What Haunts Pedagogical Documentation? Speculating With Data-Ghost(s)

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With the imaginary of (a) data-ghost(s), I use ideas from hauntology to speculate about what haunts pedagogical documentation. By re-turning to an example of documentation of young children encountering a hatchery where eggs incubated into chicks, I notice the absences of what was not documented as hauntings. With performative and playful writing, I speculate with artworks and dialogue as a way of speaking of, to, and with ghosts. By thinking with the relationships between past/present/future, I ponder what inheritances, response-abilities, and possibilities emerge. Through slowing down with data-ghost(s), I speculate with what haunts and hauntings' call for something-to-be-done to imagine what becomes possible for practices in the present and future for classroom practice and teacher education.

Key words: *data-ghost(s), hauntology, early childhood education, pedagogical documentation*

Boo! Here come(s) the data-ghost(s)

Data-ghost(s) have been playing with me for a while now. I characterize them as bothersome data that lingers, complicates, and causes trouble through haunting over and through time, where data and the ghostly are in relationship and never alone (Albin-Clark, 2023). Inspired by Derrida's (2006) *hauntology*, data-ghost(s) is/are associated with troubling binaries between presence and absence, drawing attention to what is absent or invisible but making itself/themselves known. Hauntological ideas suggest an opening of dialogues with absences through attempts "to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it" (Derrida, p. xviii, emphasis in original).

For the study of pedagogical documentation, the concept of data-ghost(s) offers an invitation to detect what was disregarded or skirted over. From those absences, it becomes possible to tease out what haunts early childhood educational (ECE) worlds. Like Berger et al. (2022), I have found that an unhurried, lingering thinking enables different kinds of noticing. Similar approaches with documentation have noticed absences through speculative drawings (Vintimilla et al., 2025). Speculating with what is missing or incomplete leaves space for possible futures to unfold through "not-yet-activated processes that become visible in the documentation" (Vintimilla et al., 2025, para. 4).

Absences through the hauntological imaginary of data-ghost(s) matter because they can take account of the response-abilities of what is inherited. Similar questions were asked with documentation when children noticed traces of absences, such as feathers or empty spider webs, and made speculative drawings as a call for those absent to return (Vintimilla et al., 2025). The ability to respond counts because noticing the undocumented holds potential for rethinking possible futures when the past/present/future is recast as a lively intra-relationality.

Through this performative writing, I make three moves in my speculative speaking of, to, and with ghosts (Derrida, 2006). First, I imagine speculative and playful dialogues between myself and the data-ghost(s) that interrupt my

thinking. Second, I explain how Derrida's hauntology (2006) and the sociologist Avery Gordon's (2008) writing about haunting have informed this speculation through illuminating their words as I write. Third, I re-turn to an example of documentation of young children encountering a hatchery where eggs incubated into chicks to notice absences using digital artworks. Finally, I speculate otherwise possibilities for practice in the present and future that have potential to inform my work as a teacher educator.

Jo: *Where do I find data-ghost(s)?*

Data-ghost(s) 👻: *I'm in moments where you wonder:*

What is not documented in documenting?

Why do these inheritances bother me?

What does haunting want?

What can be done?

Figure 1: Speaking to the ghost.

Data-ghost(s), Derrida's hauntology, and Gordon's ghostly matters

Data-ghost(s) is/are inspired by the writing of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2006). As a play on ontology, hauntology describes how the past inflects the present and possible futures through his proposition that the legacy of Marxism is actively haunting contemporary political thought. By reflecting on the spectral figure of Hamlet's father as a ghost in Shakespeare's play, Derrida wonders about how the repetition of haunting unsettles the fixity of linear time:

> A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back. (p. 11)

Because of that, hauntological thinking troubles the neat distinctions between past/present/future(s). Since ghosts do not stay put in the past, they are "neither living nor dead, present nor absent" (Derrida, 2006, p. 63).

That means that the ghost(s) displace(s) what is present with something that occupies intermediate spaces in between being visible/invisible but still has a real influence. A particularly intriguing provocation from hauntology is the possibility of thinking with what is inherited and what injustices might need resolving in "getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts" (Derrida, 2006, p. xviii).

Inheritances of injustices may be unobserved but signal your involvement nonetheless. According to Gordon (2008), ghostly matters wield power and censor "when entire societies become haunted by terrible deeds that are systematically occurring and are simultaneously denied" (p. 64).

Haunting may well suggest something that has not had a resolution, or a story without a satisfactory conclusion. For concepts such as justice, it means matters remain in a liminal state as unfixed or unsettled. Furthermore, hauntings can signal historical repression with what has been unresolved, as "hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (Derrida, 2006, p. 46).

Jo: *What does this mean?*

Data-ghost(s)👻: *You might find that you have overlooked what was worth documenting.*

Jo: *And what could I do about that?*

Data-ghost(s)👻: *Cause trouble to your thinking, of course.*

Jo: *Right, let's go ghost-hunting. ... I have a haunting in the form of a chick.*

Data-ghost(s)👻: *That doesn't surprise me, you are one of those ECE researcher types.*

Figure 2: Speaking to the ghost.

Data-ghost(s) chick(s)

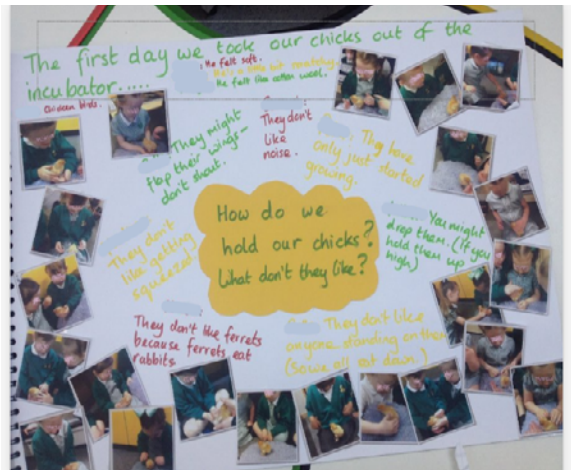


Figure 3: The original documentation.

I have an example of data-ghost(s) from pedagogical documentation of three- and four-year-old children's encounters with a small portable classroom hatchery (Albin-Clark, 2023). After fixating on the images, drawings, and narration of children's excitement of eggs becoming chicks (Figure 3), I wrenched my gaze from the joyful child-chick relationality and wondered about what was absent, unthought, and not documented.

It was not easy, as the documentation was so lively. Young children, cracking eggs, teachers busily capturing children's verbal and drawn responses to new life. But if I think with hauntology, then the child-chick documentation means taking time with what is *not living or present*. Ghosts are "neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, [and are] never present as such" (Derrida, 2006, p. xvii). If data-ghost(s) is/are lingering and unruly, then the undocumented becomes the haunting. What has *not* been documented is what happens to the chick (rather than the child) after the documentation event.

Manifesting the data-ghost(s) means speculating beyond the present time and living with the inheritance of how the chicks fared beyond the classroom. In creating pedagogical documentation, this would be unlikely to be

documented because it would not be visible or even seen to be relevant to children's learning in the here and now.

What haunts is the unresolved fate of those chicks, and their data-ghost(s) trouble linear time by returning, because ghosts are not passive bodies (Derrida, 2006). Putting ghosts to work reimagines their inheritances in the company of countless others. Hauntology acts to decelerate thinking by making room for other and particular questions (Berger et al., 2022). In this case, the questions disabuse ECE as a romanticized and nurturing practice. Life and death of other species is at stake here.

By conjuring data-ghost(s), I imagined the chick life (and death) through artworks to trace what happened on their return to the hatchery. That meant stretching documentation beyond the learning event.

Jo: *What happened?*

Data-ghost(s) 👻: *Chicks from eggs sold educationally to schools are often killed when they return to commercial hatcheries as they risk disease to flocks.*

Jo: *Some chicks become rescue hens though?*

Data-ghost(s) 👻: *Most do not live for much longer after.*

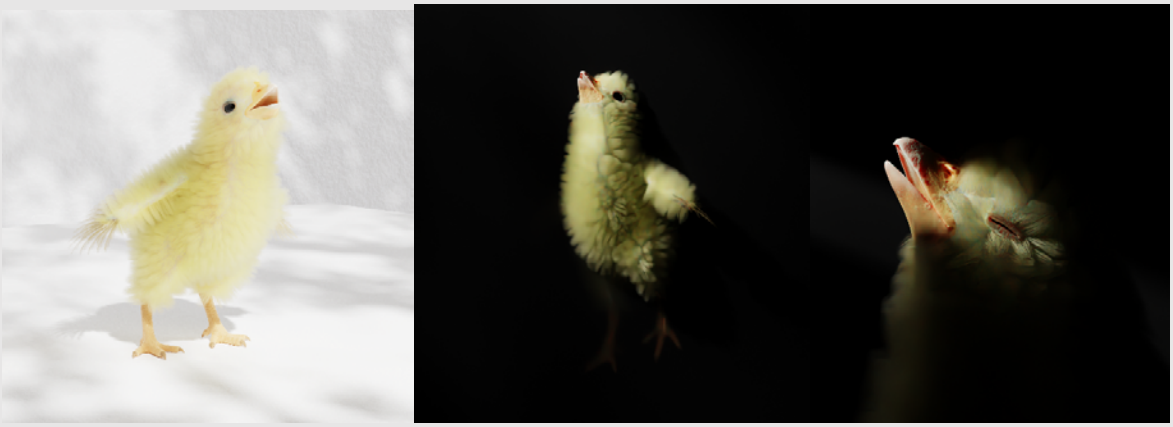


Figure 4: Speculating and speaking with the ghost.

Data-ghost(s) speculations

Speculating with data-ghost(s) brings me to question the inheritance of the chick's life and death alongside wider obligations and accountabilities beyond the learning child. When I return to the original documentation of the chicks, there are traces of dialogue between teachers and children that focus on how to care for living things. I can see narration that has been documented where children are asked: "Tell me about things that grow" and "How do we hold the chicks?" What is absent is the nonchalance of bringing other living creatures into classrooms and the disposability of others for pedagogical ends as an unproblematized inheritance. It places humans in dominion over other living things and ECE as a legitimization of that educational hegemony. Although I was delighted at imagining the tiny chick feet fluttering on small hands, I cannot bring the images of their death in any easy way.

But perhaps what data-ghost(s) speculation conjures are pedagogical questions that arise from what is absent, and in this case, it is knowledge-making bounded by the premise that only some bodies matter. What data-ghost(s)

gesture(s) towards is an urgency to find ways to craft practices more livable *not just* for children.

If I am provoked by what gets left out of documentation but still haunts the pedagogical work, it is what ethical and political moves I can make in the present and in the future as a teacher educator who often uses pedagogical documentation as a catalyst for teaching. If pedagogical spaces are opened by documentation, then what kinds of knowledge are made available, or indeed foreclosed? If we were to look at some of the iterations of pedagogical documentation, then what is documented acts as a dialogue in-between what occurred in a learning event and what pedagogical opportunities or questions emerge (Rinaldi, 2006).

Data-ghost(s) 👻: *What is my chick haunting doing?* **Jo:** *It is questioning how ECE positions children with other living bodies.* **Data-ghost(s)** 👻: *And?* **Jo:** *It has made me question how ECE practices position other living bodies (and things) as disposable.*	

Figure 5: Speaking to the ghost.

What haunting wants as something-to-be-done

In asking the question of what haunts, or put another way, what data-ghost(s) might want, then documentation brings trouble. This logic takes subjectivity beyond the learning child and the life (and death) of the chick. It means that data-ghost(s) re-turn(s) with a call for action,

> Haunting is a frightening experience. It always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done. (Gordon, 2008, p. xvii)

If I take the provocation of haunting as "something-to-be-done" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvii), then there are two possible lines of enquiry. The present practice of documenting comes with choices about what is documented, *and* the potential futures of documentation call into question how that return is encountered.

Something-to-be-done in *the present*

What is documented evolves from a criticality about pedagogical choices made in the present. With the child-chick documentation, data-ghost(s) problematize(s) how practice must enfold response-abilities to other living bodies that share the world with our youngest citizens.

Pedagogies represent how power operates through ethical and political choices, and if that involves other living things coming to harm then it needs addressing. Derrida (2006) reminds us that haunting is at work in hegemonies. Harm has no place in a practice rooted in careful ethical care for thriving and livable worlds.

For example, data-ghost(s) conjuring has shifted the kinds of conversation I might have with student teachers

about pedagogical practices. It brings a place for the unthought of and upends taken-for-granted practices such as the ethics of classroom hatcheries. Other questions arise from factoring in the response-abilities of multispecies cohabitation. On paper the hatchery was all about the care of living things. The haunting brings needless death into view.

It means pedagogical knowledge making that limits further harm and instead foregrounds the thriving of others.

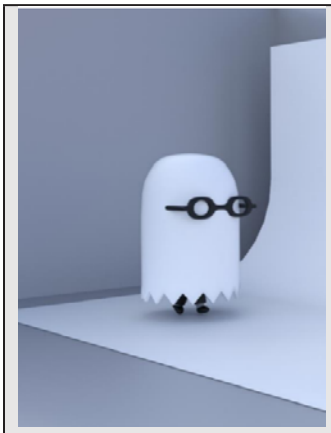
Something-to-be-done with *the future*

If data-ghost(s) go(es) on haunting, then their return remains unpredictable and they remain reluctant to leave (Bone, 2019). That lack of leaving suggests a future with something unfinished, a lingering trace of injustice or lack of resolution. But how can we know a future for documentation beyond the here and now? Rinaldi (2006) wrote that pedagogical documentation, time, and listening are related:

> Listening as time, the time of listening, a time that is outside chronological time—a time full of silences, of long pauses, an interior time. Interior listening, listening to ourselves, as a pause, a suspension, as an element that generates listening to others but, in turn, is generated by the listening that others give us. (p. 49)

For example, in conversations with student teachers I can discuss how returning to documentation needs an attuned listening that asks questions about what, why, and how aspects of practice might be absent. The crucial part is what implications and response-abilities need addressing in relation to what is unjust or unresolved. It involves a situated reciprocal listening with an appreciation that documentation *itself* has a subjective life all its own, "to understand that it can, itself, speak and speak of itself" (Derrida, 2006, p. 235).

In encountering returns to documentation, there is a place for suspending the urge to know and instead an openness to what documentation might call for.



Data-ghost(s) 👻: *What are my questions?*

Jo: *How can I know that? Do you know what you want?*

Data-ghost(s) 👻: *Not yet. And I might change my mind.*

Figure 6: Speaking to the ghost.

Inviting hauntings

Dear reader, it is time to invite data-ghost(s) in by noticing what was not documented, being alert to questions that return and how pedagogical documentation has its own intentions, as "there is no inheritance without a call

to responsibility" (Derrida, 2006, p. 114).

We need especially to be alert to how power might be at work, and how that power might repress ECE as thriving and livable for children and a whole panoply of others. Like the documentation that used "speculative drawings of what could have been" (Vintimilla et al., 2025, para. 4), the data-ghost(s) I conjure here bring(s) speculation about how the past/present/future of documentation are always in dialogue.

Yet, data-ghost(s) is/are unpredictable in their comings and goings. Hauntings are present but meddle with reality and hold the opportunity to open questions of what should come (Gordon, 2008). Let us put those hauntings to work to problematize and open speculative pedagogical spaces about what is (and is not) documented, but also what inheritances and response-abilities with future encounters with documentation might demand.

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