Zooming with Babies: Troubling a Shared Present

Ruth Boycott-Garnett

Ruth Boycott-Garnett is a doctoral student at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK studying babies' interactions with space, matter, and movement in collaboration with Manchester Art Gallery. Her research is currently orientated around babies lives within the COVID-19 pandemic and how interdisciplinary working can support mid- and post-pandemic babyhood. Email: Ruth.Boycott-Garnett@stu.mmu.ac.uk

This paper outlines how the specific constraints of virtual communication technology have stirred new thinking around what kind of research and what knowledge is produced with babies. During Zoom sessions, the 2–4-month-old babies were frequently present but out of shot, or glimpsed as a small limb or movement or sound on the other side of the screen. The babies' bodies, movements, and sounds exceeded the boundaries of the screen. Through a posthuman lens, presence, time, and agency unravel the Zoom screen as an active participant that interferes with what can happen in a shared present in a liminal space.

Key words: *Zoom; babies; pandemic; discursive; time*

Attempts to conduct research in the social sciences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic highlight just how messy social research can be. This paper was created from the messy middle of doctoral research attending to babies' interactions with space, material, and matter and documenting the everchanging process of creating research with families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ethics and practicalities of conducting research with families has been considered by many researchers since 2020 (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021), including Garthwaite and colleagues' (2020) question as to whether it is ethical to conduct research with families at all during the additional stresses of a pandemic. This paper attempts to document how the practical changes in method that occurred in this work resulted in creating new and unexpected trajectories that rippled through every aspect of the research and brought focus to the unknowability of babies' lives. This outcome is particularly made evident by the inclusion of virtual communication technology and gathering online from separate homes rather than meeting in person within a semipublic space.

Data collection for this research included a range of sessions with babies adapted to the ebb and flow of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting changes in restrictions in the UK. As a result of these restrictions, all data collection for the research was moved from observations of lively events to online. Zoom sessions with tiny babies from 2 months to 4 months old and their mothers were conducted during 2021. Zoom and other virtual meeting platforms have rapidly been adopted by many social researchers (Archibald et al., 2019, Howlett, 2021) as a tool for data collection, though typically in research with speaking adults or older children. As a virtual platform organized around a speaking, centered subject, Zoom initially appeared to be a ridiculous research method with tiny babies that would never have seemed productive, enjoyable, or even possible. Yet it is the specific constraints of virtual technology that have stirred new thinking for the researcher around what research—and what knowledge—is possible with babies.

Because this work only came to form through adaptations and undulations throughout the research process, the following section of this paper outlines and reflects on the research conducted so far and the changing methods and expectations. Then, the paper shares snippets of data from the Zoom sessions and initial thoughts on how

playing with babies, Zoom, and discursive field notes troubles how we experience a shared present with others through virtual platforms and provides insights into how time plays out over virtual liminal spaces.

Origins of the research

Originally this research was based within Manchester Art Gallery, where an interdisciplinary team of artists, educators, and health visitors delivered a weekly play installation and baby clinic. In the UK, a baby clinic is a drop-in service where it is possible to speak to a health professional, often focused around weighing the baby and marking their weight trajectory in a little red book. This collaboration between the different services and the space that it created was the original source of interest for the research. The original method intended for the research was to spend a year in this space taking short video clips of the babies as they navigated and contributed to this lively space of intertwined bodies, both human and nonhuman, and filming momentary encounters between babies and the stuff, people, and space around them. The note below describes how this space might look if you were to come across this weekly event in the gallery.

At the back of the gallery, a crowd of babies, mums, grandmas, dads, aunties and friends would lower themselves to the floor, the older bodies trying to get comfy on mats or throws while the babies were propped on cushions or cuddled in laps. The assembled would be surrounded by scratchy fabrics, silver trays of sand, dangling broccoli, bendy mirrors and pastry brushes. Babies would lift themselves up on the backs of strangers. Speedy crawlers would weave their way through bodies and stuff. Perhaps a toddling girl would roughly pat the head of a tiny baby and shout "Baby!" in delight. Perhaps two babies would wrestle over a silicone spoon. Perhaps a practitioner would cuddle a crying baby as their carer temporarily disappeared out of sight. Around the edges, mums would wait on chairs, watching other mums, while a baby slept on their lap, wrestled for freedom, suckled in their arms or grasped at soft sticks of something tasty from tiny Tupperware tubs. At the back of the room, hidden by hanging cloth, were weighing scales and women with answers and reassuring words. One at a time, the babies would have their turn behind the curtain, stripped and weighed and watched. (Discursive field notes, 2020)

The text highlights the mingling of bodies and sharing of objects that are only just becoming possible again within the UK. Since March 2020, sessions for babies have occurred in various forms, sometimes in person and sometimes online. When in person, sessions have been carried out under COVID-19 restrictions, including families having their own equipment in their own "pod" or on their own play mat and staying spaced from other families to avoid contact with other families and moving around the room. Sessions that resemble the above description are only just being introduced back into the gallery at the start of 2022.

Adapting

The pandemic has played with time, on minute and major scales. As the pandemic caused the closure of the gallery and a temporary loss of these spaces for babies and their families, Donna Haraway's words resonated in the work of the interdisciplinary gallery team. In reference to extinctions and exterminations, Haraway's (2016) discussion of urgencies rather than emergencies is relatable to the COVID-19 pandemic:

> I name these things urgencies rather than emergencies because the latter connotes something approaching apocalypse and its mythologies. Urgencies have other temporalities, and these times are ours. These are the times that we must think; these are the times of urgencies that need stories. (p. 37)

Haraway's words move from the impossibility of comprehending deep time and global impact to considering

the pandemic through the everyday moments, the daily encounters with babies, and the possibilities for small, meaningful actions. The gallery began to meet more frequently in an urge to do something. The need for urgency was balanced with the need to build something meaningful, useful, and delightful. Slow thinking emerged through discussions, and attention moved from the fast, virtual space to the slowness of posting items, the weight of objects, and the ritual of gifts. As a result of this slow thinking, 3000 gift boxes were created for all the babies of the city and delivered to their doorsteps.

Through developing the gifts a series of Zoom sessions were set up for the babies and their families. Where families would usually be invited to share a space, they were instead invited to share time together while exploring the objects in their gift boxes from their homes. Originally, these sessions were imagined as an immersive, shared sensory experience using sound, lighting, and the sensory objects in the gifts. The Zoom sessions happened once a week over an eight-week period. Most families joined the session through mobile phones and the researcher hosted the session through a laptop. The sessions were attended by a handful of regular attendees and often a few new families would join each week. Most families had their cameras switched on throughout the session so that families and babies could see each other, and parents often moved the screen close to their babies' faces so that the group could say hello to them or to show the group if the baby was doing something particularly interesting like a big smile or a funny expression. The size of the visible area on Zoom and the number of other screens that were displayed differed for each family depending on the device they used. For example, a laptop could usually display multiple screens simultaneously so that the whole group was visible, whereas a phone screen usually only displayed one face at a time. The content of the sessions varied from discussion between parents, to playing with the sensory bags and other creative activities that grew out of the discussions and interests of the group, for example, sharing songs.

As the researcher clung to the need for video of the babies for the research, the intention was to record the sessions and be able to focus in on the details of the babies and the objects as they encountered each other. Video has been a common tool for qualitative research in education, opening up audio and visual possibilities, as Elizabeth de Freitas (2015a) suggests: "Video has allowed researchers to zoom in on hands and faces, and to focus on any given moment, in order to study the micro gestures" (p. 553).

Glimmers in the data

Through this wriggly situation the process of data collection for the doctoral research became quite a contrast to the original plan, attempting to replicate something of the original through virtual technology. From a messy mingling of bodies in a spacious gallery, the process shifted to families in separate places joining together through their phone screens. During these sessions, the babies were frequently present but out of shot, or glimpsed as a small limb or movement or sound on the other side of the screen. The babies' bodies, movements, and sounds exceeded the boundaries of the frame and in so doing shattered the potentially rich visual recordings that were imagined of babies in their ongoing interaction in the world. The limitations of Zoom with babies contrast with the traditional uses of video and its long history in educational research where video is considered as "raw data" and "indexical of a given time-space relationship" (de Freitas, 2015b, p. 318).

The role of recording apparatus and seemingly objective technology has been acknowledged by previous researchers as having effects on the data that is collected. In *The Posthuman Child*, Karen Murris (2016) found that the microphone used to collect children's stories interfered with the recording and the knowledge being produced. From this posthuman perspective, the Zoom screen is not something that alters pure data that exists independently from the researcher but becomes an active participant in creating what can be seen and done and what can happen

in the liminal space. The screens create a layering of living rooms, bedrooms, offices—spaces that leak into each other with boundaries that break and rebuild. The small rectangular space created by the screen determines what is visible and sharable of these different spaces. Babies' momentary movements in and out of the field of vision resist meaning or interpretation and displace the site of the encounter. Through the Zoom screen, the families and the researcher found themselves in multiple presents that were not fully translatable in one event or in descriptive field notes. The tangling of babies' uncapturable bodies and the limited screen view moved the researcher's attention away from the "phenomenological image of the body, and its desire for presence, and directly links to the force and shock of time itself" (de Freitas, 2015b, p. 323). Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's concept of the time-image, de Freitas suggests reconsidering the capture of video data in which "many presents coexist" (p. 328). In this research, it is the babies' actions in, out of, and around the screen that create multiple presents of data.

Susanne Gannon (2016) asserts that "posthuman research practices demand attention to materialities and affects, and they prompt experiments and interferences with data" (p. 144.). Working through Zoom draws attention to these affects and breaks the habit of veering toward more conventional data collection methods. Carol Taylor (2016) warns against adding posthuman analysis to the interpretation of data that has been conventionally collected (p. 18). Instead of attempts at playing with snapshots of collected video to tune into micro moments, as was the initial intention of the research in the gallery, Zoom generates "thing power" with the "curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects both dramatic and subtle" (Bennett, 2010, p. 6). This ability to trouble and agitate the event does not fall solely within the power of Zoom itself and is not necessarily present in all Zoom meetings. Rather, Zoom is in between the babies' movements, the speaking mums, the visible living rooms, the mobile phones and the laptop screen in a congregational distribution of agency. While filming with a group of girls, Gabriella Ivinson and Emma Renold (2016) describe an "affective intensity" that grew between the camera, landscape, bodies and histories of the area and suggest that the camera became a posthuman participant that "interrupted dominant flows" (Ivinson & Renold, 2016, p. 169). In this case the affective intensity lies between the Zoom screens, the babies' bodies, the different spaces and the myriad of movements in each moment.

With the leaky boundaries of the Zoom screen and the transient babies' bodies, any attempt at description or tuning into the babies' experiences of the sensory gifts falls instantly flat. The babies and the Zoom screen are a reminder of Taylor's (2016) warning: the presumption "that one can access, know about and represent the 'experience' of an 'other's' 'reality'—[is] not so easily dispersed with" (p. 17). Field notes created after each Zoom session turn from describing the detailed micro-actions of the babies to more poetic and speculative writing to try to grasp something of what is happening in the babies' often invisible movements and the less tangible encounters. In discussing silences in spoken interviews, Lisa Mazzei (2007) evokes a poetic understanding of silence. She suggests that by focusing on data that can be catalogued or named, "what we often fail to do is give voice to the poetic among them" (p. 57). Can this poetic understanding also be applied to the liminal boundary and space of the Zoom encounters between the different screens? To open up to the poetic in these encounters, I turn to what Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes as "a speculative, concrete attunement" (p. 4) that can provoke attention to the sensations and resonances of the "weighted and reeling present" (p. 1). Through attempting writing that is tied to the present it is possible to consider what is (un)knowable and what is (un)representable. This writing seems to find a place in Stewart's suggestion that thought is "something that takes off with the potential trajectories in which it finds itself in the middle" (Stewart, 2007, p. 128).

The next section of this paper expands on two snippets of discursive notes generated from encounters with the liminal field site of Zoom that trouble the notion of a shared ethnographic present.

Discursive notes

We see the babies in momentary sweeps of the phone or as they move their bodies into the periphery of the screen. As a mum tells us a story of her day, the baby's hand stretches out to the ceiling and stays in the centre of the shot, fingers splayed, a solid silhouette. Sometimes the weight of their bodies, and the movements they make in their mum's arms, causes moments of juggling, shifting and rearranging of baby and phone so that the phone lies at an angle and I see the whole room on a slant. (Discursive field notes, January 2021)

Babies, mums, and the researcher cannot share the same space and present. In separate squares they find their bodies in different physical spaces, different rhythms attuned to different sounds and movements outside the periphery of the screen, different speeds and different air around them. The screens cannot fully contain the babies' bodies and yet become boundaries that cannot be crossed to merge into one time and space. The researcher encounters the sleeping or snuggling babies as their bodies slip in and out of the screen, yet they are wrapped in a present moment of sleep or play or snuggling that the researcher is only present to as the camera turns and a different viewing position emerges. They are not present in the same moment. The entangled performativity of time with other agencies seems to be at work here. Marc Higgins (2016) in his discussion on Barad and Indigenous ways-of-knowing-in-being suggests:

> Considerations of time as enfolded and time as always already more than an inert, immutable and linear backdrop upon which nature and culture play out invite an ongoing consideration of the ways in which time makes itself intelligible through its entangled performativity with other agencies. (pp. 201–202)

Within the Zoom, the mums' stories are shared in fragments as they momentarily turn the screen so the baby comes into view, or the baby, as in the note above, splits the screen with an outstretched arm, or causes a pause in the telling with a continuous babble or a cry in need of some action. The group stops and starts and returns to the beginning of a story or anecdote, and the researcher's stillness while watching from her room feels in conflict with the swift, blurred action and movement captured on Zoom as mums attend to babies. There appears to be an overlayering of timeframes, similar to those proposed by Jay Lemke (2009), where "we find ourselves trying to forge connections between worlds where time may be flowing at different rates" and "where space can have different relative scales, where we can move backward and forward in virtual time" (p. 13). There is no set boundary between the mum's zigzagging story, the baby's hand, the swerving of the screen as they all play out in multiple temporalities. There is also no boundary that separates the past of these stories from the present. All time is layered in this moment like sheets wrapping into separate spaces.

The Zoom sessions do not happen in isolation from the rest of the world or the rest of the research, and in some instances they brought out connections with the live sessions that had been carried out during seasons of relaxed COVID-19 restrictions. The last snippet is a crossover from a face-to-face session where families gathered together in one space with a moment on Zoom.

It happened again!

There is a memory, perhaps the sharpest memory from the live sessions, where she conducted the world. This tiny baby watched me, and when the moment came, she took it. With the elegance and grace of a film star she caught the attention of the room then waited patiently for me to play my part. She is singing. She wriggles and smiles and makes the sound of babbling music. We start a pattern: I sing, she sings. It is a rehearsed show that we have performed for hundreds of years and yet it is the first performance. All mums watch; all babies watch. It could carry on forever and eventually it's me, the amateur, that fumbles and breaks the spell.

I think of how the space, the time we spent together, the acoustics of the room, the babies positioned so far away from each other but somehow connected all play in to making this one moment.

Then it happens again.

And the space and the spacing, the acoustics and the timing are different for each of us zooming in from separate rooms on phones and laptops. And it's a different baby and a different mum and a different song, and yet she watches and waits and then takes the moment. And even though we are miles from each other she catches us all in her web. How can she make eye contact? There is no eye contact on Zoom. So why does it feel like she made eye contact with everyone there? (Field notes, January 2021)

The layering of time in the connections of separate events feels evident in this discursive note. Each event affects the other and displaces assumptions of what's going on in each moment. These moments could be considered as "multiple space-time-matterings" (Higgins, 2016, p. 202) that appear "in singular instances in bi-directional causal ways" (p. 202). Through this concept I can begin to see how each moment not only is shaped by previous events but continues to be shaped by the events to come and the myriad possible futures that stem from each moment.

Considering these moments through multiple space-time-matterings brings the perception of babies to the fore as it places them within the entanglements of past, present, and future. As Murris (2016) suggests, "we cannot reflect on a past as distant observers moving as atomistic fleshy units through time and space: past and future are already 'in' the present of which we are a part" (p. 229). To consider these moments as space-time-matterings we must acknowledge a disruption of linear trajectories. This breaks away from traditional conceptualizations of babies that are structured around models of development and maturation. By focusing in on these layers of moments within the data I am drawn to Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Fikile Nxumalo's (2014) call to embrace "mutuality, mess, multiplicity, and contradiction" in "continually emergent past-present-futures" (p. 134).

Thoughts on babies in research

When conducting research with young children in any format it is hard let go of the idea that the experiences of others can be fully known or represented. This is brought to the fore by Zoom. While doing in-person fieldwork is a multisensory experience (beyond vision), we still tend to create field notes or visual materials based on what we perceive and can make sense of. In that sense, the field is a site of extraction (of meaning), but at the same time it is also a site of production through the encounter—through "being there." As a virtual field site, Zoom undercuts the ethnographic authority of authentic being-there and perceiving-while-there. The lives of the babies in this research are never fully knowable to me as the researcher, and our encounters on Zoom keep this unknowability in tension. These Zoom encounters bring into being the unknowability of babies' lives, and the discursive notes are an attempt at accepting and working with the unknowability by focusing in on the "concrete" (Stewart, 2007) of the Zoom screen and foregrounding the flickering of different presents.

In the beginning, Zooming with tiny babies seemed impossible and of little use from a research perspective, yet these moments were made possible by Zoom's ability to continue over and through different temporalities. The boundaries of the Zoom screen, made leaky by the tiny babies, are a constant reminder of that which is unseen and unknowable yet always present when considering the lives of babies.

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