

A feminist new materialist experiment: exploring *what else* gets produced through encounters with children's news media

Abstract

In this paper we are concerned to grapple with the ways in which real world issues directly impact children's lives, and ask *what else* gets produced through encounters with children's global news media specifically within the contexts of the UK and Norway. Our aim is to experiment with worlding practices as a means to open up generative possibilities to encounter and reconfigure difficult knowledges. We take two contemporary events: the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in London, and the 2018 Marjory Stoneman high school shooting massacre in Florida, as a means to attend to ways in which affects are materialised across multiple times and spaces. News reports of these harrowing events, alongside what they produced, in terms of child activism, racism and toxic masculinity, provided a catalyst for a feminist new materialist experiment in generating other knowledges through material-affective-embodied encounters. Newspapers, glue, sticky tape, string, torches, bags and a cartridge for a firearm undertook important work within a speculative workshop, where a small number of early childhood researchers came together to be open to multiple and experimental ways of (k)not-knowing in order to formulate collectively shared problems. Following Manning (2016) we recognise that to avoid getting stuck in familiar ways of thinking and doing we need to undertake research differently. We wondered how might the re-materialisation of these events (through objects, artefacts, sounds and images) shift our thinking about childhood in other directions. We dwell upon the affective work that these high-profile news events perform, and how they might become rearticulated through affective encounters with materiality. Attending to how these events worked on us involves staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) as it becomes reignited, mutated and amplified across time and in different contexts. Our goal is to generate other possibilities that seek to reconfigure the 'image of the child'. By resisting comforts of recognition, reflection and identification we reach beyond what we think we know about how children are in the world, and instead argue for their entanglement with difficult knowledges through, ours and their, world-making practices.

Keywords: children's news media, affect, worlding, feminist new materialism

Introduction

This paper offers an account of our attempts to materialise the affects and effects generated by news media and attend to *what else* (Manning, 2016) gets produced through arts-based research methods that take everyday materiality and haunting news media stories as an entry point. Specifically, we report on our encounters with children's news media in our geopolitical contexts (London, UK and Hamar, Norway) and their reemergence at a workshop event at Oslo University, 2018. As Hickey-Moody & Haworth (2009) remind us global and national communities consistently fold into the local. Bringing global news stories to a cafe at Oslo University illustrated that affect works like a virus, permeating and mutating across time and

place, as such news media can be conceptualised as a powerful affective economy (Ahmed, 2004). By experimenting with everyday matter, including printed newspapers written by, or intended for children, as well as with on-line and printed news stories intended for an adult audience, we wonder at what else gets produced. What other stories can be told than those intended by journalists and news corporations? Our aim is to highlight the way in which news stories (e)merge, mutate and behave throughout our routine everyday lives (at home, on public transport, in schools and nurseries) so that we can recognise the work that they do to produce uncomfortable affects and unintended reverberations. It is the on-goingness of the reverberations that offer us a means to pursue ways in which the ‘the image of the child’ might be reconfigured, ways that recognise children as entangled and actively engaged in world-making practices (Haraway, 2008, 2016). This paper brings together practices of story-telling and world-making as its core methodology in order to unsettle and extend ideas about ‘taboo’ issues and children’s encounters with them.

We want to offer other stories about news media and children’s engagements with it; we endeavour to tell generative stories that do not deny the powerful forces within global media enterprises, or the sensationalist agenda that underpins so much news that saturates our daily lives. Our ambition is for a more speculative engagement with children’s news media and what it might produce. Whilst we recognise that children’s news media simultaneously addresses, tackles and dilutes real world issues we want to investigate the impact it has upon childhoods lived in the Anthropocene. What world-making practices do children engage in as they encounter news stories in their attempts to make sense of the world? What possibilities do media accounts of events (such as Grenfell Tower and Marjory High School massacre, which exposed social inequalities, racist discourses and toxic masculinity) offer children to tell other stories about their place within the world? We argue that through processes of materialised refiguration (Haraway, 1994) it becomes possible for children to generate alternative stories that recognise them as entangled and active in worlding and world-making practices (Haraway, 2016).

Theoretical Framing: world(l)ing, speculation and affect

To assist us in undertaking this speculative exercise we draw from feminist scholars who have collectively developed a range of theories and concepts that foreground a concern with affect and materiality. Specifically, we work with feminist new materialists including Donna Haraway, Kathleen Stewart, Jane Bennett, Elisabeth Grosz and Erin Manning to materialise and enact a theoretical framework that insists upon getting our hands dirty through sensingthinkingdoing practices that alter the shape and boundaries of what research might become. In this paper we argue that taking matter seriously takes our engagements with children’s news media in myriad, unanticipated directions that offer us interesting surprises and alter our ways of knowing. Bennett (2001, 2010) writes about enchantment and thing-power in her work on vital materialism. We want to recognise that things, materialities, objects, have the capacity to agitate and activate. Grosz (2005) is also concerned with things, she argues:

Things are our way of dealing with a world in which we are enmeshed rather than over which we have domination. The thing is the compromise between the world as it is in its

teaming and interminable multiplicity. ...and the world as we need it to be or would like it to be – open, amenable to intention and purpose, flexible, pliable, manipulable, passive, a compromise between mind and matter, the point of their crossing one into the other. It is our way of dealing with the plethora of sensations, vibrations, movements, and intensities that constitute both our world and ourselves, a practical exigency, indeed perhaps only one mode, not a necessary condition, of our acting in the world (p. 133-134).

This calls for an understanding of the subject as entangled with the world. Here, it is the making of things rather than the thing itself that is of interest. ‘It is the making of things, and that from which things are made, rather than the things themselves that are now in question’ (Grosz, 2005, p. 140). As Stewart (2014) articulates, the thing is ‘a generative emergence of form composed out of the singularities of what happens’ (p. 124). This concern with how human entanglement and processes of becoming are captured by the concept worlding/worldling is variously offered by Haraway (1994, 2008, 2013, 2016) and Stewart (2007, 2010, 2014, 2017) amongst others. We take up this concept and practice and endeavour to map what it entails in our experiment with children’s news media, and how it matters.

Worlding is a mixture of the material and semiotic which makes possible an erasure of boundaries between subject and environment (Palmer & Hunter, 2018). It provides a lens ‘through which processes of human-non-human enmeshment’ can carefully be approached and enables us to consider what immediately perceived life-worlds might consist of. Importantly it allows for wondering ‘how immediate encounters connect to and intersect with the wider world’ (Palmer & Hunter, 2018). For Stewart (2014) worlding is a concept that supports an attunement towards the generativity of an emergent world. Consequently, worlding insists that researchers become caught up in doings which invites a sense of curiosity at *what else* gets produced (Manning, 2016). We are concerned not only with what we habitually anticipate, like news for children that intentionally produces particular knowledge about the events reported on. We are concerned with what else gets produced, the unanticipated, unasked for.

Being curious of *what else* gets produced, insists that research is done differently. Things, worldings, or tactile compositions as Stewart (2014) refers to them, are ways elements come together in processes that temporarily hang together while simultaneously generating worlds, as she explains: worldlings ‘require and initiate the kind of attention that both thinks through matter and accords it a life of its own’ (p. 119). It is a ‘both-and’ practice, where researchers understand reality as in the making while also experimenting with how to activate different worldings. How to practice such attention manifests in myriad ways. For Haraway (in Schneider, 2005), *care* is understood as a generative force in research: ‘Everything I care about makes me more worldly, not less’, which concerns being open to ‘indefinite’ connections that, with a particular kind of caring, can emerge (p. 115-116). Further, becoming more worldly makes the questions you ask more intensely personal. When caring about something in scientific endeavours you are acknowledging how your situatedness is part of knowledge-production, while also practicing

‘response-ability’ (Haraway, 2016). Our interest in children’s news and how it might mutate in infinite ways stems from caring about how children are conceptualised, and what this does to the ways that adults can be-with children when difficult global and national events fold into each other. It allows for personal questions to emerge, and those too hard to articulate, which are integral to worlding practices.

Our speculative doings are especially informed by Haraway’s web of SF worlding, where the worlds of SF ‘are not containers’ but rather ‘patterings, risky co-makings, speculative fabulation’ (2016. p. 14). According to Haraway, SF is both ‘storytelling and fact telling’ and it is ‘the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come’ (p. 31). Further, it is a tight connection between writing and research in SF practices, and both make ‘the factual, fictional and fabulated’ necessary (Haraway, 2013). SF-storying concerns ‘telling the stuff of living’, and hence storying is active worlding (p. 39-40, 2016). Akin to Haraway’s (2016) staying with the trouble, and worlding practices, we need to be active in world making (material practices that sustain racism, sexism, classism, ableism) so as to change the story. SF-storying then is a way of being responsible to, but also for, shaping ‘conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible stories’ (p. 29), such as the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire tragedy in London and the 2018 Marjory Stoneman high school shooting massacre in Florida. SF worlding helps us attune to children’s news media as entangled in the larger ongoingness of things, it enables us to respond, always though, without thinking there are any final answers. SF also denotes “so far”, opening up what is yet-to-come in protean entangled times ‘pasts, presents, and futures’ (Haraway, 2013). Hence, we are interested in the capabilities inherent within children’s news media, and crucially how they are materialised and the affective flows they produce, but also what we do with what they create. In the following sections we are storying ourselves in processes of worlding as a way of getting in the thick of things.

Worldling practices: storying encounters with children’s news media

The workshop is fast approaching. One morning I finally find the energy to deal with the growing pile of *Aftenposten Junior*¹ which has found a place on the floor, shoved against the wall in the living room, out of the path of our bodies and habits, sitting there gathering dust but agitating the whole time. Weeks ago we decided to work with two contemporary events reported in children's news media in our domestic contexts, but the practice of stockpiling *Aftenposten Junior* predated this project by years. The issues scattered around the house, left by their younger readers, had found a resting place in this dusty pile. Issues going back many years are buried somewhere at the bottom. Some of these relics are unearthed, re-encountered and reread. Unconsciously this practice is something to preserve, not wanting to deny possibilities for vital re-encounters. The chronological pile invites me to start somewhere in the middle, I am taken back to November 2017. A pattern of regular features becomes slowly perceptible; news from

¹ [The main printed newspaper for children in Norway.](#)

Norway, news from the world, coverage of a topical theme, cultural news, a science column, a column about animals, recipes, sports news, puzzles, comic strip, and on the reverse side a cartoon about nature and related environmental questions and exercises. I read about a baby Panda in a zoo in Japan named Xiang Xiang; about a family where food is rarely thrown away; and how to make the best slime with glue, contact lens solution and shaving foam. Many of the articles seem interesting and important but disappointingly I find no taboo or difficult knowledge. And then boom, in an issue from March 2018, I stumble across an article in the world news section. Children not much older than my own are protesting against gun legislation in USA after their experiences of a school shooting on Valentine's Day 2018 at *Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School*. Half a world away, but also too close. Uncomfortable flows are forced into motion...

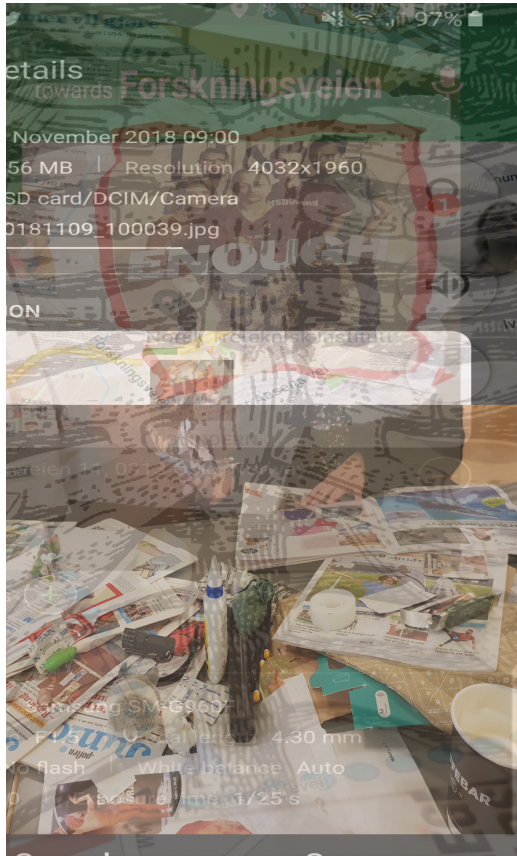
We find ourselves troubled long after the tragic and haunting events of a burning tower block and (yet another) highschool massacre; both events that had captured global attention in the world's media and that we find continue to seep into, and persistently bubble up, in our daily family lives lived in London and Hamar. We are in search of ways to grapple with how these events manifest and mutate to leave traces and stains, and activate doings. We presented our initial engagements with how such events are reported (differently) in different media outlets at the NERA conference held at Oslo University (Osgood & Andersen, 2018). Such events and their residues stay with us, they make demands of us. They agitate and provoke something in us. They are events that present difficult knowledge, expose intolerance, hatred, fear, and directly impact upon children's sense of their place within the world and how they might make other worlds possible (through creating community and exercising activism) which we go on to explore later in this paper. For now, we want to suggest that harrowing events such as a burning tower and a school shooting possess productive potential as they both sediment and resurface.

It is the run up to Christmas and the school is in overdrive. Costumes to be made; dance routines to be learnt; mince pie sale; carol singing in the square to raise funds for the school building project; on and on, relentless 'fun' festive fund-raising projects. The excitement mounts, but alas, we have forgotten the bauble competition! We have just *two days* to make an oversized Christmas bauble that has to be huge to be visible as it hangs from the school hall for all the parents to admire during the Winter Bazaar and the Christmas play. Acton-stations! What materials do we have? Quick!! Get making! The bauble must be ready by Friday or she will miss out. No time to waste. We rummage around in the recycling, we rummage through cupboards, dig out all that might be robust enough, sparkly enough - fit for the task. We inflate balloons, hang them from a shelf and begin a project of papier-mache. Discarded copies of *The Guardian* and two big bottles of PVA glue. As we rip, and stick, rip and stick we are confronted by headlines and images, front pages that declare a state of emergency of one sort or another. Questions, endless curious, probing questions: 'Mummy what is that? Why do people do such horrible things? What is global warming? B-R-E-X-I-T...what's that? Why is he in charge, why does he want to build a wall? But why do they live on the street? Old

enough to ask the questions but her questions raise ‘the’ question: is it ‘appropriate’ for a young child to wonder at such matters? Stories that surface, and surface again. War, blood, bombs, terror attacks, and closer to home, an Islamophobic incident at a North London Mosque, a burning tower block on the other side of London....Yet still, a beautiful, enormous, glittering Christmas bauble is ready for Friday, the stories it has to tell lay just beneath its sparkly, festive surface...

In order that we might work through what horrific events, and their ceaseless reverberations, might mean for the field of Early Childhood Studies we invited a small number of early childhood education researchers (working with feminist new materialism in their own work²) to join us in a speculative workshop where we could engage in some embodied worlding practices. We find ourselves back at Oslo University, this time in a cafe within the library. Our invitation to participate in the workshop was sent by email with an outline of its speculative nature and its open-endedness, some of the participants had attended our conference presentation earlier in the the year so were familiar with the theoretical framing and the nature of our post-qualitative enquiry. We were not seeking conclusions, or neat summaries, but rather an opportunity to collectively encounter the generative potential of *what else*. The participants were offered a re-introduction to our project, videos and images of the events as they were reported across various news media. They were also offered an array of materials on the table from which to engage with in anyway that they chose. Materials included newspapers, glue, sticky tape, a flameless candle, string, battery driven vibrating insects, a skeleton paper lantern, torches, a cartridge and magazine for a firearm, scissors and bags. We invited (re)encounters and re-materialisations of these events (through objects, artefacts, sounds and images) as a means to shift our thinking about childhood in other directions. Our invitation to the participants (and ourselves) was to dwell upon the affective work that these high profile news events perform, and how they might become rearticulated through affective encounters with materiality. Attending to how these events worked on us involves staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) as it becomes reignited, mutated and amplified within the workshop and lingers on and through our daily lives.

² We thank Teresa Aslanian, Anna Moxnes, Nina Odegaard and Agnes Bjelkerud Westergaard for their willingness to participate in the workshop



[Image 1: Visual Assemblage: The Affective Workshop]

‘If you’re upset by this story or anything else that you see in the news, *click here for advice*’

It is not our intention to provide a detailed account of how the workshop event unfolded. Rather our concern is with what it produced and where else it took our investigations into children’s news media and difficult knowledge; we are interested in the memories, affective charges and the bodily discomforts that were activated from material-semiotic engagements with lively matter. The workshop drew attention to specific news coverage of the Grenfell Tower fire, and in particular how that in turn made public displays of racism and toxic masculinity permissible (see *The Metro*, 6th November 2018³). It also drew our attention towards the ways in which, despite our best efforts, we persistently draw upon childhood innocence discourses and romanticised images of the child in our quest to protect them from difficult knowledge and worldly injustices. Why should some children come to live in unsafe and overcrowded accommodation in one of the richest cities in the world? Why were those particular children so badly neglected by the state? How were those children allowed to be put at such risk? These questions send us down paths of critique and condemnation - both very necessary projects (see EHRC, 2019). However, deploying a ‘successor science’ (Haraway, 1997) we are interested to pursue what else might be

³<https://metro.co.uk/2017/06/14/hope-for-residents-in-grenfell-tower-fire-who-were-awake-late-for-ramadan-6706918/?ito=cbsshare> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/MetroUK> Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MetroUK/>

possible, pushing ourselves to think other thoughts through practices of composting (Haraway, 2016).

1-5-2 was the number on our door
We lived up high on the eighteenth floor
Our mission was to escape the blaze
Our journey down was like a maze

[*Naila's Story*, aged 9, BBC Newsround, 2018]

Following Haraway (2008, 2016) we are in search of more live-able worlds, therefore as researchers it is imperative that we recognise our response-abilities and our relational entanglements with these difficult knowledges and worldly tragedies, and crucially that we attune to the ways in which they materialise and the forces that they generate. Or as Gibson, Bird and Fincher (2015: 6) propose:

'We want to engage in life and the living world in an unconstrained and expansive way. Our thinking needs to be in the service of life—and so does our language. This means giving up preconceptions, and instead listening to the world. This means giving up delusions of mastery and control, and instead seeing the world as uncertain and yet unfolding. So our thinking needs to be curious; experimental; open; adaptive; imaginative; responsive; and responsible. We are committed to thinking with the community of life and contributing to healing.'

Hence, we re-turn to trace dis/continuities (Barad, 2007) of what a burning high-rise produced by immersing ourselves in news media at three levels: that written by children for children; that written by adults (sometimes with children) for children; and that not intended for children (but routinely encountered by children). Immersing ourselves within these multiple, interwoven and at times traumatising storying practices of what happened, and what it unleashed and continues to generate, pushes us to dwell upon the inherent challenges of childhoods lived in the Anthropocene. Children living only a matter of miles across the city from the charred remains of the tower write a school newspaper report⁴. A small group of nine year olds are upset, troubled, concerned by the event and so their news account dwells mostly upon the *facts*. Although the tragic nature of the event, charitable goodwill, and the response of government to rehouse 'the victims' are also included. The news article addresses the complexities and contradictions that underline the different experiences of growing up in a city such as London. Densely populated, with extreme polarisation between rich and poor, further complicated by intersectionality, so that some communities experience multiple inequalities, and others will be spared this on account of their white, middle-class privilege. A newspaper produced by children at a leafy north London

⁴ <http://coleridgeprimary.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/The-Coleridge-Summer-2017.pdf>

primary school demonstrates literacy skills and a political awareness of ‘what matters’, but it also unearths children’s capacities to process difficult knowledge, albeit at an abstracted distance. But what happens when it is encountered as materialised figuration?

‘As we drive over the Hammersmith flyover there is a mutual gasp of horror from the back seat of the car. The charred remains of the gigantic structure surfaces on the horizon as we head west. A haunting monument to childhood trauma, displacement, loss of life, treasures and possessions; resilience and rehabilitation. Her velveteen rabbit, nestled within her privileged pink fingers, is held just that bit tighter as the tower disappears from sight.’

Whilst children are engaging in vital world-making practices through the authoring of news articles, crafting of poetry, performance of sounded word and everyday witnessing (as reported by Children’s BBC news affairs programme, *Newsround*⁵) elsewhere the towering event is re-materialised in sickening and sinister ways. The co-mingling of toxic masculinity and racism produces something else. On 5th November 2018, five white men in south London set about crafting a tower from cardboard, electrical tape, and cut out miniature figures of brown children crying for help, stuck at makeshift windows. So impressed by their racist creativity they posted a video of the burning effigy to Facebook, it instantly spread like a virus.

‘Raucous laughter can be heard off-camera as the effigy is set alight. A person can be heard saying: ‘Didn’t it start from the tenth floor, though?’, while others add: ‘Help me! Help me!’ and ‘Jump out the window!’ They were arrested on suspicion of a public order offence and taken into custody. Another says: ‘Here we go,’ as the fire takes hold. At the end of the clip, someone else can be heard saying: ‘That’s what happens when they don’t pay their rent. The video ends as the model is completely consumed by the fire, with one bystander saying: ‘Perfect.’’

[*The Metro*, 6th November, 2018]

And this is precisely the reason we need other stories. The men were arrested but the video, once viewed, can never be unseen. The hatred, ignorance and racism materialised through this pernicious act circulates, hangs in the air, and is re-presented and sensationalised in news media. *The Metro*, a free paper from Rupert Murdoch’s news empire, is distributed daily across London, and so also spreads like a virus. It is impossible to enter a tube carriage and not find at least one discarded copy of *The Metro* awaiting its next unsuspecting reader. Difficult knowledges, taboo issues on show, freely available, waiting to be consumed, to undertake its work:

⁵ ‘Grenfell Tower fire: The UK remembers one year on’ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/44396458>

As I squeeze my way on to the overcrowded ‘Morden via Bank’ line I am both relieved and uncomfortably cramped. The bodies, bags, books and devices of strangers pressing into contours of my body. Hurtling my way through the intestines of London, bodies are dispatched at stops along the way. Still packed but an opportunity to scour the carriage becomes available; I am struck, as I always am, at just how diverse this city is; I am the only white woman in the carriage, over the roar and rattle I can hear myriad accents, I feel glad that I call this city my home; that this is my children’s ‘normal’. My gaze is drawn to a (too) small figure, unaccompanied, backpack between his feet, blazer with a crest upon it, striped tie and carefully razored hair, brown hands grasped at the sides of *The Metro*. A routine, daily commute to school, encountering news that is not intended for a child.



[Images 2 & 3: *The Metro*, 6th November 2018]

‘This backpack is probably worth more than MY LIFE’⁶

⁶ Written on a sheet of paper stuffed in a clear backpack. A student’s response to one of the initiatives the authorities have implemented at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School to prevent future possible tragedies <https://www.tv2.no/a/9777001/> or <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/02/us/marjory-stoneman-douglas-clear-backpacks/index.html>

To restate, our intention is not to provide accounts of the workshop event; instead we engage in figuring *what else*, through worlding practices. Our stories are ongoing speculative fabulation (Haraway, 2016, p. 136), that enable us to attune to haunting stories; stories written by children for children, by adults for children, and also those not meant to be encountered by children, but encountered nonetheless. We do this as a practice of actively participating in world making, of shaping conditions for childhood in the Anthropocene. As Stewart (2014, p. 120) notes ‘an emergent world, always almost there, is itself always leaning into a mobilization’, into openings. Hence, our experimental storying practices are ‘minor gestures’; operative cuts opening worlding processes to its potential, cuts that catalyze reorderings without a specific aim (Manning, 2016). Storying backpacking practices might function as one such minor gesture. As the storying of a child’s school-commute at the end of last section illustrates backpacks are a routine but significant part of children’s lives; backpacks do important work. They activate and provoke when travelling on public transport; they encapsulate and harbour when shuttling between the homes of separated parents; they conceal and contain spare clothes for the inevitable messiness that will ensue at kindergarten. Backpacks *are*, and backpacks contain, children’s most vital, treasured, personal belongings: packed lunch, pacifiers, lip balm, digger, squishies, velveteen rabbit, pebbles, sticks, seashells, sweets and secret notes. Backpacks are ubiquitous in contemporary childhoods but we wonder where might diffractive encounters with backpacking practices take our investigations about difficult knowledge and the ‘image of the child’?



[Image 4: Clear Backpacks]

SKAL HINDRE BRUK AV VÅPEN

Må bruke gjennomsiktede sekker

Flere elever ble skutt av en ungdom på en videregående skole i Florida i februar. Nå gjør skolen flere ting for å hindre at noen kommer med våpen på skolen. Blant annet har de gitt alle elevene gjennomsiktede ryggsekker, som de må bruke.

Mange elever reagerer på sekkene og har ikke lyst til å bruke dem.

– Dette er vanskelig. Vi har alle måttet lære å håndtere sorgen det er å miste venner, men nå mister vi også retten til privatliv. Min skole var et sted hvor alle hadde det bra. Det var et hjem utenfor hjemmet, nå er det hjemmet ødelagt, sier elev ved skolen Kai Koerber til den amerikanske TV-stasjonen CNN.

The workshop drew our attention to backpacking practices as they emerged from news coverage of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and subsequent events that followed ‘the deadliest school shooting in United States history’. Attention was specifically drawn to how those governing Florida intended to prevent similar incidents in the future, which sat in stark contrast to the ideas that children and young people expressed. Also, it drew our attention towards gaming, particularly where violence is a key ingredient, and such a ready feature of contemporary global childhoods⁷. What happens to virtual boundaries when the name of the game is killing and beating “everyone”? What else unfolds in virtual shooting games? Are there other stories to tell? Stories of camaraderie, strategising, generosity, exhilaration, frustration? *Fortnite*, *Last Man Standing*, *SOS*, *The Culling*, *Rules of*

Survival: together spread like a multipartite virus, everywhere, a routine feature of millions of

⁷ Fortnite has of March 2019 reached nearly 250 million registered players and has become a global phenomenon <https://www.cnet.com/how-to/fortnite-season-6-ps4-cross-play-everything-you-need-to-know/> <https://www.cnet.com/news/fortnite-seems-unstoppable-with-nearly-250-million-registered-players/>

(gendered) childhoods. From coveted ‘back blings’ in *Fortnite* to mandatory clear bags in Florida, we ask what role might backpacks play in (addressing) mindless shootings? What does the posthumous initiative at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School reveal about our image of the child? In the ‘real’ world, pupils issued clear backpacks in a crude attempt to address the potential presence of firearms in school, but we ask, what else?

The practice of issuing and carrying transparent backpacks provoked strong reactions amongst young people, internationally. News produced for children in Norway declared the rationale underpinning the backpacking initiative to be deeply problematic (*Aftenposten Junior*, April 10.-16., 2018, p. 7⁸). For already heavily surveilled and regulated high schoolers, the prospect of literally exposing their innermost selves via clear pvc was considered a disrespectful violation. Furthermore, it raises important questions about our ‘image of the child’. Contemplating how to process grief and disbelief at the loss of friends, these young people then face the prospect of losing their right to privacy and dignity. Before: ‘the school was like another home, but now that home is ruined’, as a consequence of this desecration, and the subsequent imposition of a crude reactionary initiative, materialised figurations of student activism are agitated. Messages (for the world’s media to notice) are planted in the backpacks. A note: “*this backpack is probably worth more than MY LIFE*”⁹, and backpacks filled with feminine hygiene products¹⁰ make important political statements that underline the inappropriate preoccupation with regulation and containment of childhoods that work to divert attention from more urgent matters of concern. The notes and tampons undertake important work to make visible the misdirection of adult intervention. Children’s participation in these backpacking practices present other more worldly stories that actively shift our image of the child.

Troubled and inspired by children’s engagements and resistances to the clear backpacking practices of the Florida authorities we included ‘taboo’ objects at the affective workshop. We felt sure that selected materialities held the capacity to activate affective openings. Travelling across Norway with the cartridge and magazine for a firearm nestled at the bottom of backpack felt risky, wrong, and all too real. When weaponry is tangible, felt, handled, present - things happen. Space, place and objects present leaky borders, as Massey states: ‘what is special about place...is precisely that thrown togetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now...a negotiation which must take place within and between human and nonhuman’ (2005, p.9). The vital materialism (Bennett, 2010) of a bullet, unearthed from a backpack, in a cafe in Oslo, with a group of early childhood researchers agitates all manner of trouble. A bullet is especially affectively charged, and has specific connotations in Oslo. The acts of a lone, far-right, terrorist in the summer of 2011 are etched upon the nation’s psyche; agitated and re-activated in ways that are sensed but unspeakable. Unthinkable, unimaginable, harrowing but leaving traces still.

First a bomb within a car,

⁸ With permission from the editor of *Aftenposten Junior*.

⁹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/02/us/marjory-stoneman-douglas-clear-backpacks/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.dagbladet.no/video/1wE1TjFuqLE>

*outside the government building,
killed eight people.
Then, to a youth summer camp,
on an island 40 kilometers from Oslo,
69 young people killed,
shot dead.*

It is while touching and sensing affective objects (Stewart, 2007), materials spread across a table, on a misty November morning, that contradictory thoughts and questions are generated: how much should children know? How can and should we protect children from the news? Are there times when difficult knowledge is simply too difficult? Taboo issues too taboo? How do we recognise children's world-making capacities? What do we do with the matters of concern that are provoked by the smooth, cold, metal of a bullet that requires our care-full attention? How do we exercise our response-ability to engage in world-making practices to nurture, protect and find ways through?

He, who shall remain unnamed

When prime minister Jacinda Ardern, after the recent terrorist shooting in Christchurch, declared that New Zealand will not give him anything 'not even his name'¹¹, something ephemeral but recognizable coalesces. It animates a before that becomes a now and then feeds into a future.

Sometimes, when opportunities have arisen, this mother has tried to speak with her children of what happened at Utøya. It is important to understand what they know, and how they have been affected, whether and how it still haunts them. Her attempts have not felt very successful, whether the name is uttered or not, and this troubles her, she contemplates that the events of 2011 should never be forgotten, but what might it mean to keep them alive?...

She had been on another island that day, with friends, their children and her own. An island like many others off the coast of Norway, like Utøya. Memories are activated; the desperate need for news updates in the hours and days after the shootings. The ferocity of maternal protection for her then four- and six-year old children. Shielding them from sounds and images of a nation in shock. On a media loop, endlessly re-turning, everywhere. Watching in secret, as the children slept, her hunger for news and some way to process how it was possible, that *this* should happen *here*.

The shooting of 69 young people at a political summer camp remains etched on the Norwegian psyche. At the time of writing, the bullet takes us to news coverage of 49 deaths, a mass shooting at a mosque in Christchurch New Zealand. The bullet diffracts, generating discomfort, despair

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/19/new-zealand-shooting-ardern-says-she-will-never-speak-suspects-name>

and disbelief; grief, horror and grotesque anticipation. Taken back, another death toll, the Hungerford Massacre, 14 shot dead on 19th August 1987; memories of ‘he, who shall remain unnamed’¹² are reignited. The bullet re-turns, to red slippers worn that day, a teenager gripped by a deep pit-of-the-stomach churning, a churning that comes to life again. How was it possible? How could it have happened *there* and *then*? The midsts of then materialised as now and will (e)merge again (the question is when and where, not if). The dense solidity of a cold, metal, cylinder provokes and creates acute dis-ease. We ask what is our response-ability in the moment of encounter with a bullet?

Our experimental investigation asks, what do we do with what the bullet does?

‘Valentine’s Day, a former student opened fire at a high school... We know little yet, but it is assumed that at least 17 were killed and that two adults and two children were critically injured. But why did he do it? What was the motive?’
[Norwegian student, Grade 10¹³]

To attend to the ways in which it spreads like a virus...

‘We have come to a time when there are students, and students who have to do something, instead of relying on the state. The state does nothing. One needs to feel safe at school, and not the way the United States has it now. No one feels safe. How long should we let this continue?’
[Norwegian Student, Grade 9¹⁴]



¹² https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/hungerford_massacre

¹³ <http://2450.elevavis.no/index.php?artID=182&navB=1>

¹⁴ <http://frogner.elevavis.no/index.php?artID=216&navB=1>

[Image 5: What else?: productive possibilities at the Affective Workshop]

It is our contention that towering, backpacking and bulleting practices work together to disrupt hegemonic images of the child. Traumatic events and their aftershocks are encountered by children and young people in significant and lasting ways that settle and resurface. Yet the interventions and initiatives that adults implement fail to recognise children's capacities to grapple with the difficult knowledges that such events themselves, and the amplified news stories thereafter, generate. The recent, and growing surge in youth political activism¹⁵¹⁶ is in direct response to the failure of adults (particularly white, middle-class, middle-aged men in positions of power) to make the right decisions: about gun laws, about global warming, about the marginalisation of groups marked by ethnicity, sexuality and age. The events we have excavated throughout this paper expose the prevalence of toxic masculinity, and how it manifests and finds expression through terrorist acts, policy imperatives and carnivalesque displays of racist intolerance, and how it bubbles just beneath the surface of everyday lives lived, waiting to erupt. Towers, backpacks and bullets must be acknowledged for the vital materialism they extol, what they make possible, how the work that they do mutates, and re-(e)merges, and become materialised as powerful political statements, tangible tactics of subversion and resistance¹⁷. An article in *Time Magazine*: 'The School Shooting Generation has had Enough'¹⁸ was published three weeks after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. The five teenagers responsible for creating #NeverAgain, went on to lead a nationwide demonstration: 'March for Our Lives' in protest at current gun control legislation. The march remains one of the largest protests in American history¹⁹ and culminated in international youth unrest²⁰.

50 million schoolkids growing up in "the mass-shooting generation."

"I've been playing my guitar all day because that's just something that kind of helps me with my nerves (starts playing "Blackbird" by The Beatles)". Then a close up by another young face with glasses, and an arm holding a knitted purse, saying: "...tomorrow we are not aloud to bring backpacks, so...uhm.."

[CNN, 3rd April, 2018²¹]

It does not stop

In this article we have experimented with practices of worlding and story-telling in an attempt to work with the generative possibilities that emerge as we encounter difficult knowledges, the same difficult knowledges that are also routinely encountered by children. The concept and

¹⁵ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/the-new-global-youth-movement>

¹⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/13/young-people-are-angry-meet-the-teenage-activists-shaping-our-future>

¹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/24/us/march-for-our-lives-price-tags-trnd/index.html>

¹⁸ <http://time.com/longform/never-again-movement/>

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_for_Our_Lives

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/feb/11/parkland-student-activists-march-for-our-lives-year-later-2019>

²¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/02/us/marjory-stoneman-douglas-clear-backpacks/index.html>

practice of worlding/wordling has provided a way, through storying, to begin to articulate and grapple with childhood encounters with traumatic events, and to trace the on-going reverberations. We have endeavoured: ‘to pull the sticky threads where the technical, the commercial, the mythical, the political, the organic are imploded’ (Goodeve, 2000, p. 110). In doing this our investigation has become confederate and speculative, working in the minor key has taken us in unanticipated directions, forced us to attend to how events are sensed, and to embrace the stuckness that has characterised the crafting of this paper. This mode of enquiry has intensified our attention and insisted that we ‘wait for something to take shape’ (Stewart, 2017, p. 124). Storying as a worlding practice has presented us with surprises, taken us on an uncharted journey which has no end; we find that we are still looking around (Stewart, 2017).

Mass shooting in New Zealand entangled with world-famous youtuber who has used anti-Semitic gestures and racist language and is followed by millions of children
[The New York Times, 15 March 2019²²]

Grenfell Tower study: Cancer-causing chemicals found nearby,
[BBC News, 28 March 2019²³]

Marjory Stone High School students include suicides one year after the shooting on the list of victims
[NRK, March 29 2019²⁴]

We have learned that encountering difficult knowledge through news media is a lively, never-ending matter. The affective flows and forces that are set in motion proliferate and retaliate, sometimes unexpectedly. Reignited through touch with an object, or through collective doings at a library cafe, or at home with our queer kin (Haraway, 1985), the residues of news events resurface and assault, sometimes as a powerful wave, at other times as a mere breath of air that barely registers. Ordinary affects (Stewart 2007) are generated through the coming together of bodies, materialities, time, space, place, and work together to create dis-ease and confusion, for which there is no language. We recognise difficult knowledge as embodied, affective encounters that are sensed and possess an ongoingness, that insists that we exercise our worldly responsibilities:

"What counts as good, perhaps ethical, response is always context specific and relational. It is always being rearticulated, reimagined, and made possible in new ways, inside ongoing processes of call and response and the worlds that they produce. Here, responsibility is about

²² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/pewdiepie-new-zealand-shooting.html>

²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-47730638>

²⁴ <https://www.nrk.no/urix/overlevde-skolemassakre-i-fjor--to-begikk-selv-mord-forrige-uke-1.14490264>

developing the openness and the sensitivities necessary to be curious, to understand and respond in ways that are never perfect, never innocent, never final, and yet always required"

[van Dooren & Rose, 2016, p. 90]

Through our composting project with news media we have found that new life has been breathed into old stories; aerating buried memories and turning over haunting conundrums with no simple answers has kept us awake at night; conversations about difficult knowledge with our children, our students, our colleagues have resurfaced and mutated; we have taken to the streets with our children wielding homemade cardboard placards in protest. We find ourselves compelled to make other choices, other pedagogical, other consumer and other parental choices. For us this is operating in the minor key; it is worlding: 'staying with the trouble of complex worlding is the name of the game of living and dying well together' (Haraway, 2016, p. 29).

Our aim was to ask what else gets produced through encounters with news media by children, for children and not intended for children. Borrowing from Haraway (2016, p. 29) we might ask why it is important to tell the stories that we have about children's news media 'when there are only more and more openings and no bottom lines', but such stories strengthen our specific response-abilities. Further Haraway points to the details that matter because they link 'actual beings to actual response-abilities' (p. 29). In our storying we endeavoured to embrace details, although they interfere with our habitual urge to make sense, to understand, to get the whole picture. However, a curiosity with *what else* requires that judgement should not take over (Manning, 2016), but rather that we open our senses through a 'burrowing into the generativity of what takes form', to be attuned to what may hit our senses and shimmer (Stewart, 2010, p. 339). Worlding is to move towards a minor quality; to make matters more alive. We have sought to trouble the hegemonic image of the child as too young, too innocent to know, to encounter or to engage in world-making practices. This experiment works as a means to resist slipping into the well-worn paths of knowing. It invites us to thinkfeeldo differently in the world, and so engage in constant reappraisals of our image of the child. This involves recognizing the world-making practices that children actively participate in, and crucially, what we might learn with and from them.

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