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Love and agency in ethnographic fieldwork with children

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Abstract

Analysing emotions such as love can enable new ways of understanding human relationships and deepen reflexive ethnographic practice. Love in research with children, however, carries a unique set of implications due to children's structural vulnerability, the power imbalances and abuses that manifest in many adult-child relationships, and cultural taboos on love expressed between adults and children. Yet, the ability to elicit love and affective care from adults is an essential component of children's survival, and children actively coproduce relationships, making researchers into whom they need them to be. How, then, can we approach love in fieldwork with children? Drawing from fieldwork experiences at a New Zealand primary school with participants aged 8-12, I analyse how children recruited me into their survival systems by cultivating love and associated processes of empathy, care, and attachment. I suggest that ethical fieldwork with children means attending to how we feel and respond to love.

Keywords

childhood, emotional reflexivity, fieldwork, love, agency, empathy, attachment

Introduction

Clearing out my desk one day I found a tiny novelty notebook, about the size of a postage stamp with a dome clasp. I had carried this notebook in the pencil case I brought to class every day during my 2015 fieldwork at Tūrama School,[1] a primary school in Auckland, New Zealand. I had never used the notebook myself. It was a knick-knack I had acquired and stashed in the pencil case. On this day, several years after I had finished my fieldwork,

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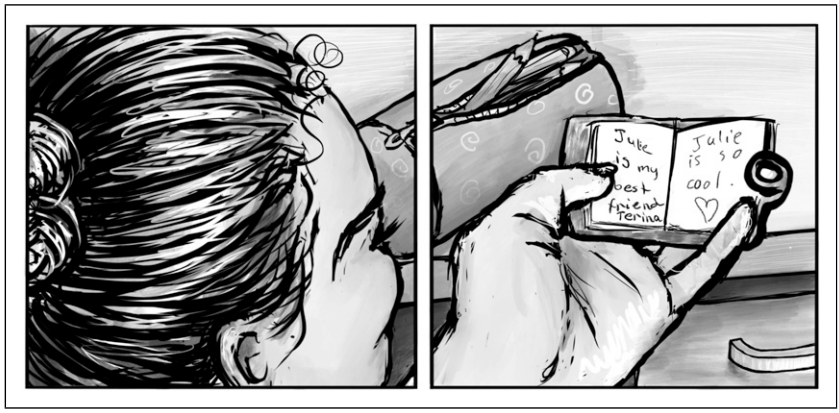


I opened the notebook to discover page after page of wonky handwritten notes. Unbeknownst to me, the children I had worked with, who often borrowed stationery from my pencil case, had annotated the notebook, page upon page. Knowing these children I expected profanity, jokes, or self-referential graffiti. Instead, I found love notes to me. "Julie is my best and coolest friend ever and forever," and "you are so pretty and kind. You have pretty-ness in your heart," some signed, many not, in different handwriting by different children across different classes. In that moment, children transmitted affection across time and space, reaching me and drawing my love for them all over again.

Children have a special power to make us care for them. Theirs is not a physical but emotional power, enacted through affection, vulnerable appearances or making behavioural "appeals" (Schieffelin, 1985: 112) for the "love-compassion-pity" that will motivate caring response (Hollan, 2008: 486). This is a power that politicians and promotional campaigns exploit by wielding cherubic images without concern for what actual children will make of these representations (Spray, 2020). It is a power cultivated through evolution; as humans' uniquely delayed maturation creates opportunity for an extended period of skills development, children's neotenic features draw care from older kin and community (Bogin, 1990). It is a power that children need, a power that is core to their agency, compensating for their physical and structural powerlessness. Love creates bonds, bonds create security, and security insures survival.

Children's power to elicit loving care has also been under-analysed in relation to research with children. Since the turn towards research with, rather than on, children, researchers have emphasised both children's agency and the power differential between adult researchers and child participants. Scholarship on ethics in child research has focused on the power of adult researchers to coerce, and sometimes, the power of children to resist or circumvent research for their own agenda (e.g. Christensen, 2004; Gallagher, 2008). But we have stayed away from love, even as children's affective power is most apparent in fieldwork or research that develops extended relationships between adult researchers and child participants.

Indeed, the reality of love in fieldwork is rarely acknowledged even in research with adults. Founded in patriarchal notions of the dichotomy between intellect and emotion, scholarly research has traditionally pursued objective truth. Love has been part of the "hidden ethnography" (Blackman, 2007), excised from ethnographic accounts as feminine—and therefore irrelevant—subjectivity with no place in scientific research (Dominguez, 2000; Gearing, 1995). These ideas have been challenged through the reflexive and feminist turns in ethnographic research, where scholars argued that taking emotions seriously as part of the research process expands possibilities for understanding the 'other' as well as ourselves (Davies and Spencer, 2010; Luhrman, 1989; Rosaldo, 2004; Spencer, 2011). Moreover, the nature of ethnographic research—long-term immersion in a field, involving sustained and often deep relationships—invites forms of love to develop that may shape or drive the work researchers do (Dominguez, 2000). The last decade has particularly seen a proliferation of scholarly accounts employing "emotional reflexivity"—the practice of attending to how researcher and participant emotions shape the research—to analyze the emotional labor of fieldwork and simultaneously challenge dominant patriarchal assumptions about how research should be done (Asante et al., 2021; Chileshe, 2016; Holmes, 2010). This work has, however, tended to focus on researchers' distress or trauma with ethical concern for harm, and accounts that center the dynamics of love in the field remain rare.

Love for children is even trickier territory. Children's vulnerability and dependency in many contexts and power imbalances of adult-child relationships means that any kind of research with children is pre-emptively assumed risky by ethics review boards. Since the amplification of child protection measures in the latter 20th century in the global West, non-kin adult-child relationships have become marked with suspicion alongside growing awareness of child sexual abuse and the "stranger danger" moral panic of the 1980s, what Kitzinger describes as a "siege mentality" that encourages parents, particularly mothers, to "keep all other adults (literally) at arms' length" (1990: 153). Because of its conflation with sex, love felt for or expressed to children can *feel* dangerous, an issue commonly framed in the education literature as "good and bad touch" in professional contexts where attachment and affection are also considered critical to child development (Piper, 2014; Piper and Smith, 2003; Tobin, 1997). Indeed, in framing this analysis of research with children in terms of *love*, rather than care or affection, I found myself picking words more carefully. If love between adult researchers and adult participants is hidden ethnography, then love in child research is taboo.

Yet children are not passive research participants but active agents who build their own relationships and make researchers into whom they need them to be (Hunleth, 2011). Love, therefore, is not only about us and what we do. I experienced children's agency during my 15 months of research alongside 120 children aged 8-12 at Tūrama School where, from almost the first day I joined them, I was overwhelmed with children as physical agents who used their bodies with me. When I sat on the steps outside classrooms to eat lunch girls wedged themselves next to be, thighs snug against mine. Children hung over my shoulders, linked their arms around mine, my skin dampened with the sweat that slicked theirs. Some children hugged their teachers hello and goodbye, and they hugged me too.[2] When I sat on the classroom mat children snuggled into my side. On playgrounds

younger children not enrolled in the study also engaged with me, some in repeated, affective encounters that disturbed me for the desperate need I felt from them. I found children use research processes and relationships to meet their emotional needs, including their need for love. And, I came to love these children, not least because they demanded love from me. I felt warm and liked and comforted when they sought proximity and touch from me. Feeling wanted is a powerful comfort in a strange place. These experiences suggest that whether we talk about it or not, love is a potent spectre in at least some research.

In this article I therefore trace how love influenced my research with children to suggest how we might approach love in child research and what we can learn about childhood by confronting love. How is love produced in fieldwork, and what might that tell us about how children and love co-produce love in other contexts? What does love do for researchers and for children, and what should we do with love?

I frame these questions in terms of love, rather than care or affection, because while I gave love in the form of affective care, feelings of love were at the heart of my motivation. These feelings are what bell hooks identifies as *cathexis*: "When we feel deeply drawn to someone, we cathert with them; that is, we invest feelings or emotions in them (hooks, 2001: 5). Cathexis tends to be skirted around in the scholarly discussions of love between non-kin adults and children that have long appeared in the education literature. After distinguishing "love as a feeling" from "love as an ethic," hooks suggests that many mislearn love as the former at the neglect of the latter. Borrowing from Peck's (1978) definition of a love ethic: "the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth," hooks sees love as not only felt but *enacted* through an interdependent mix of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust (hooks, 2001, 2003). A love ethic, then, is an approach, a way of regarding, a set of principles for practice. Many scholars have also located this ethic, sometimes re-termed radical love, as intrinsic to social research, a broader collective struggle for justice, or a politics of love rooted in Freire's (1996) critical pedagogy and its commitment to people and their liberation (Cervantes-Soon, 2017; Silver, 2020). Yet when it comes to children, radical love may sound too risky. Scholars attempting to legitimise the necessity of attachment and affection in child-care and education settings have instead produced the rather sterile concept of "professional love," often connected to children's socio-emotional development (Page, 2008, 2011, 2018).

Because fields that include caring practice have often been devalued as "feminine," a socio-historical struggle for status may have necessitated reformulating love between non-kin adults and children in scientific terms: as ethical practice for the purpose of child development, psychological wellbeing or educational achievement (Recchia et al., 2018). However, this "scientification" (Weingart, 1997) of love also circumvents the taboo aspects of love in childhood contexts. Focus on scientific practice and ethics elides how feelings of love develop and play out in the research or teaching field, overlooks children's loving practices and feelings, and turns children into passive recipients of adult action. I entered the field with a set of caring ethical principles[3] but it was feelings of love that I found unexpected and disorienting. And, I am not alone in feeling I lacked an emotional compass. Anthropologists have reflected on how their training censored emotional

reactions as "illogical, biased, and inappropriate" (Chileshe, 2016: 49) and instead provided advice on how to manage or control emotions in the field (Spencer, 2011) or directed students towards certain affective states and away from others according to disciplinary convention (Shrestha, 2007). Such training, these scholars report, ill-prepared them for the emotional realities of fieldwork with people in vulnerable circumstances. Indeed, my approach to emotional relationalities came not from any anthropological directive but from my training as an NGO youth helpline volunteer where emotions were to be felt, accepted and explored rather than controlled. As Spencer (2011) argues, approaches that aim to manage, mute or suppress emotions represent a fortifying of defences that ultimately prevent us from analysing emotional engagements and preclude an understanding of emotions and their role in knowledge production. After all, researchers and children alike navigate our worlds through our emotions, through empathically reading the affect of others and following the emotional guide-ropes that direct our attention and actions (Gearing, 1995). Cathexis, then, was core to our interpersonal relationships and powerfully shaped the research processes, including the data we coproduced. To neglect attending to feelings of love would be an unethical denial of a primordial force that motivated our work together in the field.

At the same time, Heather Montgomery cautions us that "adult-child relations are inseparable from the wider political, social and economic relations" (2007: 422). The children who attended Tūrama School were at the 99th percentile for socio-economic disadvantage. Approximately 75% were Indigenous Māori, and 20% had Pacific migrant backgrounds, mostly Tongan or Samoan. The overlap between deprivation and ethnicity has been produced through Aotearoa's history of colonisation, systemic racism, and, since the 1990s, neoliberal economic policies that have further amplified housing and employment inequities (Dunsford et al., 2011; Reid et al., 2019). My relationship to these children and the love they elicited from me was very much shaped by their precarious socio-economic circumstances, situations that made me a valuable resource. And, I was moved by their structural vulnerability. My love for them echoes colonial dynamics that have globally drawn salvationist white women to "rescue" coloured children. Historically, this love was often enacted as institutionalisation or other forms of family removal, while blaming coloured parents for their children's strife and ignoring the structural violence and neglect wrought upon children's communities (Webster, 2021). I, too, imagined taking kids home with me. For researchers working with marginalised children, particularly, love in the field is fraught with the tensions of power and privilege that without reflexivity may lead us to reproduce historical harms. *How to love* the other is an issue that extends well beyond children or even humans, as multi-species ethnographers have illustrated; love for animals may drive conservation efforts or, undirected, our reductive desire to possess them (McLauchlan, 2019). Children, too, need us to love them in certain ways—and these needs may contradict our own inclinations or adultist social norms. These tensions are why we must pay attention to love—not to deny or sanction feelings, but as with any power, to recognise, understand, and harness it towards ethical action.

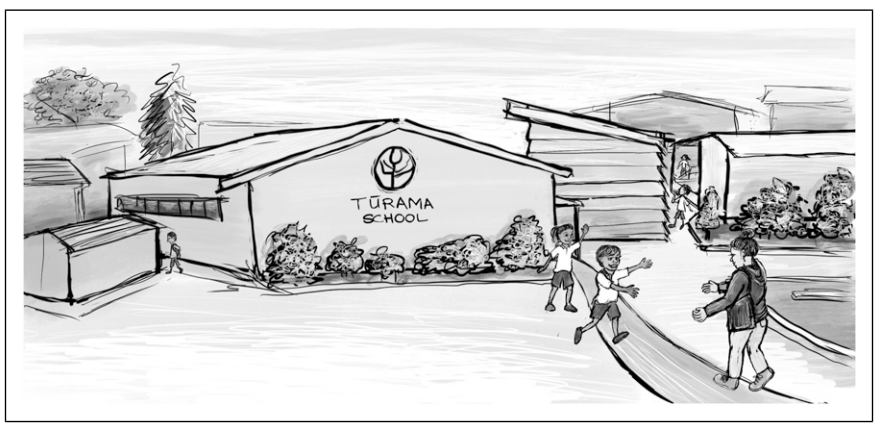
In this analysis I take love as a starting point from which I trace the relationalities that both produced and were produced by my emotional experience, and what these interactions can tell us about lived childhoods as well as the relational processes of conducting research with

children. I accomplish this tracing through a hybrid process of writing and drawing. In choosing to represent much of the data underpinning this analysis in graphic form, I follow a lineage of visual anthropologists who have demonstrated the capacity of image to convey dimensions of the sensory and emotional lives we encounter in fieldwork (Causey, 2017; Hamdy and Nye, 2017; Pink, 2004; Taussig, 2011). Dominguez (2000) shows how the love and affection researchers feel for participants, excised from written accounts via professional socialisation and scholarly writing conventions, can often slip into anthropological work via photographs. This is also true of drawing here. Rendering the small humans I knew and loved was a physical act of tenderness, care, and memorialising; when I left the field at the end of the school year I recreated their faces in pastel and paint to grieve them. This is also what children do: draw pictures of and for the ones they love (Hunleth, 2019; Spray, 2021).

Drawing was not only a vehicle for emotional processing or representation, however, but an analytic tool that demanded a recorporealising of our interactions, foregrounding how physical touch and proximity served in the emotional relations children and I coproduced.[4] I have written previously about how ethnographic drawing enabled me attend to children's embodied practices in ways more expansive than the written word alone could represent, conveying "the way children held and used their bodies, how bodies expressed affection and vulnerability and power, and how bodies existed in space and in relation to each other—and in relation to me" (Spray, 2020: 197). Children used their bodies to express and generate affection and our physicalities were core to the relationship. In writing here about love, I am describing processes that were deeply embodied, processes that I feel and remember in flashes of moments rather than self-conscious narratives. As a direct mode of representation, drawing does not demand the belabored cognitive processing required to translate sensations and emotions into words and meaning. Through image, I can find the embodied dimensions of those feelings and flashes, as I remember them.

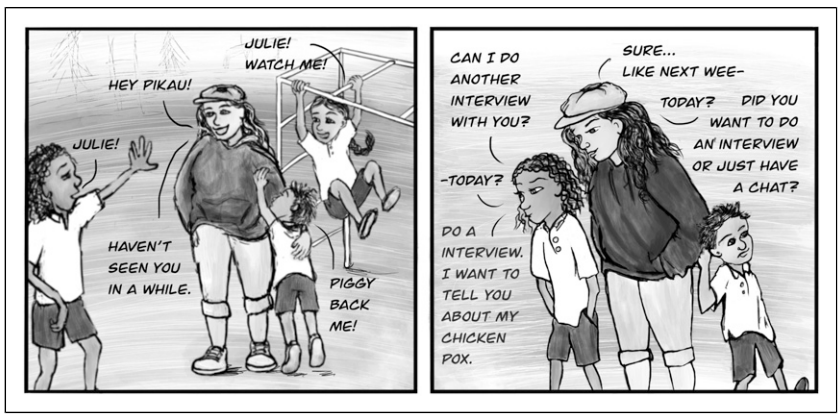
Joining Tūrama School

In late 2014 I joined Tūrama School in Papakura, a district of South Auckland characterised by high levels of ethnic and socio-economic inequity, for a study of children's



health (details in Spray, 2020). Initially intended to be a study of asthma, when I began participant-observation alongside the school's six senior classes I was quickly confronted with a constellation of health issues affecting Tūrama School children which formed the basis for a broader study of children's perceptions and responses to inequitable circumstances and the services that attempt to mitigate legacies of colonisation, systemic racism and neoliberal economic policy. While I took on variable roles where needed—as teacher aide, adult-supervisor on field trips, and volunteer face painter at the school fair—in general I tried to maintain a "different-kind-of adult" role (Christensen, 2004) in relation to the children; I did not deny my adults status (and privilege) but symbolically and practically aligned myself with the children rather than adult authorities (for discussion of how I encountered the limits of this role, see Spray, 2020). I introduced myself to children by explaining what research was and identified myself as a researcher who was there to learn from them about what it was like to be a child. I explained that if they and their caregiver permitted me, I would make notes about what I saw and use them to tell other adults about what they had gotten wrong about children. I developed a relational mode that I termed the *transparent guest*, whereby I practiced direct and honest communication about the nature of my role and the rules that governed my behaviour differently from other children and adults in the field (Spray, 2020). That approach also kept the purpose of my being there, for research, present in our interactions.

Towards the end of 2015 I invited all and interviewed the 41 children for whom I received assent and parental consent. Families had their choice of interview location and most chose for their child to talk with me alone after school in a disused classroom that had been repurposed as a clinic. I also interviewed some children at their homes, where a caregiver usually joined for all or part of our conversation. A number of children chose to be interviewed with their friends or siblings in groups of two or three, and some enjoyed the experience so much they requested to be interviewed again, which I accommodated when possible. In this community, children of this age group would often spend afternoons hanging around the neighborhood with school friends, siblings, or cousins, and so interviews became another interesting after school diversion. When children asked to participate, I could find myself hastily contacting a parent to check if their child could stay for an interview that afternoon.



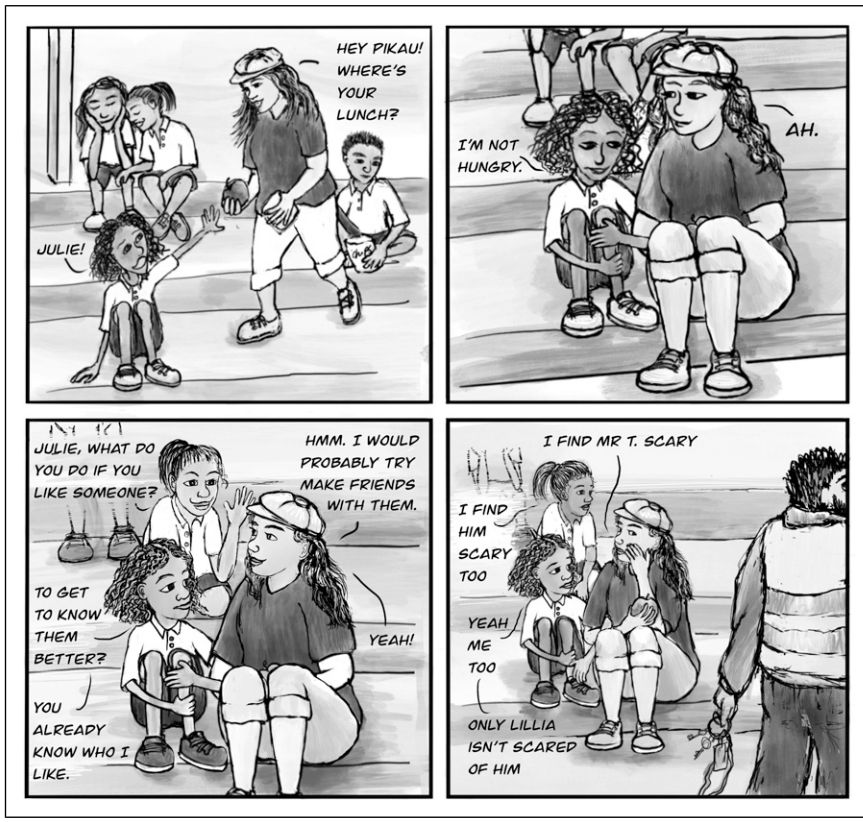
I began interviews with a conversation about the interview procedures and children's various rights (ie to "pass" on any question, to stop the recorder or leave at any time). While I had prepared questions about children's experiences of health and illness, I made it clear that children were welcome to talk about whatever was important to them, and group interviews in particular often traversed diverse subjects including children's perceptions of neighbourhood safety, conflicts between friends, and family deaths. I also supplied paper and pens for drawing and snacks. So provided with this open and flexible space, children could repurpose interviews for a range of agendas: to socialise, explore ideas, occupy time, eat, and seek social support. Participating in research became, contrary to typical teacher-led classroom activities, a way that children could practice self-authorship (Cervantes-Soon, 2017) through humanising processes of mutuality, trust, reciprocity and care—the conditions that foster love.

How is love produced in fieldwork with children?

Much recent education literature has focused on justifying the role and purpose of love in education settings where love (and corollaries such as touch and attachment) has been "professionalized" as part of a package of ethical and developmentally stimulating practices delivered from caregiving adults to care-receiving children (Cousins, 2017; Page, 2008).[5] Love may characterise the affect of the adult actor or, as bell hooks suggests, form a byproduct of the processes and conditions required for good pedagogy; the same work of care and nurture that enables (academic, socio-emotional) growth also "forms the context where love flourishes" (hooks, 2003: 130). These philosophies suggest that love in school contexts is justified by its role—either directly or secondarily—in producing healthy adults. There are very few accounts of how adults enjoy loving touch from children, for example, because adult desires are secondary to the developing child (King, 1997) and because expressing pleasure from a child's touch may be misinterpreted as sexual desire (Piper and Smith, 2003; Tobin, 1997). Yet, a view of love so blinkered by professionalism and scientific aspiration cannot tell us much about how love is produced.

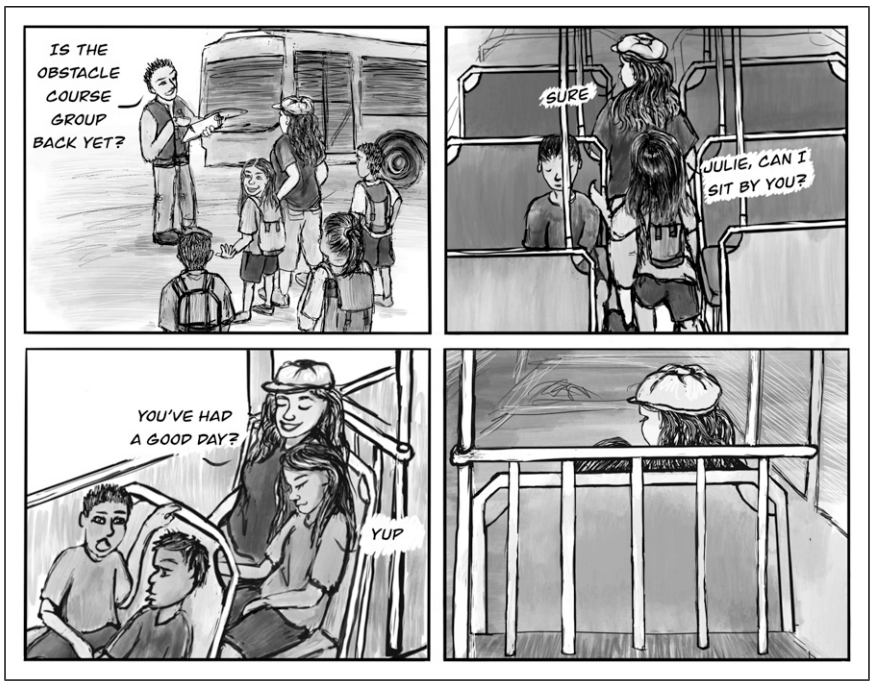
Indeed, in research our purpose is not to nurture children's development (though child research is often justified in developmental terms). Nor should it be; children's growth and development is often invoked to justify practices that simply recognise them as human—that children wish for or have the right to love (or touch) is insufficient unless that love can be deemed useful to developing a future adult. But if our research is to be built on mutual relationship, rather than colonial extraction—if we see our data as generated (relational) versus collected (extractive)—then love might be expected to flourish under the conditions created by good, ethical research. Data generation requires mutual communion, and mutual communion both requires and produces respect, commitment, responsibility, care—the ingredients of hooks' love ethic. My positioning fostered loving relationships embodied in every interaction; I was there primarily not to educate or socialise children but to listen to and learn from them (Cope, 2008). In contrast to teachers, who felt they should discourage talk of peer romances, for example, I could hear and take seriously children's confidences and answer questions about their romantic awakenings without

moralising. Legitimating children and their ideas as worthy of attention is a loving act and produces loving relationships.



I experienced love differently from the children who befriended me, though. As an adult and a researcher I held knowledge of children's lives derived from history, psychology, social sciences and public health statistics. I saw children spinning on the playground and knew, without knowing exactly whom, that some—many—of them were abused at home, that they saw their loved ones sick or violent, that they engaged in self-harm. I knew as they moved to high school that someone would take their own life, as they grew into adulthood that someone would be imprisoned. Those knowings have been confirmed over the 7 years since. On the soccer field, in the classroom, at the picnic table where we ate lunch I could see them in the antechamber of the system that reproduces injustice; the system that for them was unremarkable, normal life. And so, my love for them was a painful love. It was a love from knowing too much and doing too little, of

compassion, helplessness, grief, anger. It was a love imbued with shame that my society labels these kind, funny, bright children as problems and clings to punishment and personal responsibility as perceived antidotes to systemic injustice—and shame for my complicity in that society. It was a love that could divert shame into power. How could I mute, manage, or professionalize that love? I could not, so I did not. I just felt it.



Love was not just delivered by me, however, nor simply a byproduct of my positioning and practices. Loving relationships were also products of children's agency,[6] generated by their efforts to survive their structural circumstances. In settings where adults hold power and children are marginalized, adults create spaces of safety or unsafety for children who often have little choice about where they can be. As with most childhood institutions, Tūrama School was founded upon adult authority, manifested in different rules governing child and adult behaviours, spaces, and freedoms. There were spaces that felt unsafe even to me, who could choose to be there or not (and I did choose to avoid some classes). There were classrooms where teachers screamed and slammed tables. There were assemblies where children were shamed in front of the school. And, while teachers patrolled the playgrounds at break times to prevent or intervene with incidents, there were children who bullied and children who were victimized by peers. My adult status immunized me from much of these dangers. Neither a child nor a teacher, I had my own distinct agency to

move between adult and child spaces and relationships (Spray, 2020). I was neither disciplined as my child friends would be nor expected to enact discipline as expected of adult staff. My positionality within the school allowed me to produce myself as a safe person for children. It meant that spaces I occupied became safer for children, who were less likely to be interfered with by staff or other children when they were with me, and, children themselves suggested, because staff and students adjusted their behaviour in my presence.

Children, in turn, co-created relationships with me that insured their claim to proximity. Hunleth (2017) reports the importance of proximity for children especially in circumstances where their security is threatened; children aspire to "get closer" to adults upon whom they are dependent for survival and create interdependencies through affective and practical closeness and care. At Tūrama School children similarly sought safety through relationship with me, requesting I sit next to them and using affectionate touch to solidify our bond. As I find through drawing our bodies in these moments, I did not position myself in a role so much as children *positioned me*—literally repositioning my body to attend to them, calling me into proximity and linking my arm around theirs, making me into the confidant they wanted. They created such relations of proximity and touch with friends, also, but in my special adult position I held power their friends did not. When they called out to me to sit with them and snuggled into my side, I felt my privilege as love.

And, as I depicted these close moments and found myself reliving the sensory elements of softness and smell and temperature, I recalled how children's demands for my body actually met a package of needs, including need for physical warmth. Children at Tūrama School were required to wear a school uniform but many families could not afford the long pants and sweatshirts or replacements for uniform items that were misplaced or dirty (Spray, 2020). As children would be disciplined for visibly wearing non-uniform items, children were frequently under-clothed in winter. My adult body generated more heat and I had the privilege of choosing my own clothes and the luxury of jackets, harts, scarves, and warm boots. I was therefore an appealing body to snuggle against. Huddling for warmth creates emotional intimacy, and this physical closeness extended to warmer seasons as well.

My status as a safe person also meant I saw and held vulnerable moments. Children at Tūrama School did not often disclose or discuss their personal tragedies directly, but expressed their feelings of vulnerability through presence, appearing next to me to stand for a moment of quiet proximity or calling me over when they sat alone waiting for the "eating" portion of the break to end. After months of proximity I might be allowed some insight into their home life. In one instance, I was hanging on a swing with my 11-year-old friend Ngawaina discussing the relationships between children at the school. "It seems like a lot of kids have relatives here at school, but also like sometimes kids pretend they're related to their friends," I commended. Ngawaina and another girl, Ina, had recently begun calling each other their wives.

Ngawaina laughed. "Yes, that's true!"

"Because it makes you seem closer?"

"Yes!" She seemed delighted with my interpretation.

"Do you have anyone you call sister?"

"Yeah of course, her," Ngawaina said, pointing at a young girl who was Ina's biological sister.

"Oh yeah," I mused. "Because Ina's your wife so her sister is your sister."

> Ngawaina nodded, and then in the kind of non-sequitur I was accustomed to from children added, "my dad's in a men's refuge."
>
> "Oh, he doesn't live with you?"
>
> "No, my mum kicked him out. She wants a divorce. They're getting a divorce in February."
>
> "Was there a lot of fighting before they split?" I asked.
>
> "Yeah," she replied. "I used to hide in my room and cry."
>
> "That's a tough thing. I had that with my parents too. That's a really tough thing for kids to deal with." She nodded, and the bell rang. We headed back to class.

This sort of disclosure was rare, in part because children were wary of how state authorities could intervene on suspected child protection issues (See Spray, 2020). When they happened, though, disclosures functioned as feelers for trust, creating an intimacy that fostered affectionate love and care.

Children's agency to elicit love was socially enabled and constrained in ways both aged and gendered. Berman (2019) describes how the social acceptability of certain behaviors varies according to an individual's age (or generational) status; in the Marshall Islands, children are able to perform activities that are socially inappropriate for adults. At Tūrama School, children's relationship to me, and how that relationship was enacted, shifted with age. While small children could beg me for cuddles or piggybacks, for example, such behavior was marked as babyish and shameful for older children, whose touch took more adult forms such as a brief hug of greeting. Relationships were even more marked by gender; most of my intimate interactions were with girls as gendered norms discouraged boys from engaging in touch, disclosures, or emotional intimacy.[7] My relations with boys tended to be established through jocular interactions and play. Boys, when they disclosed personal pain, masked their disclosures with jokes or bravado, granting me access to their private knowledge while maintaining their masculine identities. While I was quicker to love the girls, then, these rare and highly defended moments of masculine vulnerability drew a special compassion from me, even as I colluded in the mutual pretense that we were just joking around.

Interpreting resonances

Writing on love as experienced by Simbo mothers in the Solomon Islands, anthropologist Christine Dureau (2012: 143) asks: "when can an anthropologist take experiences to be sufficiently alike to know others' sentiments?" Here I echo the question: how did I know how to interpret children's affectionate behaviors? At the time I felt quite certain I understood what drove them to cultivate my love. But how?

Determining our capacity to understand cultural other's emotions has been a long-term project in anthropology (Briggs, 2008; Hollan, 2008; Rosaldo, 2004; Wikan, 1992). For Dureau, this question arose as she experienced her young daughter falling ill and realized her feelings for her child deviated from the kind of love Simbo mothers expressed for

theirs. By tracing the incongruities in her empathy, Dureau identified how Simbo mothers' experienced love for children as refracted with compassion and pity from the bleak political-economic circumstances of Simbo childhoods and futures. Our phenomenological *experience* of emotions is therefore shaped by our social and historical emplacement. We feel as our circumstances allow us.

As outsiders, however, we may begin to access others' feelings through intersubjective work—the process of configuring who we are in relation to one another and thus developing empathic understandings of another's subjective and emplaced experience. As Christina Toren characterizes intersubjectivity: "At any given point, I speak to you my present ideas of who you are and of our relationship, and you answer back to your present ideas of who I am and of our relationship" (2009: 136). In practice, as Dureau describes, this may look like "an untraceable oscillation between their and my comments, questions and answers, an endless dialectic of unnoted shifts in significance, of reasons for speaking, and whatever else might have been going on in those tellings to which I was oblivious" (2012: 152). For adult researchers, empathizing with children requires careful attention to the distinct intersubjectivities produced between adults and children. Especially where power differentials are stark, children may speak fewer direct verbalisations than do adults, demanding whole-body attunement to the silences and discomforted postures that children use to indicate incongruity. And while adult researchers can never experience childhood *as children*, we may find ways to slip categories towards a consonant sense of the child other. For Briggs (2008), this category slip occurred with her child-like entry into Inuit life where, lacking the language, skills, or cultural competencies of adults, she was cast as a child and socialized and cared for as with young Inuit children who were similarly non-verbal, needy, and dependent.

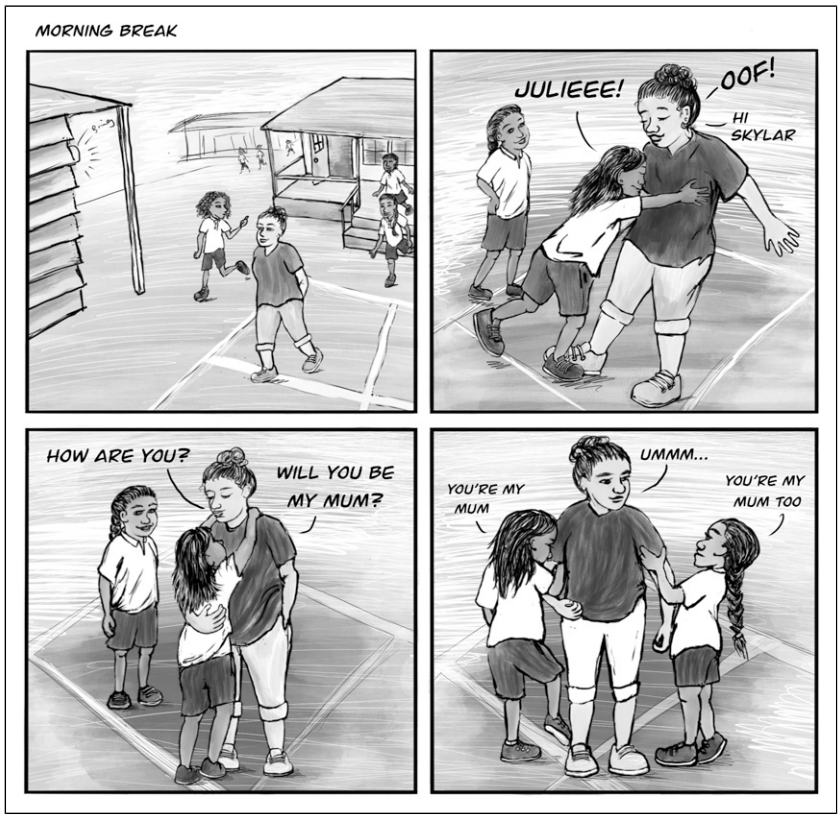
I found consonance with children's subjectivity through the embodied memories of my past self, the child I had been. Both children's emotional experience of me and I of them were shaped by our vastly different respective positions in the political-economy of New Zealand. I had been a "Kiwi kid" but the affluent, predominantly Pākehā (New Zealand European) area where I grew up was a different world to theirs. Our intersubjective encounters included examining our marked differences of skin color and accent. But where I entered the field anticipating differences, I also felt similarities—*felt* similarities, as visceral, embodied resonances. I allude to Wikan's (1992) concept of resonances as distinguishing understanding produced through feelings versus only thought, but for me these resonances were acute, an embodied sense of recognition, an awakening of feelings long dormant. I was surprised and disturbed and sometimes deeply triggered by relived/re-lived experiences of childhood vulnerabilities, joys, injustices, misunderstandings, and unsafeties. When I sat alongside children I was not one of them but I *had been* there. Emotional resonances pointed to a common experience of age-based oppression and power, of *being a child* in a colonial institution where adult authority reigned. In some ways their school lives were more similar to mine than contemporary peers in more affluent schools with democratized classes and smart technologies; I remembered intimidating teachers, playground politics, and parents who mostly left school as our business. I also knew what it was to stay vigilant at home for unpredictable dangers. And, slipping categories via my child self who had once been there, I understood who I was to

some of them. Their needs resonated with my childhood memories of seeking adult attention. In our intersubjective reckoning with each other, therefore, there were two of my selves responding and being responded to: my adult self who gave love and care, and my child self who knew why it was needed.

I trust my resonances to guide my interpretation of children's affection because their intersubjective responses were congruent with mine, and because the resonances ended where our experiences diverged. I recognized little of children's racialised experiences, for example. We also differed in how we responded to our experiences. Where I processed my resonances in therapy, children disconcerted me with their ability to move on—nay, joke, play with, even hug the teachers who had earlier shamed or frightened them. Where I withdrew from uncomfortable people—because I could—children sought to reconnect, to resecure the relationship. They did so, I believe, because affective relations made unsafety safer. When the people children depend upon for survival behave badly, the threshold for forgiveness is by necessity low.

Children as system builders

Skylar was the first child to start calling me "mum" but she was not the last. Over the course of a morning and lunch break I acquired four daughters, a sister and a niece and



nephew, the precise affiliations shifting as children tried on new kinship identities. I responded with playful acceptance. Claiming kin ties was not in itself unusual, as I'd observed with Ngawaina, and children often pointed out their biological siblings or cousins on the playground. Girls, in particular, could also name close friends as sisters, mothers, or wives, securing the relationship through social legitimacy when friendships are ephemeral but family are always family.


MUM!
MUM!
YEAH,
MUM!
I'M MUM
AM I?
WELL... GO CHANGE
YOUR CLOTHES!
EAT YOUR DINNER!
GO TO BED!
NOOO! I
DON'T
WANNA!
I WILL CHANGE
MY CLOTHES
AND EAT MY
DINNER AND GO
TO BED.
NO SHE'S
MY MUM.
SHE'S MY
AUNTIE
CAN YOU BE
MY MUM TOO?
AWW BYE
SWEETHEART
BYE MUM!
WILL YOU BE
IN MY CLASS
TOMORROW?
NO I'M SWEETHEART.
SHE'S BABY.

> "Some of the kids keep calling me 'Mum,'" I said to a senior academic who had enquired about how my fieldwork was going. Her eyes widened.
>
> "Oh you need to put a stop to that."

The professor's concern was clear, but her reason was less so—she gestured towards the danger of attachment. As I revisit these interactions, I reflect on how this professor so quickly interpreted my sense that *something was happening* to infer something was potentially unsafe, unethical, or a breach of professional boundaries. In advising me to shut "that" down, she forestalled any enquiry into how I experienced these interactions or what they might suggest about these children's childhoods. Nor did we discuss how I might go about stopping children from claiming kinship ties to me or what that rejection might mean.

Emplaced as I was in those relationships, I did not try to tell children they could not call me mum or sister. That decision was partially an emotional one. The children had made me fictive kin, and in doing so had enhanced our loving bonds—similar to what Toren (2009) describes in a Fijian context as the mutually constituting relationship between kinship and love.[8] I wanted to stay in relationship with them, and, recognising their need in those resonances from my younger self—a need I had considered pathological in myself—I felt rejecting their attachment would also pathologise theirs. My sense was that, while I saw no evidence of harm from our relationships, withdrawing or withholding the affection they requested from me could be harmful, as well as incongruent with my relational approach. If, as Dominguez (2000) encourages, we enact a politics of love in the field—"the kind of love we feel for family members"—then we cannot object when research participants see us as family. Indeed, ethnographers commonly forge kin-like relationships with adult informants without comment—several of my doctoral cohort had "mothers" in the field. Should this change when informants make themselves our children?

But, the professor's concern also came from a particular view of children as vulnerable and of childhood attachments as loci for harm—especially when I left the field. Indeed, the work of Bowlby, Ainsworth and successors (Bretherton, 1992) has established attachment processes (as historically conceived, to a single primary caregiver) as both critical for healthy development and fraught with potential for rupture. Such views triggered a crisis in professional childcare and early childhood education settings, where children are separated from their primary caregiver for long periods to be cared for what can be a revolving door of staff. However, contemporary approaches in practice fields now hold that children can form secure attachments to professional caregivers without disruption to home relationships and without significant harm when the child or professional moves on (Page and Elfer, 2013; Piper et al., 2006). Still, I put a great deal of thought into how our research relationship would end. Multiple layers of gatekeeping, including my ethics agreement and social media age restrictions, precluded the kind of

ongoing relationships with children that I was able to maintain with teachers and staff. Concluding my fieldwork at the end of the school year co-incided my departure with the closing of children's other relationships—with their teacher, their classroom space, for many the school itself—and I took advantage of the ending rituals: attending graduation; gifting students with photographs and cards with personal notes and my university email address in case anyone wished to reach out. When I revisited the school 6 months later, children initially crowded me with greetings but, after 5 minutes, drifted back to their business—they had moved on. The few occasions when I met children in the following years—most notably, at funerals—they greeted me with the warmth of a fondly remembered former relationship, like an old teacher. While I cannot know, therefore, if I caused any harm by accepting children's attachments to me, 7 years on, my sense is that I was simply giving them something they needed for a time. Nourishment is nourishing, even for limited periods.

In receiving children's attachments I saw how children, as agentive beings, survive their marginalisation and precarity. While child development fields usually focus on adult provisioning or children's behaviors towards meeting immediate and basic needs such as food, sleep, shelter or comfort, my experiences of love and related processes of empathy, care, touch and attachment show how children work to secure their own survival *system* that produces resources and protects safety. Children found in me resources such as food and warmth, an empathetic ear, a powerful ally, and a presence that was not just a safe space for them but that modified others' behaviour, making unsafe people safer. They secured those resources into their survival systems through touch, affection, creating kinships, and encouraging me to love them.

When Pikau cried our interview shifted sideways. For the remainder of our conversation, which included discussions of her experiences of self-harm and life-long bullying, I focused on emotional care, risk assessment, and a plan for Pikau to talk to her teacher.

Why had Pikau insisted that our conversation be held as an interview? On previous occasions Pikau had come to walk and talk with me about things that were bothering her and so she knew, when I offered to have a chat, that she could get support this way. Pikau also had prior experience of participating in an interview with me. Although her first interview had mainly focused on her experiences and understandings of illness, I suspect Pikau had determined that an interview offered a private space and formal framework for emotional disclosures and compassionate support. And, she had previously established me as part of her survival system, those early days in my fieldwork when she would call me over to sit with her at lunch and evade my enquiries about why she had no food. The closeness we had when she was a 10-year-old waned as she moved into the intermediate level class, where I spent less time. But the relationship meant I had always been a resource to her. I loved her because she sought my care, and I cared for her because I loved her. Our love and care had, in fact, become a vehicle I used for the research, just as she used the research to meet her own needs. But while our data generation was never free from the power imbalances that traded her information for my social and emotional resources, I do not mean to imply love functioned as part of a capitalistic exchange of resources. I simply mean that tracing the reciprocal processes through which love is produced in fieldwork can illuminate how children create their own systems with which to navigate those systems they are thrust into.

Concluding discussion: What should we do with love?

"*How* we love matters" writes McLauchlan (2019: 516) of hedgehogs in Britain, but also of everything we feel drawn to, because the objects of our affections often need different things from us than what we, in all our projections and assumptions, may feel compelled to give. Loving Tūrama School children meant presence of body and attention, sometimes closeness and sometimes jokes, accepting touch or letting go. Both children and wild critters need us to make ourselves and our spaces safe and accessible for them to incorporate into their systems for surviving or thriving, and not enclose them out of care for our own painful love rather than their autonomy. *Knowing* how the other needs us to love them means attuning ourselves to their invitations and discomforts and to our own empathic resonances to the child we were or could imagine being. And, I argue, responsive love requires us to *feel* and *attend* to feeling, reflexively, and honestly. If our goal is to work for understanding, justice, and a good life, then a sanitised or managed love is a damp fuel for those fires.

Attending to love is also important for a reflexive understanding of our knowledge production, and because love will tell us things about childhood, adulthood, and between, and all the aged, gendered and racialised dynamics that shape our intersubjectivities. By attending to feeling, I learnt that love is not something adults and children give and receive, but something coproduced, something we responsively draw from each other, in our differently aged and gendered ways, for our different reasons. Through drawing, I found love to be built from moments too fleeting for writing to do justice to their power. Fleshing out the mechanics of love, drawing recorporealised our relationships to pay weight to a touch, a call, outstretched arms, a head laid on a shoulder, the vulnerability of a

small body next to a big one. I saw how love operates in specific ways for children, securing safety and survival, especially if those children are socio-economically marginalised. Love for children gives researchers fuel and also, perhaps, legitimacy, a sense that our presence is meaningful and wanted. Yet a sense of love as legitimising can be a dangerous rationalisation for our presence in unequal circumstances, too, when that love is partially produced from our resources. And as love serves different needs, our attachments will form, persist and wane over different time periods. The most persistent attachments from my fieldwork, it seems, are mine. I have stayed in loving relation to these children much longer as I work with their data and the material remnants of our time together: my drawings, their notes in the tiny book. My lingering attachments to them are very much entangled with my continued agenda—to produce scholarly knowledge from those relations.

These insights from my experiences of love in fieldwork—how we coproduce love, what love does for children and for us—likely extend to adult-child relationships in other contexts: teaching, coaching, counselling, caregiving. These are also contexts where love has most commonly been associated with abuse and so love has been rejected, hidden, or suppressed. I suggest that the answer to abuse is light, not shadow. Enlightening our relationships with children means attending to love, to feel it, name it, and observe it: where it comes from, for whom, how it is and is not expressed and why, and what it does for us and for others. We should also attend to the absence of love and what takes its place, because apathy has things to tell us too. Allowing oneself to feel and accept a love that is painful, that is brewed with grief, anger, shame, or helplessness may be the first radical act towards a politics of love that drives justice.

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Notes

1. The name of Tūrama School and all participants are pseudonyms.
2. Though touch between teachers and students is discouraged or prohibited in some New Zealand schools, Tūrama School did not have a touch policy. When I enquired, I got the sense that such a policy would be seen as impractical if not culturally and developmentally inappropriate—perhaps because children made their need and desire for touch so apparent.
3. I practiced an ethic of care grounded in Carl Roger's (1951) person-centred therapeutic approach as a mode of interaction in the field. This meant receiving and following children's approaches with unconditional positive regard, genuineness (congruency), transparency and empathy.
4. I rendered the drawings digitally using the Procreate software on an iPad with an Apple pencil. This medium enables a "scribble and erase" drawing process whereby I would roughly outline and then remake, resituate and refine figures through erasing, redrawing, layering, selecting and moving elements. Because the software enables much easier modifications than traditional pencil and paper, this was an analytically useful process which allowed me to focus on refining the details of bodily form, interactions and relationships.
5. Though Page (2018) recently elaborated the concept of "professional love" as occurring within reciprocal relationships, the education literature typically focuses on the adult caregiver or teacher's actions.
6. Though I distinguish between compassionate love and romantic or sexual love, I also note that to write of children's agency in love parallels an argument used by adults who wish to engage in paedophilia. To be clear, though children may elicit emotions from us, adults are responsible for responding with appropriate regard for consequences that children may not apprehend.
7. My own agency was also gendered; a male researcher would face more social constraints around physical touch, for example.
8. Across many Pacific cultures, *whānau* (Māori), which loosely translates to "family" is a central organising structure. Whanaungatanganga (lit. family making) is a primary and essential relational process in Māori society that means to create connections that imply the belonging, rights and obligations of kinship. Children here may have been literalising whanaungatanga or "making whānau" by labelling their relationship to me (and to other children) with Pākehā kinship terms.

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