

Grappling with the miseducation of Montessori: A feminist posthuman rereading of ‘child’ in early childhood contexts

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood
2022, Vol. 23(3) 302–316
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DOI: 10.1177/14639491221117222
journals.sagepub.com/home/cie



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Abstract

This article demonstrates how feminist posthumanism can reconfigure conceptualisations of, and practices with, ‘child’ in Montessori early childhood contexts. It complicates Montessori’s contemporary reputation as a ‘middle-class phenomenon’ by returning to the earliest Montessori schools as a justice-oriented project for working-class children and families. Grappling with the contradictions and inconsistencies of Montessori thought, this article acknowledges the legacy of Montessori’s feminism while also situating her project within the wider colonial capitalist context in which it emerged. A critical engagement with Montessori education unsettles modernist conceptualisations of ‘child’ and its civilising agenda on minds and bodies. Specifically, Montessori child observation (as a civilising mission) is disrupted and reread from a feminist posthumanist orientation to generate more relational, queer and expansive accounts of how ‘child’ is produced through observation. Working with three ‘encounters’ from fieldwork at a Montessori nursery, the authors attend to the material-discursive affective manifestation of social class, gender, sexuality and ‘race’, and what that means for child figurations in Montessori contexts. They conclude by embracing Snaza’s ‘bewildering education’ to reach towards different imaginaries of ‘child’ that are not reliant on dialectics of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’, and that allow ‘child’ to be taken seriously, without risking erasure of fleshy, leaky, porous, codified bodies in Montessori spaces.

Keywords

Children, early childhood education, feminisms, Montessori, posthuman theories

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Introduction

Following a controversial article published in 2022 in the *New Yorker* ('The miseducation of Maria Montessori'), debates around Montessori's reputation as an elitist movement resurfaced. While the article's historical accuracy is questionable, it is not the first time Montessori has come under fire for being a 'middle-class phenomenon' (Pound, 1987: 81). However, tracing the origins of Montessori education reveals that the pedagogical approach emerged from justice-oriented projects in poor working-class neighbourhoods of Rome, Italy (Montessori, 1912). Furthermore, Montessori's pedagogical project was shaped by feminist sensibilities and activism (Babini, 2000), in which the lives of women and children were seen as intertwined in interdependence and marginalisation (Mohandas, 2020). Her feminism was evident early on in her life, as she jumped various structural, familial and societal hurdles, forging her way into educational places that were traditionally denied to girls and women (Kramer, 1988). Moreover, she was an active participant in the early women's congresses, speaking out about legal issues, women teachers' low pay and status, adverse working conditions, and appeals to prohibit the exploitation of children in mines (Trabalzini, 2011).

While the feminist congresses were primarily concerned with the plight of women who owned properties, Montessori addressed the challenges of working-class women, whose lives were 'made even more oppressive as a result of poverty'. She argued:

We are blind if we believe that the very same reforms are useful to them as they are to ourselves, and if we assume that they have, as do we, ample time to wait. It is an entirely different women's question, which is united with our own. (Montessori, 1896: 202–203)

This indicates Montessori's awareness of class-related struggles – that not all bodies are equal – which influenced the way her approach was instituted amongst working-class families. Although opportunities for working-class children were created, a closer look reveals other forces at work. The Istituto Romano di Beni Stabili, a real-estate association, purchased and restructured rundown apartment blocks in the area. A school in the remodelled housing complex was established to address the issue of latchkey children, who were considered a nuisance to ongoing building work.

These civilising forces are reflective of wider political shifts associated with modernity, coloniality and capitalism. Tracing modern coloniality, Rollo (2018) highlights the obligatory imposition of maturity on the premodern child, conceptualised as subordinate and only partially human. The civilising mission of modernity is foundational to Montessori's (1989) view of child development, which is ultimately concerned with the construction of the 'New Man'. This continues in contemporary Montessori imaginaries, with investments in making up a certain sort of normative 'child' – white, middle class, heterosexual – shaped by an identifiable ethos, tastes, values and locality (McDowell et al., 2006; Reay, 2006; Vincent & Ball, 2007) through materialities, discourse, affect and organisation of space (see Osgood & Mohandas, 2020, 2021).

As argued elsewhere (Mohandas, 2020, in press), foregrounding the feminist roots of Montessori creates openings for contemporary feminist theories and practices to rework and unsettle established ideas. Drawing from 'ethnographic observations', we interrogate observation, which is often referred to as the 'motto' of the Montessori method (Montessori, 2008). Montessori's views on observation are inconsistent but generally tend to focus on 'what observations can tell us about the child, in the moment, against some narrow imaginary of the developmental child' (Osgood, in press). Moreover, they are preoccupied with 'the practice of humanization' (Snaza, 2013: 38) – that is, the 'making of human', which relies on the ontological givenness of 'human'. Through a feminist posthuman rereading, we argue that by decentring the humanist

'child' and attuning to more-than-human relationalities, it is possible to offer rich accounts of 'child' that refuse containment and codification against developmentalist, civilising logic.

While the article offers a critical reading that uncovers strong colonial legacies within Montessori theory and practice, it is not our intention to solely critique. Rather, by embracing the proposal of bewildering education, which 'begins with a refusal to say in advance what the outcome of education will be' (Snaza, 2013: 49), we are interested in exploring how Montessori *both works and does not work* (Haraway, 2014) towards disrupting dominant ideas and practices that fix 'child' in particular ways. We are concerned with immersing ourselves in the complexities, contradictions and promise of Montessori philosophy for contemporary (re)conceptualisations of 'child' in early childhood contexts. To explore this, we begin by disrupting conventional approaches to child observation and then move on to read Montessori through a series of vignettes that provide opportunities to put posthumanist theories to work to arrive at other ways to encounter 'child' by foregrounding affect, matter and bodies.

Moving from 'ethnographic observation' to situated evocation

The article works with vignettes of 'ethnographic observations' recorded by both authors at a Montessori nursery in north London. We stress that our 'situated knowledges' and partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988) profoundly shape what is 'observed' and how child figurations are differently sensed as atmospheric affective forces (for further discussion, see Osgood, in press). As stated earlier, we trouble and expand 'observation' in Montessori settings while simultaneously unsettling what constitutes 'ethnographic' – this insists on reconceptualising what constitutes 'human', particularly 'human child'. Unlike conventional humanist ethnography concerned with 'collecting', a practice rooted in colonialist extractivism (Alonso Bejarano et al., 2019; Smith, 1999), we follow Strathern's (1991) notion of 'evocation', characterised by partial connections and relations. Evocation hinges on moving 'ethnography' beyond static hierarchical logics of representation (Strathern, 1991; Tyler, 1986) by embracing the liveliness of the material world, which 'is not held still and forever separate from the linguistic or category systems that "represent" it' (MacLure, 2013: 660). A feminist posthuman rereading of Montessori observation attunes to the liveliness of matter and views worlds as produced through the inseparability of matter and discourse. Haraway's (1988) 'situated knowledges' argue against static, unlocatable, universal and homogenised claims to knowledge. They diverge from modes of knowing that position the researcher as producing neatly connected, holistic accounts of the world. A situated evocation is freed from acts of mimesis – that is, refusing 'the reproduction of the sacred image of the same, of the one true copy, mediated by the luminous technologies of compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist self-birthing' (Haraway, 1991: 299), to put to work material-semiotic technologies to link meanings and bodies (Haraway, 1988).

To counter this, we use Haraway's (1991) concept of diffraction for a more subtle vision that defies representation and reproduction (of 'child') or being stuck with questions like 'Is the copy really a copy of the original? If you get a reflection and the image is displaced elsewhere, is it really as good as the original?' (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000: 102). Diffraction, by contrast, is about attuning to relationalities and differences. The diffractive patterns record heterogeneous histories of interaction, interference, reinforcement and difference, which enables another kind of critical consciousness. In this article, we employ Haraway's diffraction as a way to read different texts, intellectual traditions and fragments from the nursery through one another, to produce a relational account of 'child' that resists the individualising acts of modernism, which detaches 'child' from deeply political, lively and entangled material-semiotic relations.

Locating Montessori and observation: ‘Attendere, osservando’

Montessori summarised her philosophy as ‘*Attendere, osservando*’ (quoted in Kramer, 1988: 365) or ‘Wait, observing’. We organise our analysis around Montessori’s idea and practice of observation, which is viewed as essential to the manifestation and revelation of ‘child’ (Montessori, 2008). A fixation on producing and centring ‘child’ allows matters such as gender, class, race, sexual orientation and disability to fall from view. We draw on fieldwork fragments to consider how observation can be rethought from a feminist posthuman perspective to enable other potentially generative accounts of ‘child’ to unfurl.

Montessori’s views on observation are varied and sometimes contradictory. In *The Montessori Method*, she underscores the necessity of objective observation ‘without any preconceptions of any sort’ (Montessori, 1912: 29). She argues: ‘the purpose of observation is to see what the children are doing independent of our presence’ (quoted in Lontz, 2016: 122). She goes on to instruct the observer ‘to remain absolutely silent and motionless’ (quoted in Lontz, 2016: 122), which signals her positivist understandings of the world, in which knowledge production becomes possible by distancing the observer from what is observed (Haraway, 1997; Heath, 1997). In the history of science, this is founded on the ‘modest witnessing’ practised at the Royal Society, the oldest natural scientific institution in the world (Heath, 1997). It is at the Royal Society that Boyle performed his air-pump experiments to demonstrate the effects of air on various living entities – birds, mice and insects. These demonstrations drew large audiences to witness the eventual death of the creatures. Amongst the audiences were ‘modest witnesses’, upper-middle-class men who were tasked with witnessing (verifying the knowledge produced). An upper-class woman had once demanded air to rescue a dying bird; consequently, only men were permitted into these scientific demonstrations (Haraway, 1997). Feminist science and technology scholars (Haraway, 1997; Heath, 1997; Potter, 2001) argue that such practices were shaped by gendered notions of objectivity, in which the self-invisible upper-middle-class man aimed to mirror nature while leaving no mark of his own history.

These scientific practices surfaced in schooling, where mechanistic, objective and rationalist approaches were used to control child bodies through heavy benches and desks, as well as rewards and punishments, all of which Montessori (1912) opposed. Her insistence on introducing a feminist ethic of care to education (Babini, 2000) demonstrates her departure from modernist notions of objectivity. She draws the distinction herself:

The interest in humanity to which we wish to educate the teacher must be characterised by the intimate relationship between the observer and the individual to be observed; a relationship which does not exist between the student of zoology or botany and that form of nature which he [*sic*] studies. (Montessori, 1912: 13)

These feminist traces emphasise a relational approach to observation that resonates with our aim to tell richer accounts of ‘child’ through a relational ontology. In contrast to the ‘modest-witnessing’ practices that dominate contemporary early childhood practice, feminist modesty constitutes inhabiting the thick, messy, intimate and intricate connections of everyday early childhood practice, which make stronger objectivity and knowledge claims possible (Haraway, 1988; Osgood, 2019).

In 1915, Montessori offered another approach to observation:

the attention which one pays to things is not passive, but they correspond to an activity and an inner meaning. We do not take the world as it is, but as we are. It is not the picture of the world that is in

us, [rather] it is our own picture. It is not the world that is in us, but it is what we have chosen. (Montessori, 2008: 229)

While this moves away from radical objectivist understandings of the world, it continues to be entrenched in humanist understandings of observation, which centre particular versions of 'human' and 'human child'. We argue that a reified focus on the humanist 'child' can lead to what Whitehead (1967: 51) refers to as 'misplaced concreteness', where the relational action becomes a noun. Following Haraway (2014), we argue that the premises of methodological individualism and human exceptionalism, the old tenets of western philosophy and colonial capitalism, have made childhoods unthinkable. 'The destruction of more-than-human beings through forms of violence such as colonization, extractive capitalism, and global patterns of racism' (Hernández et al., 2021: 838) makes urgent the need to radically re-view early childhood worlds, not as separate but as deeply embedded in political, economic, ecological and industrial complexities. We wonder: What if observation becomes 'something much more intuitive, sensory and speculative; indeed much more childlike in its receptivity to the curiousness of the world' (Osgood, in press)? In the following sections, everyday encounters are explored to consider how critical feminist posthumanism can expose colonial capitalism and enliven complex and multiple more-than-human relations to produce 'child' in Montessori contexts.

Civilising the queer out

Thomas is seldom still, seldom quiet. After a morning circulating in and out of the classroom, he suddenly stops by the sensorial shelf, pulling out Montessori Colour Box 3, used to refine children's chromatic senses. He takes out the colour tablets and lays them one by one in an astral fashion. A teacher says: 'Thomas, darling. Make sure to do that on a mat'. Thomas lets out a sigh and begins to put the tablets back into the box. Hailed by this moment, I approach with the iPad, intending to capture the event. Standing there about to document, suspicion hangs in the air. A parent there to help her child settle in observes the observer. The intensity of atmospheric forces insisted I walk away from the scene. 'What will he do with the photo?' I overheard the manager reassuringly assert that any photos taken would be vetted by the nursery.

In contemporary early childhood spaces, cameras are ubiquitous, increasingly playing a role in profiling children, charting development, safeguarding and as pedagogical tools. The camera is considered passive and neutral, an instrument that captures 'natural development' against predetermined criteria informed by Montessori philosophy and the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. In contrast to contemporary Montessori practice in the UK, Montessori's view of development differed from other approaches in that children were not subjected to tight developmental milestones, nor were they viewed in terms of what they could not do. Montessori viewed the child as a rich and potent source for transformation, 'endowed with specific psychic powers' (Montessori, 1989: 2) allowing self-construction by actively absorbing knowledge and insight from a prepared environment that could secure the eventual 'formation of Man' (Montessori, 2007).

Notwithstanding a more positive view of 'child', the focus to continually refine, fix and civilise children to a particular version of 'Man' positions the Montessori child as 'only partially human who must be guided into maturity through education' (Rollo, 2018: 63). This is evident in the encounter, where Thomas's body is regulated in particular ways (i.e. not to be seen working without a mat), as well as in the pedagogical intentions embedded in materials such as Colour Box 3, which is concerned with refinement of the chromatic senses. *Is Thomas able to follow*

instructions? Is Thomas able to regulate his emotions and manage his behaviour? How are Thomas's fine motor skills? What is Thomas's level of proficiency in grading colours using Colour Box 3? What is the next step for Thomas's continual development? Such a developmentalist view has long been critiqued by feminist and anti-/post-colonial scholars as being premised on colonial conceptions of development (Blaise, 2005; Murriss, 2016, 2019; Murriss et al., 2020; Nxumalo, 2021).

Identifying the links between developmentalist theories such as Montessori's and the wider political, economic and social workings of capitalism exposes the colonial logic that is embedded in everyday early childhood practice. Colonial expansion, marked by violent militarised attacks, stealing land and the extraction of 'resources', was defended by colonial capitalists as being carried out with civilising intentions in mind (Lugones, 2010). For instance, Kipling's (1899) poem 'The white man's burden' orients the 'white Man' as morally obligated to civilise the primitive 'Other', 'half devil, half child', encouraging economic, social and cultural progress. Nieuwenhuys (2013) argues that this civilising mission shapes how childhoods have been understood, constructed and practised globally. In the Montessori context, these civilising interventions are embedded in the notions of producing the 'normalised child', who eventually emerges as the 'New Man' (Montessori, 1989: 3). The child before normalisation is described by Montessori (1966: 154) to possess 'childish traits', including untidiness, disobedience, sloth, greed, egoism, quarrelsomeness and instability. Furthermore, the child is framed in colonial extractivist terms as 'a treasure which has never been exploited, more precious than gold', who will perfect themselves through 'continuous conquest' (Montessori, 1989: 29) towards economic independence at later stages of their development (Montessori, 1994). We therefore see the production and over-representation of a western bourgeois conception of human – that is, 'rational economic Man' (Burman, 1994; Wynter, 2003) – interspersed throughout Montessori's vision.

Robinson (2005: 21) argues that a developmentalist perspective renders gender and sexualities irrelevant to childhood, even as 'heteronormativity largely continues unabated as an unacknowledged and invisible everyday practice'. The modernist conceptions of childhood position the child 'as innocent and pure; as asexual, immature, and undeveloped ... with no control over their bodies' on the developmental path to normativity, to be safeguarded at all costs from any perverse influence (Renold, 2005: 37). These are readily visible in the above encounter. In this moment of encounter, queer, brownness, iPad camera, assumed childhood innocence, nursery space, whiteness, parental suspicion, child protection policies, safeguarding, the Montessori ethos and surveillance work together to agitate tangible forces of suspicion and fear. The iPad camera becomes implicated for the potential threat it presents; rather than being an innocent research device used to capture data, it becomes something else. The coming-together of these affective forces reworks the iPad and its place within the nursery. It is no longer a device in the service of research. Through the material-discursive encounter, an atmosphere forms that qualitatively shifts the encounter; it becomes something else, evokes something else (Stewart, 2011) – judgement, suspicion and, for Sid, hauntingly familiar discomfort and misrecognition. While the entanglements of gender, race and sexuality in this encounter are impossible to tease out, the affective associations stick to some (brown, queer and child) bodies more than others (Ahmed, 2004). As someone *assumed to be* male in early childhood contexts, Sid is deeply familiar with the natureculture technologies that work to position some bodies as out of place and hence subjected to persistent surveillance (for more detailed discussion of this, see Mohandas, 2022). The experiences of men encountering considerable suspicion concerning their motivation for working with children have been well rehearsed (see King, 1998; Murray, 1996; Pruit, 2014; Skelton, 1991; Sumsion, 2000). Researching from a Montessori context, Pruit (2014) specifically highlights the performance of heteronormative forms of masculinity to escape suspicion. Tracing the historical entanglements

of queerness and childhood offers further insight into the civilising affects that seek to manage and control. Silin, for instance, explains:

[T]he new scientific disciplines of the nineteenth century pathologized the homosexual and the child as special beings, members of discrete populations, who could be observed, classified, explained, and ultimately controlled. Both were regarded as suffering from the need for immediate gratification of undeveloped, egocentric impulses. Both required constant surveillance to check an assumed surfeit of erotically suspect energies. (Silin, 1997: 215)

The child and the queer adult are subjected to the civilising order in different ways. While the researcher (assumed male) is readily categorised as queer and dangerous, the child is normatively understood as ‘naturally heteronormative’ and ‘innocent’, so denied the possibility of queerness (Stockton, 2009). Moreover, drawing links between the coloniality of gender and childhood sheds further light on the civilising processes at work (Lugones, 2007; Mohandas, 2022). Indigenous gender possibilities and configurations that threw western gender/sex binaries into question were framed as primitive and uncivilised, in turn positioning cis-heterosexual manhood as the pinnacle of human formation. Rollo (2018: 60) argues that ‘premodern/modern and savage/civilized binaries’ form the basis of the civilising gaze of modern education, and seek to regulate, control, and straighten and tame the queer out. The heightened discomfort produced through more-than-human entanglements offers a glimpse into the civilisational processes that are at work in the nursery, which become invisibilised through individualising childhoods.

Civilisational progress: child’s work

We turn to another seemingly unremarkable event: the domesticated task of leaf clearance undertaken by 2 three-years-olds. Domestic chores such as sweeping form part of the Montessori curriculum in an area of learning often referred to as ‘Practical Life’, which emerged from Montessori’s (2008) observations of children’s frustrations at being offered unnecessary help, and their insistence on doing things independently. Contrary to beliefs at the time that positioned young children as unruly, incompetent and incapable, Montessori believed that children were capable of caring for themselves and their environment. These exercises have an ‘educational, not a utilitarian purpose’ (Montessori, 1994: 66) – that is, they are concerned with child development (Montessori, 2008).

I settle down on the floor outside, just to the left of two girls enthusiastically sweeping recently fallen autumn leaves. They busy themselves with brushing and scooping up horse chestnut leaves that cover the immediate area. One girl is wielding an adult-sized broom. I notice that it is quite a challenge for her to manoeuvre it, and on several occasions it looks as if she might inadvertently bash the other child – but this does not happen. One girl has taken on the task of placing the leaves that have been swept into a small pile into the garden sack, but most leaves seem to flutter away before her hands reach the sack. The effectiveness of this leaf clearance work is questionable, but the commitment and enthusiasm is in no doubt. As I observe them toing and froing, I recognise the Mini Boden leggings and pinafore dresses these girls wear from my daughter’s days at nursery – signature clothing denoting British middle-classness. Practical but fun, reassuringly expensive and hard-wearing. According to Boden, they manufacture clothes that ‘capture the joy of childhood with vibrant colours and bold motifs; practical, playful clothes designed to delight and brighten young wardrobes’. Leaves and twigs adhere to the Mini Boden outfits, and to the children’s hair. This goes unnoticed as the girls continue to work, in parallel, and with

great concentration. The teacher is nearby and occasionally engages me in conversation about the importance of activities with a purpose, that aid child development in various ways. Despite all this industrious labour, I notice that the garden sack remains mostly empty. The girls put the broom and sack neatly to one side and move off in search of a new project.

As is evident, the emphasis is not so much on how well the sweeping is done but on the constructive processes at work within the child. Montessori viewed the child as undertaking the grand 'work' of self-construction and 'formation of Man'. By engaging in activities like sweeping, the child refines and coordinates muscles, and develops the cognitive capacities to concentrate on a given task. The emphasis on children working – externally on the environment and internally in constructing the Man – is interesting, given the context of forced child labour around the time when Montessori's ideas were gaining in popularity. In England and Wales, working-class children were historically forced to work in cotton mills and were regulated by Poor Law guardians rather than their family (see 1834 Poor Law). Rollo (2018: 64) argues that the inferior status of children within the civilisational order was used as a justification 'to legitimize the various domestic economies, affluence, and privileges that came as a result of child labour'. Children played a central role in the success of industrial capitalism, in which they constituted 50% of the workforce in many industries. Moreover, Hepburn and Jackson (2022: 226) point out that 'class-based and gendered constructions of childhood were exported from the metropole to the colonies, where they were reworked to suit the racial hierarchies which structured colonial societies'. The subordination of an entire group of people on the basis of cognitive immaturity was fundamental for the emergence and success of industrial-capitalist modernity. While Montessori (1994) appealed against the exploitation of children in Italian mines, the rationale and processes for forced production of a particular kind of labour workforce remain embedded in the approach.

It is by engaging in mutated modest witnessing (Haraway, 1988) that this encounter holds the potential to raise important questions about the complex ways in which contemporary 'child' gets produced through an activity that is narrowly read through Montessori pedagogy as largely innocent and concerned with cultivating independence and practical competence. As we have written elsewhere (Osgood & Mohandas, 2020), Montessori pedagogy, with its focus on the individual child, growing independence and the importance of the Montessori environment, means that wider concerns with social inequalities relating to gender, social class or 'race' rarely find expression. This vignette evokes memories and hauntings, and provokes disquieting questions about what sort of child is permitted to participate, or gets produced, through the act of leaf-sweeping. This simulation of practical work, and the readiness with which it can be abandoned for a more interesting activity, jars with the reality of undertaking (paid) domestic labour, where the hours are grueling, financial remuneration is pitiful, and the status conferred on the work is lowly – and, of course, such work is not exclusively the preserve of adult human workers in other global contexts. The classed and colonial inflections of this particular physical labour bubble to the surface and cause a stutter in our thinking about the making of the Montessori child in contemporary Global North contexts.

There is also an imperative to attend to 'what else' (Manning, 2016) is produced through this encounter. Attuning to the 'something happening' (Stewart, 2007) that hails attention forces the confrontation of other uncomfortable questions that are agitated by a clothing brand and its synonymy with British middle-classness. Taking the Mini Boden pinafore dress seriously – that is, what it is; what it agitates; what it is made from; who it was made by; the airmiles that have accumulated; the working conditions under which it has been manufactured – the 'Made in China' label provokes and unsettles more troubling conceptualisations of 'child' and 'Britishness'. Boden

clothing is widely celebrated for what it symbolises (quintessential Middle England, middle-classness) and yet it is simultaneously ruthlessly mocked on social media for its pretensions and aspirational associations. The Mini Boden pinafore dress does important work in the making of the Montessori child; it works to mark this practical, physical labour as something wholesome, pedagogically meaningful and, ultimately, beneficial to the cultivation of a particular sort of child, which shuts down critical interrogations of the work it does to elevate, marginalise, legitimate and exclude other modes of doing ‘child’. Montessori education as a middle-class phenomenon is sensed through encounters such as the leaf-clearance vignette. Such moments serve to reinforce certain classed aesthetics, assumptions and atmospheric forces that produce ‘child’ in particular ways.

Montessori nurseries, like other early childhood settings, are part of a capitalist economy. Montessori is in the business of generating and establishing particular conceptualisations of ‘child’ that serve to ensure its continued success and appeal as a provider of early childhood education. Such conceptualisations are further intensified by government drives for ‘more great childcare’ within the global economic race (Department for Education, 2013), ‘excellence’ and the cultivation of enterprising citizens of the future. Children are coded into this colonial capitalist agenda, where they continue to be forced into developmental trajectories that are ultimately concerned with ‘high economic returns’ through the future contribution a child will make to the labour market (Moss, 2015; Osgood & Mohandas, 2020). Through logics of commodification, marketisation and competition, a complex hierarchy of provision is created, with certain forms of fee-paying, private sector nurseries faring more favourably than others (Osgood, 2012). ‘Overtime, Montessori has become synonymous with middle-class ideals about a certain sort of childcare, what Montessori has come to symbolise is aesthetically appealing to middle-class tastes and values’ (Osgood & Mohandas, 2020: 68),¹ and this has maintained, strengthened and sometimes challenged social boundaries (Vincent & Ball, 2006). The making up of a particular kind of (middle-class) child (Vincent & Ball, 2007) is sensed in this encounter through an attunement to materialities and affect that has all the trappings of middle-class taste, distinction and values.

Snot: bewildering education

Western education (from Plato to Rousseau to Montessori) has long been concerned with the making of human. Feminist posthumanism fundamentally questions the ‘historical production and deployment of “the human” as a political concept’ (Snaza, 2013: 39). As Lugones (2007) argues, the dichotomy between human and non-human is central to colonial capitalist modernity. By considering more-than-human relations in the following ethnographic fragment, we contest taken-for-granted boundaries between nature and culture, and human and non-human, to reconceptualise ‘child’ as transcorporeal (Alaimo, 2010) and ‘naturally queer’ (Hird, 2004).

Whilst working as an early childhood educator, catching a cold was inevitable, no matter how well I prepared or took precautions. There is a reason nurseries are referred to as ‘germ factories’. This time was no different. Sniffing, blowing, wiping, dispensing, sneezing ... feeling hazy with a light headache. A few children at the mud kitchen were ‘making tea’. I jot down thoughts on my notepad, but struggle to focus. Just then, the manager brings me a cup of tea...

Feeling slightly better, I go inside, sit down in a corner of the classroom to organise my thoughts. As I take a notepad and pen out, I hear laughter, followed by a cough. I gaze over to see Ilana. This was Ilana’s third day at the nursery. Hopping and laughing, coughing and sneezing. On closer inspection,

Ilana has a runny nose, with snot running down and over her upper lip. Walking, hopping and laughing again. I should probably find the box of tissues and assist in cleaning up the snot. But just then, right forearm is used to wipe nose ... mucous is now smudged all over cheeks, on the right hand and arm. I resist the urge to respond intuitively ... instead I stay with the disgust ... Where will the snot go? What will it stick to next? What will the snot do? I intently follow the snot, as child moves through the classroom touching various objects with sticky snotty hands – tables, chairs, shelves, pouring jugs ... hailed by a stuffed teddy bear, race towards it, grab it with both hands, smile at me, hug and then kiss it ... I smile back ... trying to hide feelings of revulsion.

Snot is part of the everyday inescapable materiality of early childhoods and its presence as a forceful threat has of course been intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic. Snot is encountered undesirably, incuriously, with feelings of great repulsion and disgust – something to banish. The affective situated evocations align with working-class respectability, where cleanliness, combed hair, a blown nose and being neatly dressed are imperatives for the working-class child (Skeggs, 1997). These civilising and categorising forces have been central to the pathologisation of working-classness as dangerous and polluting, and further displayed in painstaking efforts to disidentify and dissimulate, to be seen as respectable (see Reay, 2006; Skeggs, 2004). What snot does to figurations of ‘child’ is felt powerfully, as articulated in the above observation, and also through historical accounts that underline the vibrant force of snot to fuel class prejudice: ‘Filth, snot and vermin are enough to render an infant vile’ (Pierse, 2017: 159). Trawling through the literature, it quickly becomes apparent that the topic of snot, just like its substance, has been an undesirable and improbable subject for early childhood research. From a developmentalist perspective, education is concerned with the acquisition of personal care and independent hygiene skills (Department for Education, 2021). Montessori (1949) narrates engaging a group of children in a lively demonstration of nose-blowing and handkerchief use to eliminate snot. While the production of snot can be attributed to many different factors, from allergic rhinitis and the consumption of spicy food to viral infections, in this particular case, the manifestations point to a viral infection, perhaps the common cold.

Embracing Snaza’s (2013) proposal for ‘bewildering education’ – that is, refusing civilising processes and practices preoccupied with determining ‘human’ – an attunement to more-than-human relations (with snot) is fundamental to taking childhood seriously. The snotty manifestation in the above situated evocation is a reminder of the ongoing openness and porosity of our bodies to other biological forms of life. The bounded human – in this case, the bounded human child – can only be produced through ontological simplifications. The presence of microbiota further complicates the idea of ‘human’. Microbiota are an integral and constitutive part of what forms ‘human’. As Gilbert et al. (2012: 325) argue: ‘we have never been individuals’. Possessive individualism, which dictates much of the language in the biological sciences, divides organisms into hosts and symbionts. Inspired by Margulis’s notion of *holobiont*, Haraway (2016) instead argues for a *sympoiesis* – that is, becoming-with – which offers a much more complex and non-anthropocentric account of how worlds are made. Sympoiesis underscores the impossibility for living beings to be biological individuals by anatomical or physiological criteria. ‘Child bodies’ are in continuous constitutive relations with other bodies. Thinking-with snot raises important questions about human–non-human boundaries. As Haraway (1991: 220) asks: ‘why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?’ Queering these taken-for-granted boundaries gives pause for thought to trouble the notion of material autonomy.

Haraway (2005) contends that such human–non-human borderlands are productive spaces where struggles about what counts as valid knowledge take place. Thinking-with snot enables

other stories to emerge that illuminate the relations that 'child' is enmeshed in, which again eludes developmentalist captures. Pursuing a view of childhood where 'human' is not the telos enables grappling with a wider network of relations that cannot ever be fully mapped or known. Snaza (2013) proposes 'bewildering' as an approach that moves away from humanising projects towards a 'wild politics' (Hawthorne in Snaza, 2013: 50), where what is important is not known in advance. This aligns with Haraway's call for sympoiesis or making-with, which insists that snot is taken seriously. As with centring the iPad or Mini Boden pinafore in the other situated evocations, a raft of uncomfortable questions that produce figurations of 'child' (as verb rather than bounded human subject) becomes agitated. Thinking-with snot invites a critical engagement with the 'what else' and 'where else' that a posthumanist approach provokes. The tissue-paper industries (Research and Market, 2020), in turn, have been implicated in mass deforestation, reforestation through monocropping, the erosion of soil, the loss and displacement of indigenous communities, plant and animal life, and on. The worldly connections of 'child' are endlessly unfolding and enfolding, back, forth and sideways. As Alaimo (2010: 23) asserts: 'the sense of selfhood is transformed by the recognition that the very substance of the self is interconnected with vast biological, economic, and industrial systems that can never be entirely mapped or understood'.

Concluding remarks

In this article, Montessori's feminist activism has provided an opening to invite the critical gaze of contemporary feminist theories and practices to rework ideas about 'child' in early years contexts. By dwelling on and delving into three (seemingly) minor and insignificant situated evocations from the daily ebb and flow of life at a Montessori nursery in north London, we have wrestled with the ways in which particular ideas and practices in early childhood take shape and, without the critical framework of feminist posthuman theories, might have otherwise been overlooked. We have found these moments to be ripe with potential for other ways to contemplate how 'child' gets produced and with what affects. By mobilising feminist posthuman perspectives, the potential for such rereading to trouble colonial capitalist conceptualisations of 'child' and its civilising agenda in producing a particular kind of 'human' (Rollo, 2018; Snaza, 2013) has been explored. Following Strathern (1991), working with evocations has enabled us to reconfigure 'observation' in Montessori from a motivation to civilise to a place of decentring the humanist 'child' that resists developmentalist practices. This has generated relational, queer, feral and more-than-human accounts of 'child'. We are not interested in the replication of an original, 'authentic' and static version of Montessori where 'childhood' is artificially severed from the ongoing material-affective workings of political, social, economic and ecological processes. Rather, we are unwilling to 'denounce this world for an ideal one' (Stengers, 2005: 998) and instead grapple towards 'bewildering education' (Snaza, 2013), where 'there are only more and more openings' (Haraway, 2016: 29) framed by definite response-abilities.


Declaration of conflicting interests


The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. We do not work with official definitions of social class in the UK because such classifications work to codify and fix individuals and groups. As we articulate throughout this article, our conceptualisations of social class are shaped by posthumanism and the idea that social class is something that is not specifically attached to an individual bounded human subject but rather circulates and becomes material-discursively generated in localised encounters as something that is sensed, and works to affectively agitate evocations that unsettle, haunt and extend understandings of ‘child’.

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