming. Thrift and others (e.g. Dewsbury et al, 2002) are seeking new ways of ‘knowing’ as creative performative practices which can enact new kinds of (often Deleuzian) liberational politics and ethics.

I think the general dissatisfaction Thrift feels about social sciences is particularly relevant to thinking about children’s lives and how they are studied. With its focus on the other energies of life, which seem to be so important, and differently articulated, in children’s lives, NRT holds out promise for thinking creatively about these areas.

Horton and Kraftl (2006, 2005) turn to NRT in their call for children’s geographies to go through a period of conceptual and methodological self-examination and expansion. They (2006) challenge us to think through such windows as ‘everydayness’, ‘material things’, ‘practices’, bodies’ and ‘affect’ and urge readers to examine their own states of becoming in relation to these processes as ways of opening up understandings of children’s (geographical) becomings. These are certainly very interesting and potentially fruitful orientations. I would add that in all cases there is no simple elision between adult and child becomings - our bodies, affective states, relationships with things, and each other, are very different.
The challenge is to rethink how we practice research in relation to children in ways which proliferate possibilities, acknowledge limits and disorder, and become a form of creative narrative which can witness the otherness of children. There remains the question of whether NRT replaces or rather radically extends current approaches (see Lorimer, 2005). The second option leaves some room for coexistence with more established systems of geographical knowledges and methodologies. There are also a number of approaches related to NRT such as pragmatism, dwelling, actor network theory and hybridity which stress, in different ways, ecologically embodied processes, experimentation, openness and practice over representation. All these can be usefully explored as approaches to children’s lives.

Thrift (2005: 472) sets out five principles of ‘an ethics of intelligence’ which could underpin a ‘non-representational geographic ethics of knowing’. I go through these (under my own headings) and add 3 further, as a way of exploring in more detail the promise of NRT for thinking about children’s worlds in ways which respect their differences and their energies.

**Proliferation**

‘The world should be added to not subtracted from’ (Thrift 2005: 474 ). This is one of the basic principles of non-representation. Children’s becomings (and their development) has a strong element of proliferation in terms of exploration, experimentation and questioning. Indeed, as many parents and teachers know, children themselves could be described as ‘machine(s) for multiplying questions and thereby inventing new relations between thought and life’ to repeat the quote from Thrift.

Approaches and methodologies are needed which do not reduce the becomings of children to adult representation but which instead extend the m/notion of proliferation by bringing children’s practices into new settings and assemblages. Lee (2001), in relation to hybridity and actor network theory, has also called for research with children to be open to the possibilities of creation rather than representation in relation to relationality.
the change we are urging on the social study of childhood is to pay less attention to the question of what children are in themselves, the question of being and becoming, and to pay more attention to the question of what children may become in changing contexts of extension and supplementation (p. 121).

What methodologies can we adopt/develop which do not seek representational insights into the otherness of children’s worlds, but rather, seek to enable and extend children’s abilities to become other - to allow them to becoming themselves? Getting children to create and do research themselves is one way that has been developed to avoid the adultist trap (Kellett, 2003).

A note of warning is needed here. The NRT desire for proliferation does open it up to criticism on political and ethical grounds. For example, Dewsbury et al (2002) in their section on NRT and pluralism state they are ‘hospitable [ ] to whatever happens; to whosoever or whatever arrives’ (438). This is closely echoed by Harrison (2002: 501), quoting Derrida - ‘let us say yes to who or what turns up’. Such statements do not convincingly shake off the air of ‘conservative quietism’ that some feel hangs around NRT and Wittgenstein (Harrison, 2002, 499). Should we be hospitable to all, and all creative acts? As Gagen (2004) implies children can be cruel and obscene. To be so is a form of experimentation, and a kind of creative expression. Where do ‘watchers of children’ stand in this regard?

_Multiverse not universe_

‘The world should [ ] be held to be multiple. [ ] This is the principle of relentless pluralism’ (Thrift 2005: 474). Drawing on the pragmatist term ‘multiverse’ of James Thrift uses this principle to fight the urge for grand explanations and representations. This seems to be a fundamental point in the context of childhood, children’s otherness and otherness more generally. The multiple human (and non-human) ways of becoming in the world cannot be assumed to boil down to the same kinds of things. The urge for translation is always there, but it might not be possible. Wittgenstein’s (2001: 223) famous quote ‘if a lion could talk, we could not understand him,’ means that the ‘other intelligences’ of, in this instance, animals, which work in one lifeworld, are untranslatable into the context of other lifeworlds. A qualified version of this could be applied to children’s lives as being other to that of adults, and to the
othernesses within childhood (and adulthood for that matter). The lives of children vary greatly but they also vary from the lives of adults in the ways discussed. We cannot assume there is an easily accessible common ground or language in which research can operate.

*In disorder is otherness*

‘The world should be kept untidy. It should have negative capability, or as Keats put it “a man [must be] capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” [ ] This is the principle of messiness’ (Thrift 2005. 474)

There is a rich legacy of associating children with disorder within adult patternings of life. They can be bringers of disorder, or exploiters of disorder derived from other sources. As a parent, and as an observer of my home community where a number of families with children live and have lived quite inter-connected lives, it has been striking the extent to which children seek out other children for company and for play. Roberts (1980) points out that Rousseau’s *Emile* ‘lacked the most important element in play – other children’ (41). This importance of companion children I suggest stems from children’s need for beings who can share their own world, and who, even with the best will in the world, do not impose orders and tidiness on their ‘other’ logics and practices, as adults do.

Along with Paul Cloke I have explored elsewhere (Cloke and Jones, 2005) the idea that there are many interconnections between children/childhood and disordered spaces. This is born out not only in many famous studies of childhood such as that of the Opies (1969) and Ward (1978, 1990), but also in much literature for childhood and about childhood. The basis thrust of this idea is that within the *derelictions* which sometimes befall the adult orders (social, material, symbolic, disciplinary) which largely pattern the world (e.g. the city or the house), children can find and make their own orders (material, symbolic, disciplinary) in ways in which mean the world (or a bit of it) becomes a geography for (their) otherness. It has recently been claimed that there is a need to “rough up” our urban spaces in order to make them more interesting to children and young people’ (Thurrock Council 2006), this roughing up making ‘other geographies’ of the urban more possible.
The challenge is to think of this in terms of knowledge and theorisations of childhood. Inevitably, conceptualisations and methodologies are adult structures and patterns. How is it possible to wreck these, to generate new rough grounds for new knowledges of childhood to proliferate so the mysteries in children’s becomings are not stripped of their otherness and vitality?

John Law (2004) sets himself the questions; what should social science research look like once the non-representational challenge has been taken up? How does social science research deal with the powerfully flowing, messy, complex flux that is the everyday becoming of the world and lives within it? He argues that conventional methods need not be abandoned, but rather should be seen as useful, but also limited and partial (in focus), representing some on-going function or pattern in the world, but not the wider flows this pattern is set in.

He asks

if much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much pattern at all then where does this leave social science? (2004: 2)

I don’t say all these terms are straightforwardly applicable to children’s lives, but they resonate with the more distant elusive aspects of children’s lives which are central to it, and which are very distant from adult states of being. Law adds that social sciences are badly adapted to the ‘study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular’ (4). These also are characteristics of children’s lives. For example, Chris Philo asks what are we to make of children’s drawings and the ‘neglected stuff of childhood worlds’ (2003: 19)? In our house thousands of drawings, models, scenarios have been routinely made by our two children and their friends. Often this involves large amounts of stuff very untidily jumbled across the geography of the bedroom. Such scenes are vested with great significance in the moments of enactment but soon become abandoned in the fast moving, affective becoming of children’s play. It is very difficult to understand or value was is or was at stake. Tidying – which in the end one feels has to happen (but not that often) sometimes results in conflict.
Much qualitative research into children’s worlds is based upon methods which are adapted from standard social science ethnographic methodologies such as participant observation and interviewing. If these methodologies are now being deemed too representational to capture the wildness of the (adult) world in motion, might this not be even more so when they are applied to childhood?

Law’s answer, which he stresses is only a beginning - an opening gambit - is to generate new methodologies which he groups under the heading ‘method assemblage’. This approach has multiple features. Key within this is the recognition that research is a creative act of practice, and should be treated as such with all the ontological, epistemological, political, and ethical implications that that carries (see Thrift 2004a/b). This ‘is a continuing process of crafting and enacting necessary boundaries between presence, manifest absence and Otherness’ (Law, 2004: 144).

Here there is great scope for exploration of Law’s approach in relation to researching children, the interplay between what is known, what is present, what is other, what is absent needs to somehow be woven into accounts of children’s lives.

Wonder, witness and narrative

‘The world should be free to display its spectacular and amazing performances [ ] that can pass their energetic demands on. This is the principle of wonder.’ (Thrift, 2005: 474) This, again, is a basic principle of NRT and is a challenging call. The practice of the world always exceeds and bamboozles theoretical attempts of capture. How can we respond to the very energetic demands of children, pass them on, and allow them to be free to proliferate and display. One way, I suggest, is (modest) witnessing and narrative.

In his paper on Wittgenstein, Harrison (2002) turns to the idea of witnessing to begin to build an ethical/political momentum for NRT. This essentially asks, what can be said about – or done with, Wittgenstein’s call for the event to be taken seriously (in and of itself), the call to describe and not to explain, or worse, to abstract or seek meaning elsewhere/prior to the event. Harrison feels that the direction to readers ‘to pay attention to whatever is taking place in front of them’ (2002: 500) can be understood as a call to witness, and that to witness is/can be deeper that just observing
and reporting on an event, it can be to share and deeply empathize with pain and suffering – the negative (although it could be applied to joy and love – the positive) and otherness – without fully knowing it. Pause to think how often it is that understandings of and responses to current/historical events are not prompted by explanation or analysis but by witnessing.

Witnessing is often expressed as narrative. And here we connect to the long running tension between explanation (representation) and certain forms of narrative. NRT is drawn to towards ethological narratives - a sort of ‘radical ecological empiricism’. This could be developed for approaching children’s worlds. Serres, an influential figure in NRT thinking (Bingham and Thrift, 2000) has made narrative a central means of exploring the flowing interconnectedness of life ‘What better way to describe this fluctuation than with everyday words, concrete experiences--in short, by narrative?’ (Serres 1995: 65).

There is a strong affinity between narrative, artistic practice and NRT (see Thrift 2004a) and related approaches such as hybrid geographies (Whatmore, 2002). More generally the developing linkages between geographical and artistic interests and methods are going on apace in the pursuit of methodologies sensitive to affect. Artists (e.g. writers, painters, photographers, performers) are often commenting upon, witnessing, ‘analysing’ the world and their and/or other people’s place in it, but through affective/creative narratives rather than rational/representational registers. They do this by generating new accounts of/in the world which might witness eloquently. They add new accounts to the world (e.g. images, movements, sounds, artefacts) which at the same time help us re-evaluate the apparently existing state of things.

Thrift is not the only one who considers that these ‘performances’ are often more telling (of the world) and more ethically and politically alive than much social science and academia. Rorty (1991a/b) for example, has been at pains to point out that great art in the form of literature can have much more telling effect on society than centuries of precisely argued metaphysical philosophy and, latterly, realist social science. Dickens, for example, transformed understandings of children’s lives in the Victorian cities, and he did so through his vivid ‘non-representations’ of what he saw
around him. Given the difficulties of ‘representing’ the otherness of childhood, such non-representational approaches thus may be of particular interest and importance in children’s geographies (but still have limitations).

Witness and narrative are also being explored as a means of generating new political and ethical languages within poststructuralism and NRT. Barnett (2005) suggests that, at worst, poststructuralist theory can ‘generate[ ] an epistemological and ethico-political impasse for itself’ through the generic device of ‘essentializing the logic of exclusion as the ontological foundation of all modes of subjectivity’ (8). Barnett suggests that a reading of Levinas alongside Derrida can point to ways beyond this impasse by which the other is excluded. The ethical relationship, he suggests is inevitably (and) ‘irreducibly asymmetrical’ (18, my emphasis), and rests on an openness towards the Other in which temporal dimensions of being are critical. Within this temporal being in relationship to other, Barnett sees ‘acknowledgement’ (knowledge which includes recognition of suffering and sympathy and the demands of the other) as a means by which the gulf between self and other can be crossed. We need thus, to first acknowledge the otherness of children and the great asymmetries of body, knowledge, emotion, imagination which exist between adulthood and childhood, before we can begin to do children justice. The acknowledgment Barnett seeks might then open up our ability to witness otherness.

*Openness to other narratives*

‘The world should be free to teach us. That means retaining difficulties, uncertainties, inaccuracies since mistakes are a part of the lesson [ ]. There is a pragmatics of error which is crucial in all this. [ ] this is the principle of testing life’ (Thrift 2005: 474). Again this points to ethological narratives, a kind of (un)natural history of contemporary childhood. But also here there is a call for experimentation, trial and error, with the error being seen as vital.

Jenks (2005) feels we should let children teach us. He suggests that ‘childhood becomes an interesting metaphor for a post-structuralist, post-modern identity at both an analytical and a concrete level’ (150). He feels this is because the otherness, or the transgressiveness of childhood points to ‘missing, unexpressed and disempowered aspects of ourselves’. These ‘lost dimensions’ should not be seen as a threat or
disruption to adulthood, nor innocent wonderland but a critique of the norms of adult(ist) society.

In NRT there is a call for modest method and theory in so much as limits are recognised. This is essentially the approach embedded in pragmatism, particularly its fallibilism, but also its experimental, creative orientation to knowledge claims which drops notions of truth as correspondence and seeks knowledge which is contingent yet liberational (See Emel’s (1991), inspirational paper).

Doubt is at the heart of knowledge, yet it does not disable it, rather, it energises it. This pragmatic trait of NRT can be linked to Matthews (2005) discussion of supposedly ‘modest witnesses’ in children’s geographies who end up being anything but. Matthews seeks an ‘embodied epistemology’ which is enlivening, enabling, emotional, enlightening and emancipatory’ (272). I suggest that bringing the notion of the otherness of children into childhood study is an essential step of activating modest, yet affective witnessing.

All this then points to new creative, pragmatic, non-representational inflections of methodologies and epistemologies in childhood studies which are open about the partiality of their accounts and their tentativeness to represent the more other aspects of children’s worlds. This tentativeness should not only be in terms of uncertainty of the ability to do research, but also in terms of the need to do it, and the right to do it

(Rough) Play

It is a risk to claim that children are other to adults in the way that I am, but I feel it generates new possibilities of thinking about children’ geographies and society’s relationship with children, and if so (through a pragmatist lens) it is a valid claim. One way which we might activate the above principles is through ideas of play and rough play. I am aware that some of the most successful (personal) moments of interaction between adult (parent) and child are in moments such as ‘rough and tumble’ (a highly affective, bodily process) and in playful humour (such as watching the Simpsons and other cartoons together). It is not that the adult becomes juvenile, it is something about entering other states of becoming (together).
Play is a very interesting and nuanced term. It can mean ‘give’ and ‘movement’ (as in a loosely articulated joint) as well as the more common notion of playing games. The latter can be seen as a central facet of children’s becoming and is certainly in itself a highly complex, fluid, messy concept. Thinking through play, playing as ‘thinking’ offers great potential for NRT approaches to children’s becomings and questions of child-adult interaction as Harker (2005) vividly shows. Sutton-Smith (1997) discusses play not in terms of childhood (although children do feature) but in the wider terms of what play is and the functions it serves. He lists how differing theories of play have come up with a range of defining terms:

- pure assimilation, divergent thinking, indeterminism, anarchism, dark play,
- inversion, the world upside down, order and disorder, transformations, dialogic imagination, the play of signifiers, paradoxical modes, tricksterism, and grotesque realism (222).

Many of these smack of transgressions and subversions of /from settled, dominant patterns. Although childhood cannot be simply equated with play or transgression, children’s propensity for play surely is a marker of their otherness and vice versa. For Sutton-Smith one explanation of play is that it is a form of flexibility of openness to the future which might come in many possible guises. The play of young animals can be seen in this light. Play which can be ‘structurally characterised by quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility’ (229) is then a future-orientated, wilfully (in some sense or other) perverse experimental practice which is always opening into the new. This echoes Thrift’s non-representational call for experiment and practice with an eye to the future and openness.

The (playing) (political) body
Adult play is not child’s play, but it can echo it in some ways though our bodies (Weiss, 1999). Strikingly, Sutton-Smith points out the brains of very young children (at 8 months old) have 1,000 trillion synaptic connections, but by the age of ten ‘a child typically has only about 500 million connections’ (225). The very young child is born with a vast capacity of mental processing to face any possible future, and as life settles out and routines and environment become familiar, the brain works/strengthens certain neural pathways while many other fall into disuse (this is an
intriguing echo of the romantic notion of the wisdom of the child. As our experience grows we become defined, even confined by it. So to play back through this is hard, but playful bodily engagements such as running, tumbling, being in water can open up the sense of playful bodily becomings which are so vivid in childhood and dulled in adulthood.

Castañeda (2001) turns to nature and the body in ways which chime with Thrift’s approaches. Working from Haraway’s notion of ‘the world’s active agency’ which exceeded or frames social and cultural agency (and which includes the body and affective processes) and speaking of younger children, Castañeda (2002), concludes that lack of language;

    does not constitute this entity as pre-subjective in this formulation, and as such cannot be occupied by adult fantasies or desires. Instead, this entity’s existence, and its embodiment are the ground of its subjectivity, where “subjectivity” signifies embodied experience (p .171).

Again there is no (easy) way around this but methodologies which use the playing affective political body as a tool should be developed. Can research methods be developed that are playful, lighter in touch, perverse, generators of roughness?

*Playing with memory?*

I have discussed before the complexities and challenges of the idea that we can research childhood through memory either by remembering our own childhood, or through others’ memories of their childhood (Jones, 2003; see also Treacher 2000). The fraught complexities of this are illustrated in Castañoeda’s (2001) analysis of Walkerdine (1997) who despite being ‘a careful theorist’ leaves out ‘precisely the adult woman’s relationship of privilege and power with regard to the child and, more specifically, Walkerdine’s own position of privilege as an adult academic and no longer working-class feminist researcher, in relation to the working-class girls with whom she works’ (Castañeda, 2001: 37-38).

However, I do feel that this is one of a number of avenues to explore as is set out by Philo’s (2003) reading of Bachelard’s (1960) poetics of reverie. A notable exploration
of childhood geography through memory is *Berlin Childhood around 1900* by Walter Benjamin (2006). Here childhood is identified with the remembered spaces of the house, neighbourhood and wider city and some of the richness and strangeness of childhood becoming shines through, but as Eiland (2006) points out, this is not achieved through a supposedly straightforward retrieval of the past but through a kind of *inter-subjectivity between child and adult self*.

Research into children’s lives needs to acknowledge and deal with all these points rather than seeking to capture and deliberately or inadvertently converting the experiences of children into adult codes.

**Towards Conclusions: Witnessing as Open(ings) for the Otherness of Childhood**

*Opening to conclusion # 1*

‘Children are genuine, natural. They do not live according to 'our' laws.’ Antanas Sutkus (2006).

![Figure 1: The Mother’s Hand (1966) by Antanas Sutkus.](image)

Consider the photograph of a young girl holding her mother’s hand taken by Antanas Sutkus (figure 1). This picture speaks eloquently of the issues I am trying to deal with here. The intimacy between child and adult seems palpable. But so too is the distance - the difference in body scale, the remoteness of the face, head and eyes of the adult, the expression the child’s face, and the fact that the adult cannot see that expression in
the same way that the camera can. The child seems in her own world, a world we
cannot know - maybe fear, concern, love, longing? The picture speaks of the mystery
of children’s inner worlds. It is a picture of affect at work. (Thrift (2005) discusses
Darwin’s work on facial expression in relation to emotion and affect). I don’t think it
is a world we could easily go to even if we had the chance to interview the girl and
ask her. We could get some statement or record of the event, but we could not know
of the affective pull which produced such an expression in such a moment. And all
moments are charged with affect in some way.

What the picture does is witness the otherness of the child at a moment of affective
manifestation. Similar pictures can be seen in Higonnet’s (1998) great book Pictures
of Innocence. And much the same can be said for the series of the photographs which
make Ward’s (1978) The Child in the City and Berg’s (1972) Look at Kids, such
powerful accounts of children’s other geographies. We can hope to do children justice
by witnessing their lives and making space for them without trying to occupy those
lives and render them in adult discourses.

Opening to conclusion # 2
Let me start this final section by mentioning an example of what I see as the opposite
of allowing (giving and admitting) children their own space. It was well documented
recently that the most expensive new state school to be built in the UK (Thomas
Deacon Academy) (BBC News, 2007), designed (sadly) by a leading architectural
practice, was not to have a play ground. There was to be in fact no ‘unprogrammable
space’ or time in the institution, it would not be required as the children would be
entirely occupied by the school agenda. This is a gross example of colonisation and a
misreading of adult child relations which is blind to the otherness of children and the
other physical, identity, and ontological spaces they need. I feel it is profoundly
misguided and doomed to failure anyway. Another school built on similar lines, was
reported to have added a playground a year after opening (ibid).

Opening to conclusion # 3
David Mitchell’s novel Black Swan Green, (Mitchell, 2006) is told through the eyes
of Jason who is 12 at the very start of the story. The opening paints a convincing and
entertaining picture of not only the very other moral economy of a cohort of children,
but also the distances between children and parents. Quite often we are in Jason’s head, as he grapples with these two key shapers of his moment to moment becoming. What does this, and the many other novels written by adults from the perspectives of children, say about the idea of the otherness of childhood?

There is a scene early on when Jason comes across another child, ‘Squelch’, holding something, which is apparently, precious and secret. It is a kitten. Squelch stokes it. Jason asks to see it and stroke it, and after a few moments of negotiation, Squelch throws the kitten to Jason who catches it. Squelch runs off laughing. The kitten is dead, cold and stiff. It is shock. It is a small but dramatic incident, cleverly told. Then I thought, clever though it is, the affective richness in terms of drive and reaction that would enframe such a moment is inevitably absent. It is bound to be. Of course this accusation could be made of all narratives of moments of life, be they fictional or generated by, say, ethnographic study. Yes, and that is what NRT is on about, what can we do about that?

*Finale*

There are very real differences between the becomings of children and the becoming of adults. As adults are (generally) the more powerful, and in the context of academia, producers of knowledge about children, I am calling the difference of children, otherness. This otherness poses epistemological, methodological, ethical and political challenges to research. Is it possible to fully recreate child becoming in adult discourse? I don’t think it is. Should we be trying to? This needs to be asked. Are adult researchers guilty of (attempted) colonising of children’s lives? This needs to be asked. I am sure much research is legitimate, but we need to ask these questions of research and in research. The otherness of children’s lives is, as I see it, much about being in differing affective states of becoming which come from their different positions in the processes of becoming human. This affective becoming is much of what being a child is. Non-representational approaches which have emerged in the context of an interest in affective becoming seems a good source of ideas for researching childhood. More specifically, notions of play and creative production and witnessing (rather than representing) seem key ways forward.
It seems likely that we are all shaped by the experiences of our childhood, and these hold us – to an extent at least – through the rest of our lives. This then may be the otherness of childhood – to be in a condition of malleableness. Adults are more settled beings. I don’t think it is possible, suitable or desirable for adults to try to retain or regain the malleableness of children. Let’s not try to steal what is both their joy and their burden. We can chase other forms of becoming in the context of the fact that our beings and our bodies become less plastic. But in an effort to be open to children’s worlds, and in order to make (friendlier) worlds for them, we need to undo ourselves, and the adult geographies of the world, or at least loosen them, by tugging away at the tight, ossified and ossifying knots of adult being, space and knowledge.

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