# Empathy and the Past: Outlining, Erasing, and Colouring In.

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This document is the script from a presentation given at the symposium 'Colouring In: The Past' on Friday 9th of December 2022 at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London.

When I was first invited to speak at Colouring In: The Past, I was drawn to the title, and the idea of 'colouring in the past' and what that could mean, particularly when applied to illustration. It reminded me of a workshop that I had led with children as part of my PhD research. On this slide, you can see a drawing by a child made during one of these workshops, simply using outlines.
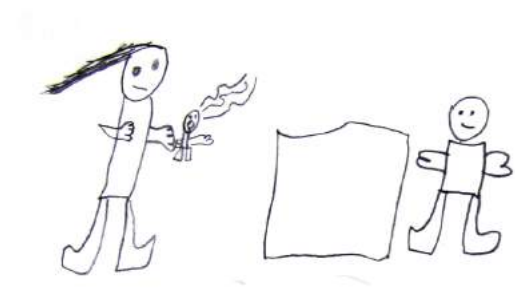
Here is another, an image from the same workshop but by a different child, and it has been coloured in.

These workshops were part of a residency at the Foundling Museum [undertaken as part of my PhD, titled *Heritage as Process: Constructing the Historical Child's Voice Through Art Practice*, 2014–18]. This museum tells the story of 'the foundlings', which were abandoned children who were left in the care of the Foundling Hospital.

I was working with young children from the local area [Kings Cross] as part of my method, in the hope to reconstruct the historical foundling child's voice through practice. Now, at the time when I began this work, these 'voices' were absent in the museum. I was hoping to engage the contemporary children from the local area with the narrative of the foundling hospital – but, from what I had observed prior to this, the children were fairly indifferent – I hoped to generate some form of empathy with the foundlings, in the hope that the sessions would provide material to work with in the reconstruction of this missing 'voice'.

I began the workshop session by introducing the children to the history of the Foundling Hospital. Each child imagined what it was like to be a foundling and I instigated this act, using exercises from theatre practice. As I present, you might notice I am not including any photographs of the children I worked with, and this is due to the ethical restrictions put in place by my University.

The children were invited to make an illustration of their own imagined foundling 'character'. Structure was put in place to guide the children towards empathy. Bioethicist Jackie Leach Scully says that empathy is not possible without 'knowledge of the other',[1] as this is needed to *imagine* another person's situation. As the facilitator, I am responsible for this in the workshops. In hindsight, my own opinion influenced how I passed on this knowledge. Although this was something that I attempted to avoid, there is a tendency to judge their historical situation with contemporary values; in history, this is termed 'presentism'.

I gave each child a 10" x 8" canvas and asked them to draw their character's portrait. I also showed them examples of paintings of foundlings in the museum, and these images were intended to assist the children in drawing the uniforms. I suggested that

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1 Jackie Leach Scully, Keynote, *Empathies*, University of Basel, June 2017.

the children started their image by drawing the outline of the face – a simple oval shape – before adding their features. I gave a mirror to the children who struggled so that their features could help to guide them with their proportions. Their reflections could be used to measure and understand what features needed to be included. The mirror also enabled them to crop their images 'in frame'. In hindsight, by handing each child a canvas that had borders and a mirror – I directed them towards tools that cropped their image. The illustrations became faces that were bounded inside frames and without bodies.


Some children panicked when there was freedom in the task of drawing a portrait and illustrating their character, so I sat beside them and demonstrated how to measure their features with their finger and a pencil. As I continued, I found myself talking about facial symmetry, which the children enjoyed, and they drew a line of symmetry to guide their drawings. During the session, I decided to use guidelines to help focus their attention so that they could complete each stage of their portrait step-by-step and the children became absorbed in the exercise. A child asked me to draw on their canvas when they were 'stuck', but I refused to do so.

The children had an hour to compose their illustrations and rework their character's expression. In one drawing a child focussed on the mouth and out of frustration at the external image not appearing similar to the imagined, they replaced the straight mouth with a crescent moon smile. Although this shape is not how the mouth anatomically appears, it is a standardised shape that the child associated with the mouth. In this instance, the child was aiming to draw a 'neutral' expression but after becoming frustrated with the image, they chose to draw a recognised expression of happiness. On speaking to the child, happiness was not the emotion they intended to

communicate. The child reverted to familiar symbols when faced with the inability to draw what they imagined. If, however, their foundling 'character' was in fact happy, this might seem an unexpected emotion based on the common reaction from visitors at the Foundling Museum, but it is still a valid interpretation made by the child.
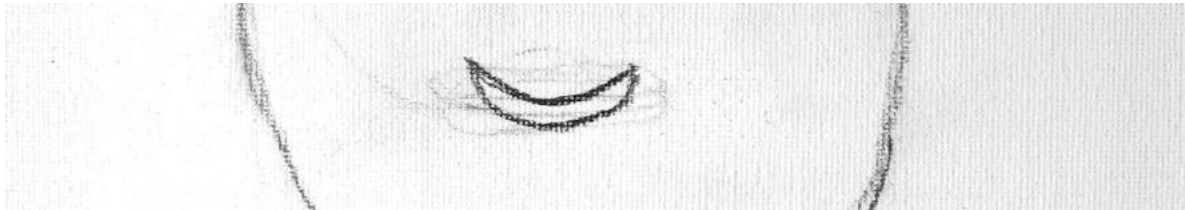
In the children's illustrations of the foundlings, the eyes are large in proportion and appear to be doubled; the eyes have two irises and, in some cases, two pupils. This 'double portrait' could have been caused by looking in the mirror and the gaze moving while drawing. However, it gave the impression of being looked at by two people, perhaps the historical foundling child and the contemporary child, or perhaps an image of the child and their alter ego.
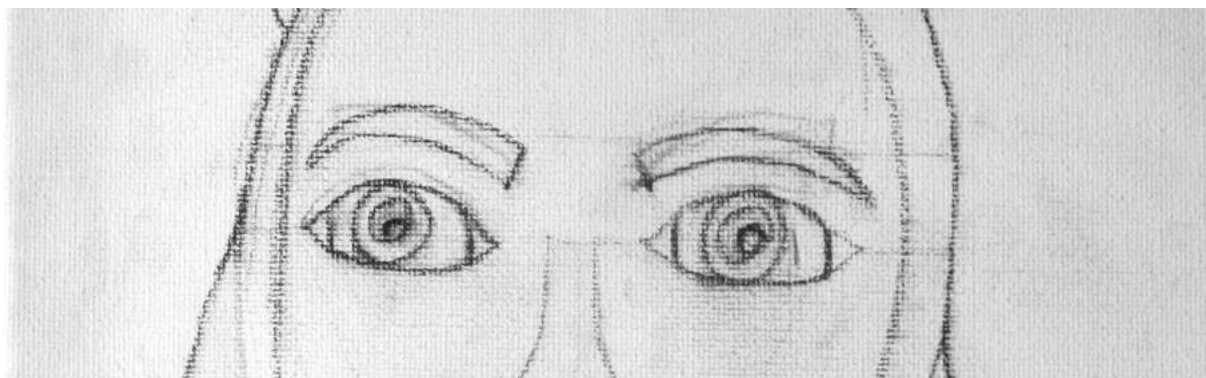
The 'doubling' is also a product of my instructions: I asked the children to draw a portrait of the historical child, but there were mirrors on the table. I had constructed an environment that could influence the children in relating the image to their reflection. Based on this awareness, in following workshops, I made the decision to remove the mirrors. Even so, a blending of self and other still occurred – and this could be described as an example of Lacan's mirror stage. Lacan returned to the mirror stage throughout his work and developed its complexity. Initially viewed as a stage in the child's development (when one begins to recognise oneself in the mirror) but later

developed it as a fundamental aspect of subjectivity. The subject – very much like the children in the workshops – is 'permanently caught and captivated by his own image'.[2]

On viewing the finished illustrations at the end of the workshop, I remember the children laying them out on the floor in a row. They began comparing their work and playing a guessing game, with cries of 'whose drawing is mine? Guess!' Ostensibly the children did not seem to empathise with the foundlings, but there appeared to be a connection in their illustrations. The foundling children stared out of the images with wide-eyes and closed mouths, as if 'voice-less'. In these images, each child has captured the face of a foundling from their imagination. These lost and forgotten children reappear, as if they had been photographed. Each painting is a portrait of two people: the child-artist and the foundling child they seek to recreate.

The paint had covered the pencil marks – the doubling of the eyes, the guidelines, and the mistakes – and through the application of colour, the two people in the image were merged into one. The drawings and outlines appeared to reveal the process, but the act of painting (or we could say 'colouring in') flattened the images and hid the guidelines. They became uniform.

What was lost or gained by the act of 'colouring in'?

The idea of 'colouring' is tied to conversations on race, and this has been suggested by the colour of the paint. 'Colouring in' also can be likened to empathy.

2 Dylan Evans, An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 115.

Do we 'colour in' parts of the past with our imagination?

Does 'colouring in' overwrite experiences and become an act of erasure?

In these children's illustrations, through the act of 'colouring in', have they *replaced* the historical foundling child with themselves?

The history of empathy as a term is complicated. It was introduced into the English language in the twentieth century, translated from the German *Einfühlung*. This in turn is a translation from the Ancient Greek word for 'passion', *empátheia,* and it derives from *en* 'in' and *pathos* 'feeling', *feeling into,* or *feeling onto* [gesture to suggest the flat surface of the paper]. The term was later expanded to include the aesthetic experience and our modern understanding of empathy, which is now defined as the ability to understand someone else's perspective, of another person or a fictional character.

Scully voices her concern that there are obstacles to imagine another's life and inhabit their embodied experience, she says, 'I'm highly sceptical if this is possible, and I think

we are kidding ourselves if we think we can do it'.[3] We are erasing the other by imagining ourselves in their position, and in so doing, we are at risk of appropriating their experience. Jesse Prinz expanded on this, stating that 'empathy is a double-edged sword, by erasing the other and making the other's pain your own'.[4] The use of 'erase' can also be considered as a 'replacement'. You may stand in their shoes but, you do not stand in their skin.

Now, we must not forget that these children have been asked to *imagine* a historical foundling child. There is naturally a blurring of self and other. But even so, I would argue that this work could be a used as an example when discussing empathy and 'colouring in'.

The children's paintings were worked into an installation, *Kept Within the Bounds* (2016), which was exhibited at the Foundling Museum. Although the children's portraits were 'coloured in', they were metaphorically placed on 'bounds' that contained negative space, in the same format as the floorplan as the Foundling Hospital, to draw attention to what was lacking in the museum.

Perhaps, as illustrators, we should not always use our practice to colour in the gaps in history. But instead, can we draw attention to these empty spaces and missing voices in historical record by *outlining* their existence?

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3 Jackie Leach Scully, Keynote, *Empathies*, University of Basel, June 2017.
4 Jesse Prinz, Keynote, *Empathies,* University of Basel, June 2017.