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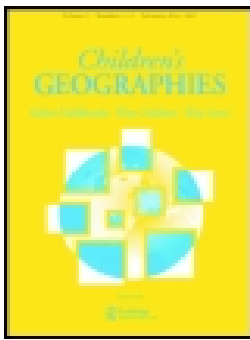
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# Young children's museum geographies: spatial, material and bodily ways of knowing

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## ABSTRACT

In this guest editorial, we outline a new field of children's museum geographies. We do this by opening up a space for the reader to engage with a collection of papers that trace embodiment, tacit and emplaced knowing, material entanglements and non-representational aspects of experience in accounts of children's presence in museums. We hope that this special issue will act as an impetus for further working, thinking and collaborating, firstly by disrupting the conflation of children in museums with narrowing notions such as learning and talk, and secondly by highlighting the rich potential of museums as a space of interest for the field of children's geographies.

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This special issue of *Children's Geographies* outlines a new field of children's museum geographies, acknowledging an emerging and irrepressible agenda for early years when children's geographies, museum studies and theories of the material, body and place come together. Through this guest editorial, we seek to open up a space for the reader to engage with a collection of papers that trace embodiment, tacit and emplaced knowing, material entanglements and non-representational aspects of experience in accounts of children's presence in museums. The inter-disciplinary papers in the special issue share a concern with the role of materials, the body, movement and place in children's realities. These aspects of children's experiences of museums have thus far been under-theorised, and in bringing them to the fore, we intend to both build on, contribute to and disrupt theory and practice with regards to children in museums.

Thus, we hope that this special issue will act as an impetus for further working, thinking and collaborating in the following two ways;

## 1. Children in museums as learners: a contested idea?

In the last 20 years, learning in UK museums has gained a much higher profile, and become a well-established and dynamic field of practice. Within the current paradigm of 'the new museology' (Vergo 1989) in museum studies, the most significant body of work on families in museums draws on socio-cultural perspectives, with an emphasis on cognitive learning as evidenced through talk. Several aspects of children's museum visiting are not well served by the domination of this approach, for example, the embodied and spatial nature of museum visiting, the tacit ways in which museums may feel meaningful to children, and the vibrant materiality of the museum itself. The consequence of this has been that children in museums are almost entirely framed as 'little learners' (Kirk 2016). Whilst we do not contest that museums can facilitate children's learning, we are

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interested in approaches that might offer a less instrumental approach to interpreting what children do in museums and why museums might have meaning for children. These approaches might include a particular emphasis on place, the body, sensory experience and materiality, aspects of children's museum visiting that adults may struggle to codify, or represent, or rationalise. We hope the papers in this special issue make the case to researchers from museum studies, childhood studies and children's geographies interested in children in museums for the potential that broadening the theoretical scope beyond socio-cultural/language/learning perspectives offers for thinking generatively and generously about young children in museums.

## 2. Museums as a space of interest for children's museum geographers

As under-theorised para-public spaces, museums offer rich potential to advance the field of children's geographies. They can become the focus of communities and offer inter-generational dialogue and yet at the same time are spaces whose use, particularly by children, that can be contested and controversial. One of the most interesting things about museums from the point of view of children's geographies is that they tend to offer distinctly different environments compared to children's everyday places (homes, communities, schools, parks, etc.), for example in terms of scale of the buildings, atmospheres, collections, objects, use and unwritten rules of engagement. The contrasting materiality and discourses of museums compared to other aspects of children's everyday lives offers rich potential, therefore, for exploring and discussing the possibilities of non-representational concepts such as materiality, embodiment, affect and ongoingness in new ways, concepts which, in themselves, would benefit from further engagement from children's geographies (Horton and Kraftl 2006). Following Horton and Kraftl's (2006) appeal for children's geographies to 'do more to speak (back) to their wider contemporary theoretical, philosophical and conceptual context – and that the work of "Children's Geographers" could importantly enable more to be done with/in this context' (70), our hope is that this special issue will stimulate more interest and engagement with museums from children's geographers. We look forward to seeing how children's presence in museum spaces could be further theorised, disrupted and reinterpreted by this field.

## 3. Propositions for the reader

A recurring question raised in this special issue is; what happens when we take close account of the dynamics of young children's sense-production in the museum? Underlying this collection of papers is a belief that listening to and with children, can be productive in thinking about the potential of museum spaces as places that can enchant and move us all. In order to interrogate this potential for enchantment and movement, we offer the following questions and propositions for the reader to consider as they engage with the rest of this editorial, and with the papers that follow within this special issue.

- *What new conceptualisations of the child in the museum become possible when we foreground an experiencing body over a learning / developing brain?*
- *How are children's presences in museum always relational, with both humans and nonhumans?*
- *How does a foregrounding of space, material and body unravel or disrupt currently dominant notions within museum learning practice, such as child-friendly, age-appropriate, quality, learning outcomes or observations of learning?*
- *Do spatial/geographical notions such as place-making, entanglement and in-between-ness enable a more encompassing view of children's museum visiting, better able to dwell with the improvisatory and serendipitous?*
- *What is produced when the museum is thought of as always-in-movement, as consisting of threads of things coming together and dispersing before reassembling differently?*

Each of the papers in this special issue, in different ways, ask us to consider not only 'how do very young children move in museums?' but additionally 'how do museums move children?' Exploring these two questions re-orient us in relation both to how we construct the child, as well as how we construct the museum.

### 3.1. Re-constructing the child in the context of the museum

In different ways, all the papers highlight children's everyday sense-making and the resourceful ways they navigate the world of the museum. Movement turns our attention from minds and speaking mouths to bodily encounters that direct us, instead, toward the powerful affective force of the small, and the mundane. An attention to an *experiencing* body as it encounters matter, place and space unseats the position of a *learning* child at the centre and as the locus of agency (Birch [forthcoming](#)). However, at the same time, there is a note of caution running through the papers in this special edition, alerting us to the perils of conflating an experiencing child with an innocent child and re-inscribing familiar binaries through the category of child. Both Birch ([forthcoming](#)) and Kelton et al.'s ([forthcoming](#)) papers explicitly grapple with this question, and they also draw our attention to how an idealised intelligent and learning child body persists and haunts the museum. This haunting is produced through what Birch calls the *packaging* of the child in the museum, as well as the over determination of the museum as a site of learning. The degree to which this child can be pulled out as an isolated figure in museum space is challenged by the inherently relational ways that young children with their accompanying adults are co-involved in intra-generational sense-making practices (whether in the form of family group as in Kelton et al. ([forthcoming](#)), or with early years practitioners as with Carr et al. ([forthcoming](#)), or with participating researchers, as with Macrae et al. ([forthcoming](#))).

This intra-active mesh of relationships between adults and young children, likewise, cannot be singled out from the active role played by place, space, time and materiality in this sense-making. Emphasising how matter comes to matter in the context of young children in the museum, offers Macrae et al. ([forthcoming](#)) the ground to align a reframing of the museum, with a reframing of the child. Taking readers through the assumptions behind cognitive and socio-cultural theories that all too often saturate notions of childhood and the museum, they go on to argue that the figure of a post-human child opens up new possibilities for thinking about children's meaning-making in museums. By taking non-human aspects and qualities more seriously, they acknowledge the way that place, matter and time are entangled with and act on human bodies. This approach recognises how research data that has remained stubbornly resistant to analysis when seen through well-trodden developmental frames, also has the power to 'speak back' and re-orient us in the ways that we conceptualise children.

Giving more weight to the agency of museum matter and the way that children's bodies respond to this through dynamic and on-going encounter also raises questions around expectations of adult's roles in relation to children's experiences of the museum. By conceiving of the museum space and its artefacts as a fellow 'co-author' (Carr et al. [forthcoming](#)) of the museum experience, along with other human-beings, Hackett, Procter, and Kummerfeld ([forthcoming](#)) confront what Birch ([forthcoming](#)) calls the 'too-muchness' of the term *child-friendly*. Their paper in particular addresses practical ways that museum staff can reflect on their practice through a self-evaluation framework (APSE), a method that highlights the way that children are active in the production of space using the notions of emplacement, dwelling and spacing. This notion of children's space-making is further animated in Clayton and Shuttleworth's ([forthcoming](#)) visual essay, that beautifully documents and illustrates what they call an emergent and materially co-produced 'space-between'.

### 3.2. Serendipity and improvisational practice

By unboxing children and their presence in museums from the confines of 'learner' and observations of their behaviour as evidence of 'learning', the papers in this special issue take a more expansive view

of what could be attended to when children and families visit museums. Emerging strongly through this collection of papers is the notion of serendipity, and the improvisatory approaches that both visitors and museum practitioners might adopt in response to the moment by moment unfolding of museum visiting experiences, which often seem to take off in unexpected and unanticipated directions. For example, Birch ([forthcoming](#)) celebrates the ambiguity of the museum experience, Carr et al. ([forthcoming](#)) emphasise the ongoing nature of the museum visiting experience, and Clayton and Shuttleworth ([forthcoming](#)) advise us to plan for the unexpected. As Hackett, Procter, and Kummerfeld ([forthcoming](#)) point out, advocating for improvisatory practice is a political position, standing in opposition to generalisable notions of ‘quality’ with regards to early childhood education, and to assumptions that ‘the child’ could ever be fully knowable through Western scientific study (Jones et al. 2016).

Whilst it is true that young children are frequently unpredictable, surprising and creative in their engagement with places, objects and experiences (see e.g. Olsson 2013), there is also, we argue, something specific to the geographies of museum spaces that enable us to attend to improvisation and the serendipitous in specific ways. The built architecture, textures and atmospheres (Clayton and Shuttleworth [forthcoming](#)) of a museum or gallery can offer something unique and unreproducible within the lived experiences of visitors (particularly young children who may be visiting a museum for the first time). As Hackett, Procter, and Kummerfeld ([forthcoming](#)) point out, ‘Place, children and objects become entangled in particular ways when children visit museums’. Thus, the unique-ness or new-ness of the materiality of a museum can open up possibilities for the unexpected, or for improvisatory practice to unfold. ‘Landmarks’ such as the way light reflects onto a floor can develop and gather the attention of children and families within a gallery (Clayton and Shuttleworth [forthcoming](#)). An improvisatory decision to remove socks and walking barefoot through an immersive sculpture made of packaging tape (Kelton et al. [forthcoming](#)) is an experience unlikely to occur elsewhere in the lives of young children and families. Museum objects frequently exceed their human prescribed meanings (Carr et al. [forthcoming](#); Macrae et al. [forthcoming](#)), causing museum visits to take flight in various serendipitous ways. Whether a small ball of clay becomes of prized possession for a short time (Macrae et al. [forthcoming](#)) or an observational drawing of a dinosaur head suddenly acquires a smiley face (Carr et al. [forthcoming](#)), meanings can frequently be multiple, unpredictable, and shift moment by moment (Yamada-Rice [forthcoming](#)).

Improvisatory practice is usually defined as something made up in the moment, taking up whatever is available, and occurring without pre-planning. Thus, this research sits in tension with many dominant notions of learning policy and practice, in which pre-planning and intended learning outcomes are frequently markers of ‘quality’. As Macrae et al. ([forthcoming](#)) point out, this tension can be manifested in an oblique relationship between cognitive or social theories of children’s learning and what families and practitioners frequently tend to observe taking place when children visit museums. The potential for improvisatory practice to redefine ‘purpose’ or ‘quality’ with regard to programming for children in museums is taken up in a discussion between museum professionals and academics in the Coda of this special issue, which engages with the legacy of the work of Dr Elee Kirk. Notions of ‘thinking on our feet’, attending to what children and families are showing us through their actions, tacitly knowing how to read what is unfolding, and deciding when to participate and when to pull back and give space, offer some starting points for practitioners wondering about the implications of these ideas for their work.

In-between-ness is a notion that can help us to think about serendipity and improvisation from a spatial perspective. Clayton and Shuttleworth offer the notion of ‘spaces in between’ in museums and galleries to attend to the overlooked and unexpected. The unexpected can happen ‘in between’ in terms of the ways that meaningful or intensely affective aspects of a museum visit can often seem to fall outside of planned activities or intended learning outcomes (Macrae et al. [forthcoming](#)). At the same time, the notion of in-betweenness can be useful for thinking about tacit, atmospheric aspects of why a particular experience in a museum might work well (or not) in any particular moment (Birch [forthcoming](#); Clayton and Shuttleworth [forthcoming](#)). Finally, as the papers in

this collection illustrate, stairways, corridors, and paths of movement that encompass physically 'in between' spaces are often locations in which serendipitous moments of significance can arise (Clayton and Shuttleworth *forthcoming*; Hackett, Procter, and Kummerfeld *forthcoming*; Kelton et al. *forthcoming*). For Kelton et al. (*forthcoming*), following Ingold, the museum consists not of fixed points but of movement, as 'meaning making is made along thickening lines'.

### 3.3. *The museum as dynamic knot*

Returning momentarily to the questions posed at the outset of this editorial, 'how do very young children move in museums?' and 'how do museums move children?', we turn to the museum-in-movement,

... a knot whose constituent threads, far from being contained within it trail beyond, only to become caught with other threads in other knots ... things leak, forever discharging through the surfaces that form temporarily around them. (Ingold 2013, 217)

The papers in this special issue draw on the idea of the leaky museum that has a continuous trajectory of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 2003); following Ingold, the world of things find themselves pouring in and out of the museum's buildings and its incoming young visitors, oozing back into the world beyond its walls. Rather like the concept of 'The bird *is* its flying; the fish its swimming' (Ingold 2013, 220), the museum *is* its collecting of things, its gathering together of the threads of communities and practices. Cut out the turbulent flux and flows of collecting and gathering, the museum would be mere congealed outer surfaces (Ingold 2013), lifeless, still.

The papers in this edition work with the movements and variations of museums as temporary host to combinations of objects and things that are imagined and 'actual', abstract and embodied, physical and social (Hackett, Procter, and Kummerfeld *forthcoming*). The museum takes on particular forms and works with familiar processes, replete as an architectural spectacle and consumed by privileged forms of artistic, anthropological and archaeological knowledges, it nevertheless retains a strong sense of intrigue, necessary riskiness, strange awkwardness and an abundance of uncertainty. Each of the papers in this special issue opens up museums to their potential as full of atmospheres and ambiguities (Birch *forthcoming*); stories so far (Kelton et al. *forthcoming*) conjured by communities and histories; pasts, presents and futures entangled in policies and practices (Carr et al. *forthcoming*). As a dynamic knot that 'restores things to life' (Ingold 2010, cited in Carr et al. *forthcoming*), museum collections and gatherings together are generative oddkin (Haraway 2016), sometimes 'unexpected collaborations and combinations ... becom[ing]-with each other' (Haraway 2016, 4). The molecular lines of 'things' that, at times become perceptible momentarily as objects (that might include bricks and mortar, shoes and socks, balls of clay, non-human animals and more-than-human entities) simultaneously resist being locked into their final form, saturated with regimes, schema and pressures. They retain a fierce desire to be open to improvisation, '... to follow the way of the world ... weav[ing] themselves into life with "thread-lines" ...' (Ingold 2011: 216). The papers invite the reader into the collecting and gathering, to follow the trails of movement and growth, where

... Every such trail discloses a relation. But the relation is not between one thing and another – between the organism 'here' and the environment 'there'. It is rather a trail along which life is lived. Neither beginning here and ending there ... the trail winds through or amidst like the root of a plant or a stream between its banks. Each such trail is but one strand in a tissue of trails that together comprise the texture of the lifeworld ... organisms being constituted within a relational field. (Ingold 2011, 69–70)

We hope that this collection of papers will provoke museum staff, researchers, and carers of young children, to attend to ways museums can offer us spaces of enchantment; ones that in part we co-produce with children, but also ones (often overlooked as small and irrelevant events) that are brought to life by the 'perpetual dynamism' (Horton and Kraftl 2006: 86) that children's bodies bring to museum space. In different ways, they all make perceptible the ways in which children

'hunt for that which glimmers' (Birch forthcoming), and how, by noticing this, we can reflect on what Jane Bennett calls the enchanting 'virtual possibilities' (2001, 111) of the actual museum.

#### 4. A tribute to our friend, colleague and fellow editor of this special issue: Dr Lisa Procter

In November 2017, as this special issue was being finalised, Lisa Procter passed away. Shortly after Lisa's death, MMU held an event to celebrate her research, during which Professor Kate Pahl read out a list called 'Things I have learnt from Lisa'. Inspired by this, we want to re-turn some of the (innumerable) things we also learnt from Lisa, which may resonate with the readers of this editorial.

... re-turns are products of repetition, of coming back to persistent troublings; they are turnings over. In such re-turnings, there is no singular or unified progressive history or approach to discover. Rather, there is the intensity of multi-dimensional trajectories, as concepts are de- and re-contextualised. (Hughes and Lury 2013:787)

##### 4.1. Creativity

Good academic research should push boundaries, and experiment with ways of thinking that have not yet been thought. 'Inquiry should *begin* with the too strange and the too much' (St Pierre 2017, 6). Lisa was always interested in what was difficult to understand, questioning bounded spaces, assumed expectations and taken-for-granted knowledges, in a quest to go places that seemed unreachable, talk about what seemed not able to be spoken, and unravel what appeared *fait accompli*. A key purpose of this special issue is to introduce less obvious, non-mainstream theories for thinking about young children in museums. In doing so, we seek to both build on and disrupt more well-established social constructivist theories through which children's museum visits are most commonly analysed. This work requires a creative leap, and that leap depends on willingness to think differently, messily, generously, and remain in a space of confusion when necessary.

Lisa's tenacity, attentiveness to the oblique, consideration of the overlooked, relentless energy, infectious love of learning and a wild, unbounded curiosity for all things, taught us to persist and resist, attend and be thoughtful about young people, theory and all things that matter. Seeking out St Pierre's 'too strange and too much' will never be a straight forward adventure but always a necessary reminder for those who want to develop and transform early years museum and gallery work.

- Seek out the 'too strange and too much', start there.
- Keep going, keep thinking. Know that hesitancy and humility paves the ground for new ideas.

I was a good girl and wrote what I should ... ... The text undoes itself. (St Pierre 2017)

##### 4.2. Generosity

Creative academic thinking is risky. It does not always make one popular. Contemporary academia is increasingly precarious (Ivancheva 2015; Webb 2018) and citation is a political act (Ahmed 2017), working to uphold the established order. The support of others around you, through generous mentorship, critical companionship and peer kindness, is essential to maintain a sense of confidence in the value of experimenting, of taking risks and navigating academic politics (which can often be gendered and racialized, as part of maintaining a particular social order). It is also essential for the energy to keep going, to keep well.

- Find those who provide you with energy, support and kindness. Go to these spaces when you need to.
- Be kind to others, even when their ideas challenge or confuse you.



We hear you. We will not let you go; let it go.

Ahmed (2017, May 21st) Snap! Retrieved from <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/05/21/snap/>

### 4.3. Wilfulness

To claim to be wilful or to describe oneself or one's stance as wilful is to claim the very word that has historically been used as a technique for dismissal. (Ahmed 2017, 77)

Ahmed points out that wilfulness can be read negatively (unwilling to obey) or more positively (strong willed) and this reading is often gendered. In order to speak up for what we believe in, for new ways of thinking, we have to remain wilful. Lisa was one of the most wilful women we know. Will is required to persist with ideas, to speak against and about injustice, to be who you are. Having and expressing will is 'responsible and serious' (Ahmed 2017: 79) as often, to try new things we have to embody refusal. This is easier to do with others than alone. Hence the importance of embracing, naming and reclaiming wilfulness.

- Insist on a will of your own.
- Seek out others who are wilful.

Wilfulness can be a spark. We can be lit up by it. (Ahmed 2017, 83)

### 4.4. Care(fullness)

Puig de la Bellacasa points out that care is about a 'thick, impure, involvement with the world' (2017: 6). Even with the most generous mentorship, and supportive peers, so often criticism, precarity, and a sense of risk can seep under the skin. After leaving toxic spaces, their impact on bodies and minds, including the embodied residue and the visceral ways of re-making sense of yourself afterwards, can live on for months (or years) afterwards. This is the hardest lesson we learnt from and with Lisa.

Care(fullness) is integral to working through these experiences, knowing who is strong enough to resist or speak out, and when we need to pull back, for the sake of our health. Perhaps this feels like a paradox; fighting injustice, whilst acknowledging our privileged positions and caring for ourselves? Collective responsibility is important. When Sara Ahmed writes 'Even if speaking out is not possible, it is necessary' (2017: 260), we take this to mean, even when individuals are not in the position to object, to tell a story, collective care and strength can and should continue.

- When you are able, speak out on behalf of others.
- When you need to, pull back and care for yourself.

Caring for myself ... is an act of political warfare. (Lorde 1988)

To work in an experimental and creative way with theories and ideas, to create generous spaces where risks can be taken, to remain wilful as a community, and to collectively care – for ourselves, for each other, for the ideas and the possibilities these ideas might provide for children and families – these are our wishes for the field of children's museum geographies. And these are the things we learnt from Lisa.

I don't think anyone is impervious. It's tricky what seeps in without really noticing, until it starts to slap back. But we always seem to get the giggles back.

(Lisa Procter, pers comm, 2017)

This walking, this valuing, this attending, there is not an easy ending. (Tuck 2010: 649)

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