Rules for re-enchanting our relationship with play

Wendy Russell

This piece was originally written for inclusion in a book, but in the end that didn't happen. Keen for it to get out there, I used it for a presentation at a conference called Prioritizing Play in the autumn of 2020. Now it has a new life here, on the East Lothian Play Association (ELPA) website. The piece is all about looking beyond what play is, or even why it's important, to developing ways to pay attention to how it happens. It introduces some very practical ways to document children's play that will, I think, also help you reconnect with just how enchanting play is.

Here's a thing...

What if, what if... we stop obsessing over what play is (is it only play if it's freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated?[1] Can you have structured play or purposeful play or play-based learning?). What if, what if... we stop trying to convince people why it is important (it's for its own sake of course, but also it helps children learn, gets them physically active, builds resilience, is the basis for good mental health, is the panacea for all the ills of the 21st century)?

The great English children's author Michael Rosen recently said 'it's well known that if you pull humour apart, you can kill it stone dead';[2] maybe we do the same to play when we dissect it, fix it in definitions, impose our terribly serious adult rationality onto it, shackle it to worthy outcomes. Luckily, children care less about such earnestness and carry on playing regardless, in the cracks left in our adult orderings of their time and spaces.

So. What if, WHAT IF... we look instead at how play happens? Because we know that playful moments will erupt whenever the conditions allow. Perhaps what we should be doing then is paying attention to what those conditions are and using this as the basis for reflective practice in supporting children's right to play. I shall argue here that this is also a brilliant way of re-enchanting our relationship with play.

Let's start with an example. This is taken from my field notes for my doctoral research (some time ago now). I worked alongside a brilliant team of playworkers in a play centre in a city in the East Midlands of England, always carrying in my back pocket a small note book where I jotted things down and padded them out with the detail later.

I was talking to Corey who complained of being bored because her friend Kimberley was on holiday – she'd gone to Spain ("She shows off," said Corey, "but I'm going to Spain soon.") She'd been bored yesterday too because it had rained and they were going to go to the park but they couldn't because of the rain. They went to MacDonalds instead. She had a magic pen that did invisible writing which you then wrote over with the other bit and you could read it.
I asked her to write a secret message in my little fieldnote book. She wrote, very carefully " ".
I looked and said, "I can't see a thing. It really is invisible!" I gave it back and she carefully traced over the letters to reveal them and handed it back to me: "yoo ar Poow." I protested.

[1] This is the definition of play in the UK's Playwork Principles, the official professional and ethical framework for playwork practitioners.
[2] Michael Rosen: The Trick to Making Children Laugh, The Guardian, 28 July 2018.
[3] http://happymuseumproject.org/rules-playful-museum-2

We could get tied up here with deciding whether or not this was 'play', whether it was freely chosen or not, and what the benefits might be of such a moment of scatological nonsense. But we won't. I'll come back to this rather mundane, everyday, but still magical example later. For now, just enjoy it.

The title of this piece implies I'll be laying down the rules, but of course that's a playful title. Rules schmules. They are rules, they aren't rules. If you don't like the idea of rules, think of them as sensitising concepts. Bear with me while I give a little bit of context here. You can skip this bit if you want to get straight to the rules. But it might help you make sense of them.

I have been working in children's play for some 45 years, and the last 20 of those have been in academia. During those 20 years, things have come my way within an overall atmosphere that was at least tolerant if not overtly supportive of my personal desire to think differently about play, to disturb our habits of thought.

One of those was academic teaching. Another was access to books and journals. Another was my practitioner students. And another was the stuff that emerged from encounters with colleagues – a historian (my PhD supervisor), a philosopher (we ended up founding the biennial Philosophy at Play conferences and publishing several books), and of course my dear friend and mentor, Stuart Lester, with whom I worked on our postgraduate programme on Professional Studies in Children's Play and on several research studies. Together – and separately – we meandered down disciplinary pathways not well trodden by playworkers: philosophy, geography, anthropology, post-humanism, even quantum physics. This is where a lot of these ideas come from, and we have been using them to develop something we have called 'critical cartography'. It's hard stuff to get your head round conceptually – not because it's academic, but because it turns our habitual way of thinking about how the world works upside down.

My intention here is not to go into the academic detail (there is a list of papers at the end of the chapter that you can read if you want that side of it, and also a glossary of the words presented in 'inverted commas' that are part of the terminology from the academic literature – this is my referencing if you like). But this approach is also hugely practical. We have been using it in a range of contexts: working with Welsh local authorities on their Play Sufficiency Duty, working with local groups on children's right to play, and Stuart's work (with Charlotte Derry) making cultural institutions more playful. This last is where the rules thing comes from: Stuart and Charlotte published Rules for a More Playful Museum as part of their work with Manchester Museum.[3] And finally, of course, we have used it with playworkers as professional and organisational development, reflective practice and as an evaluation methodology, particularly with colleagues John Fitzpatrick and Bridget Handscomb in London and Cornwall, but also with a play project in Nottingham.

So, here are the rules:

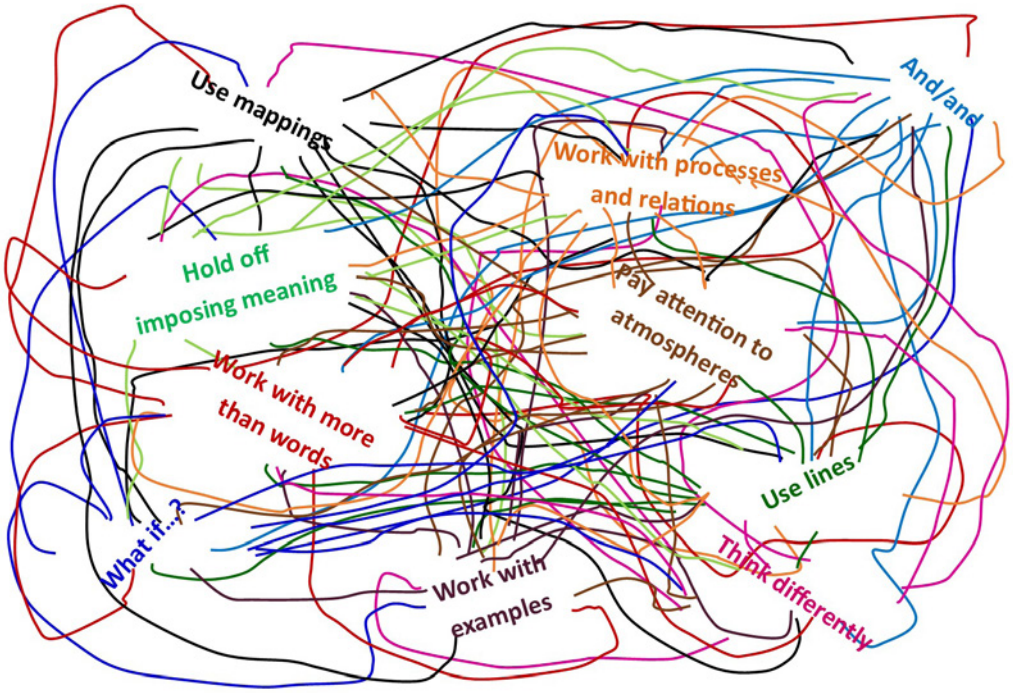

Figure 1: A meshwork of rules

As this image shows, all the rules are connected to each other in one big messy entangled meshwork. The trouble with writing is that you have to put one word in front of another, so something always comes first. So, a list of rules presented like this:

1. Work with processes and relations
2. Use 'mappings'
3. Work with more than words
4. Use 'lines'
5. Work with 'examples'
6. Try to work with and/and
7. Pay attention to atmospheres
8. Hold off imposing meaning
9. Think differently
10. What if ...?

makes us think that there is an order, 1, 2, 3, and so on. This is the power of the 'apparatuses' we use to try and communicate. They affect how we think. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's look at the rules one by one, and it will become clear how interconnected and interdependent they are.

1. Work with processes and relations:

Let's go back now to Corey and her magic pen. We can see how the story emerges opportunistically from everything that is to hand: her boredom, the pen, my notebook, my invitation, her desire to enliven things, the slight thrill/risk that it might elicit disapproval, the culture of the play centre and so on; so much is brought to that one 'mo(ve)ment' that is fleeting and then moves on to something else. It is these relational processes that this approach pays attention to – we can call them 'entanglements'. They are not fixed, they are always in motion, always changing, and always relational. This moves us away from seeing play as a time and space bound activity, away from looking at individual children's minds (was it freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, personally directed?) and towards an appreciation of everything else that co-produces that mo(ve)ment.

It also throws up a different way of looking at stuff – material objects. They play their part in this mo(ve)ment as much as anything else. We might say there is a certain liveliness of material objects, they offer possibilities, affordances. This shifts play from something inside the minds and bodies of individual children to something that emerges in-between everything to hand at that moment (including stuff, other bodies, the weather, affects, desires, memories and anticipations). Everything is always in a state of flux, changing through encounters. (As an aside, this is also a very different way of looking at children's development, but that's a pathway not for this piece.)

2. Use mappings:

Paying attention to the how of playing, and to the conditions that support its emergence, means looking a bit differently at 'space'. In this approach, space is also understood as relational and emergent, always under construction. It is not just a neutral container for action, it is produced through encounters in-between bodies, objects, landscape features and less tangible things like atmosphere, children's desires, histories, expectations and so on. From this perspective, anywhere can become a playspace – or rather a playspacetime – through the emergence of playing.

If the production of spacetime is all about relations, it is necessarily about relations of power. This is the political bit, the bit that shows how children's right to play is a matter of spatial justice. Those who design towns and cities, who set timetables, who make laws, who own land – these are the ones who decide how things work and who has access to the resources that spaces have to offer. Planning policy is all about keeping the economy going, it is about the movement of people and goods, supporting the economic processes of production and consumption. It is this that places the car (both moving and stationary) as the primary user of streets rather than people. Children and young people are 'out of place' on the street, belonging instead in the institutional spaces of childhood such as schools, playgrounds, activity centres and homes. Of course, children can usually find ways to play both because of and in spite of adult organisation of time and space, often in ways that adults ignore or don't see, sometimes in ways that annoy or concern them.

Mappings can help shift attention away from individual children towards looking at how the whole space works. We have used mappings with planners and other professionals when working with local authorities in Wales, to help them appreciate the politics of the production of space and to leave space more open for children's play. Here, however, I focus more on using it as a tool for reflective practice in playwork.

In the institutions of childhood, and particularly those that aim to support children's right to play, we also need to pay attention to issues of power in the production of the space. This is why critical cartography focuses on how spaces are produced rather than on individual children or adults and why it seeks to hold habits and routines up to scrutiny to see how those productions might be more just.

Figure 2: Map of Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, Cornwall, UK

There are several methods that can be used for mapping. You can start off by actually drawing a map of your site. A good process is to start doing this on your own and from memory, and then work with your team mates to share what you have come up with and create one joint map. It's amazing what people forget and how differently things are sized and positioned – this is a lot about how each team member feels about areas of the site and talking this through in itself can be very helpful in terms of appreciating both the affective relationality of space and difference among the team. Work on a big sheet of paper and take a photo of it. You can use both the big sheet (pinned to something rigid is helpful) and also smaller prints of the photo. The map can form the basis for a range of documentation:

- You can take photos of spaces that are significant to you for whatever reason, pin them to the big map and share with others why that space is significant – this brings to life how differently people feel about certain areas of the site. These might be spaces of joy or sadness, excitement or boredom, calm or anxiety, Figure 3 is one example.

- You can tell stories – write them on a post-it and stick them to the big map. When it's full, take a photo, and then start again. We live our lives more by stories than facts. Here we are looking for moments that emerge from the everyday, not high tariff special stuff, small moments of nonsense that contribute to the ongoing affective atmosphere of the space, like the story of Corey and the magic pen.

- You can draw lines of movement on the smaller maps – see rule 4 below.

- Play around with other ways of documenting how the space works, especially using all the senses – what are the smelly areas? What audio-only recordings belong in which spaces? People have used comic strips, illustrations, videos, sharing photos and stories on WhatsApp and more. These are all ways of documenting how the space works, and particularly what is unique about a playwork approach.

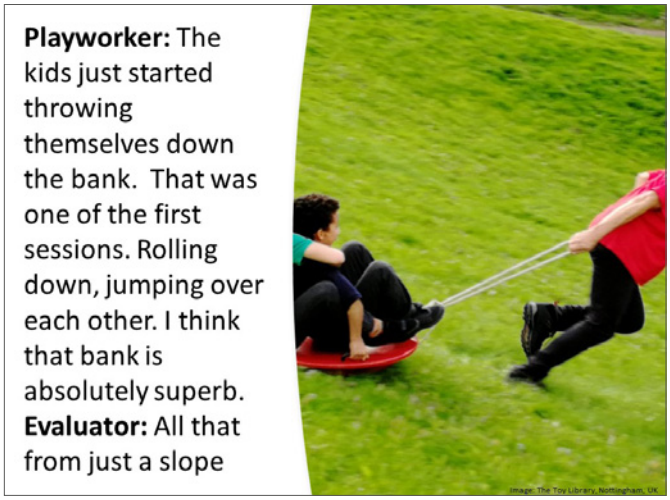

Figure 3: The slope, The Toy Library, Nottingham, UK

There is also another sense of 'mapping' in this approach. As well as documenting what happens, 'mapping' can be about what else the space might become, other ways of configuring it – a mapping out of possibilities – again, mapping is process rather than product. Maps in this sense are not accurate representations of an objectively existing reality ('tracings'), they are imaginings of what more can be done. In my experience, much of this comes out of the conversations between people as teams co-produce the big map or share moments of nonsense and other forms of documentation (and this links to rule 10).

3. Work with more than words

There is so much more to life than can be captured and represented in words. Try explaining what it is to be happy, or to be in love. Paying attention to the flows and rhythms of affective atmospheres of spaces (rules 4 and 7), and particularly to the everyday exuberances, nothing-specials, boredoms and tragedies of children's play, requires methods that can work with this excess. Hence the mapping, and the use of stories and the use of a range of methods that use all the senses. Videos are useful – especially if taken of a whole session from a high vantage point and watched speeded up. But it is also good to go beyond the visual sense – this is our dominant one – and bring in sound, touch, smell, taste (and other senses such as proprioception).

Figure 4 is a picture of the notebook with Corey's magic pen writing. How much does it add to the mere words of the story told at the beginning? For me, actually, I was able not only to find my little fieldnotes booklet but to go to the page where she wrote this, and this brought back all sorts of memories of my research. The notebook itself has a curve on it because it spent so much time in my back pocket, it is well thumbed, there are annotations in it... and so on. The mere words of the story can be brought much more to life using other senses. One thing we have done is to ask playworkers to do a short audio recording in an area of the site and then play it back to others and they have to guess where it is.

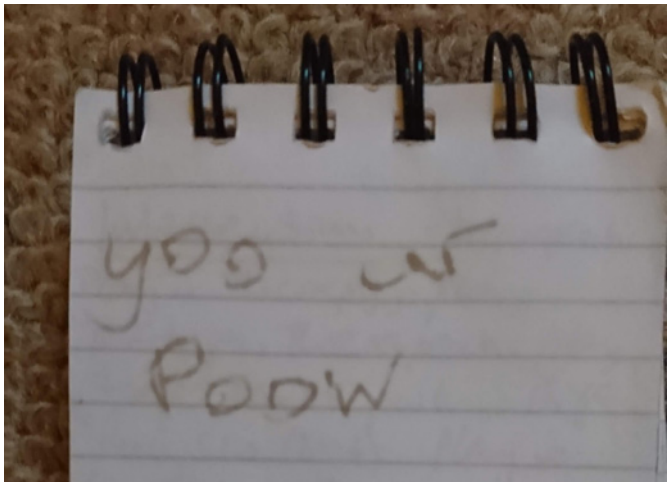

Figure 4: Yoo ar poow

What sometimes happens is that they hear for the first time sounds that have just been a part of the background (one example being church bells) and not been noticed and can also appreciate how they affect the production of space.

4. Use lines[4]

This is about a focus on movement. Everything is always on the move. Instead of thinking about bodies as 'blobs' that have boundaries and are pretty static, pay attention instead to 'lines', to the flows, movements, affective forces and rhythms of the space. On one of your small maps, or just on a plain piece of paper, follow the movements of a child, or an adult, or an object. Make sure you bring in as much detail as possible. The more detail, the more you will notice how movements are also a series of encounters, and how they meander through space. These wobbly lines offer up something different from our usual straight-line approach to the world: thinking straight is seen as A Good Thing, and in trying to understand how the world works, we draw straight lines of cause and effect. We have straight line trajectories for children's development, traced out in predetermined stages, closing down any possibilities for being different. Also, tracking lines of movement helps us realise that there isn't ever a start or end point, everything is always in the middle, always becoming...

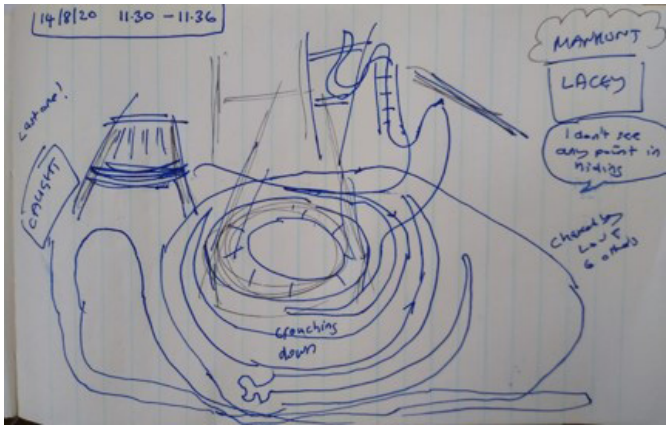

Figure 5: Lines, Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, Cornwall, UK

[4] This section draws heavily on the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold – see the glossary at the end.

5. Work with examples

Usually, when we try to explain the world (in research, in justifying our work and so on), we seek themes, headline truths and generalisations. These are useful, and yet they obscure detail and difference. These rules focus on detail and difference: small, unique moments of becoming different in a mo(ve)ment of playing that creates a different world from the everyday one. Each example stands only for itself, it can't be generalised, it is intensive. Yet gather sufficient examples, and they begin to spread out extensively, new examples emerge, patterns can be discerned, but the trick is always to pay attention to the singular and not the general. Children often like to repeat things they enjoy, but each time they do something it will be a little different. It's that difference we are looking at here, not sameness. If we were to run an activity called 'magic pen writing', it is likely that children will write rude words, playing with the possibilities of invisibility and exposure. But the opportunistic, banal and fleeting moment with Corey would not be repeated in exactly the same way.

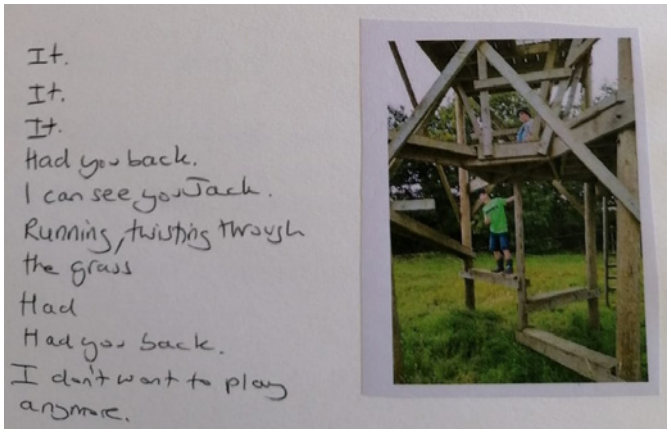

Figure 6: It, had you back, Gwealan Tops Adventure Playground, Cornwall, UK

6. Try to work with and/and

We often understand things by what they are not, creating binary opposites that fix each part. A classic example is adult/child: the concept of a child can only exist in its difference from the concept of adult. Children are fixed as immature, irrational, incompetent; adults are fixed as mature, rational, competent. This doesn't allow for other ways of seeing childhood or adulthood. Other fixed binaries are nature/culture, boy/girl, rational/emotional, subject/object, play/not-play, inside/outside, good/bad, and so on. Not only are positions and identities fixed, but one is usually seen as preferable to the other, creating a power hierarchy. They are useful because they help us navigate our everyday lives, AND they have the effect of fixing things and glossing over difference.

These rules are offered as an alternative to dominant ways of talking about play (mostly from psychology and education theories), but it is not setting itself up in opposition: this is and/and not either/or (there is an irony in that statement of course!). It is generative – not dismissing other theoretical perspectives as wrong but asking 'what more?' and 'what do these truth claims obscure?' It is about difference and possibility, which in the end is an ethical endeavour.

7. Pay attention to atmospheres

Atmospheres are intangible, so they don't lend themselves to being measured, and often that's what we're asked to do – measure things. Ages ago (2000), Stuart Lester and I developed a quality assurance scheme for play projects in Manchester, UK, and we had as one of the criteria 'there is a prevailing playful feel'. People struggled with this, because it was seen as subjective. In practice, we found it worked really well, as a developmental idea for the organization not only an assessment one.

Paying attention to atmospheres means you notice different things. Most of the playworkers I know do this anyway – you can tell when the atmosphere shifts, perhaps when a disagreement is turning nasty or the kids are getting wound up. But this is also about paying attention to the everyday atmosphere, not just peak moments. Chances are, if you do this alongside paying attention to small moments of nonsense and the relational nature of encounters and life generally, you begin to appreciate how much a space is co-produced and where the conditions are right to support the emergence of playing. And this is what we're after here.

Hanging around
All of a sudden they all congregated for a chill and chat before more fun

Figure 7: Hanging around, The Toy Library, Nottingham, UK

Try different ways of expressing the atmosphere. For example, imagine your setting in full flow; if it was an animal, what kind of animal would it be? You can share your thoughts with your colleagues, perhaps creating a hybrid animal. What characteristics of the animal influenced your choice? We end up in words eventually, but this method provides a different starting point and therefore opens up a different line of enquiry.

8. Hold off imposing meaning

This is one of the hardest things to do. Keep telling yourself the question is not 'what does it mean?' but 'how does it work?' The rush to impose meaning inevitably rationalizes something whose value lies in its capacity to dream up different worlds not tied by rationality. It creates questionable straight lines from what is seen to what might happen (skills learned, habits laid down, accidents, ...). This approach rests on being able to stay in the here-and-now and appreciate the (very ordinary) magic of playing. It is an appreciative way of observing – of sensing rather, as we need to pay attention to all our senses – that can be cultivated over time, and that takes effort. Slowly, with more and more shared moments, you will (re)discover a sense of awe and enchantment with children's capacity to play, to rearrange the world in ways that enliven things, that make life better for the moment of playing.

9. Think differently

Given the interconnectedness of these so-called rules, you have probably twigged that this is all about difference. It's about working with difference, and also about constantly challenging our habits of thought and practice to see what more can be done to leave space open for children's playful productions.

And a good way to do this is... the experiment.

10. What if...?

We could say that 'what if ...?' is the basis for children's play. What if I jump from this platform? What if I believe I can fly? What if I write something rude in this book? What if we die? What if I really am the ruler of the world? Such open questions are here-and-now questions of curiosity and possibility, not with any expectation of what might happen next.

It works well, then, as the basis for disturbing our habits of thought and practice. Try to come up with 'what ifs' for your setting. The smaller the better, nothing grand and nothing that has an expected effect. Often, these will emerge from your shared discussions of documentation, not as any formal review process. Or they will just come to mind in the middle of a session. Be open to 'what ifs' that colleagues might suddenly implement. It might be rearranging furniture or changing from a fixed snack time to a fluid one. Or it might be doing something unexpected (what if we all wore skirts to work one day? What if we stop talking?). I'm sure you can come up with loads.

Stuart and I have been using the terms 'account-ability' and 'response-ability' as guidelines for adult actions to support children's right to play, whether in dedicated children's spaces or in the general environment. Account-ability is an approach to accounting for how children's play can emerge, whether conditions support or constrain it (and of course the same conditions can do both – and/and). The mapping documentation introduced here helps with this. It offers an account of conditions for play and how children can find timespace for playing.

Different accounts will be generated, creating a collective wisdom. Holding these multiple accounts up to critical scrutiny to see what more can be done is the response-ability element. The two are not separate processes, they are deeply interconnected. Looking at the how rather than the what and why, paying attention to how children can create playtimespaces, using some of the methods offered here, can help us to look again at how spaces are produced and whether we can introduce small disturbances of spatial habits that can support children's right to play – and (re)enchant us at the same time.

A glossary for critical cartographies of play

The explanations given here are necessarily superficial and partial. They are complex concepts that have probably been far too over-simplified here, but at least this gives a flavour of their intent. The main purpose in giving this glossary is to show where the concepts have come from. If you are interested, read the originals!

apparatuses: Karen Barad uses this term to talk about the tools we use to observe and understand the world, noting that these are not neutral and the tools we use affect how we see things.
Barad, K. (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning,* Durham: Duke University Press.

blobs and lines: these ideas come from the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who says that we see bodies as boundaried and static blobs rather than seeing life as lines that have vitality.
Ingold, T. (2007) *Lines: A Brief History, London:* Routledge Ingold, T. (2015) *The Life of Lines*, Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge.

entanglements: another concept from Karen Barad (see apparatuses for reference), where she asserts that life goes on through entanglements, that nothing pre-exists encounters with others. Although this to an extent seems obvious, she takes the idea a long way further to suggest that agency (the capacity to act) is therefore not possessed by individuals but arises in intra-actions – in these encounters.

examples: philosopher Brian Massumi argues for using examples that can be faithful to detail and singularity and resist being shoe-horned into themes and generalisations.
Massumi, B. (2002) *Parables for the Virtual*, Durham: Duke University Press.

mapping: a concept from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, mapping is about working with movement and the senses and exploring possibilities, whereas 'tracings' seek to impose rationality, certainty and fixity onto representations of the world. We need both, of course.
Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Continuum.

mo(ve)ment: drawing on work from Curti and Moreno, this is about the inseparability of time and space, moments and movements.
Curti, G. and Moreno, C. (2010) 'Institutional Borders, Revolutionary Imaginings and the Becoming-Adult of the Child', *Children's Geographies*, 8(4), pp. 413-427.

Further reading

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w: elpa.org.uk e: info@elpa.org.uk