

# **Becoming gendered bodies:**

A posthuman analysis of how gender is produced in an early childhood classroom

For consideration of the award:

**Doctor of Philosophy**

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# Thesis Summary

In this thesis I explore how gender features in the experiences of nursery age children in South Wales, using a new feminist materialist theoretical framework to inform an analysis that moves away from the binary separation of the social and material spheres. Drawing on a year of ethnographic data produced through participant observation in a state school nursery located in a deprived suburban area, I examine small 'moments of emergence' where gender is produced within the spaces and relationships of the nursery. I take a posthumanist stance to these emergences, where I do not locate the children themselves as agential producers of gender, but instead trace how human and non-human bodies and discourses work through space and time to delineate subjects and objects in gendering ways. Through doing so I shift focus from a purely social understanding of how gender roles are transferred to young children and instead encourage a holistic view of how environments, matter, and temporality combine with discourse through multiple and complex pathways to create continuous and flexible (re)iterations of gender emergence. I argue that it is only when we appreciate the complexity of these emergences that we can seek to positively impact children's gender experiences in effective ways.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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## Arguing with Biology

*To treat a baby as gender-neutral, as an 'it' rather than a 'he' or a 'she', therefore, is tantamount to denying its (or perhaps I should say his or her) humanity*  
(Burman, 1995:49)

On the 21<sup>st</sup> May 2011 the *Toronto Star* newspaper carried an article featuring Kathy Witterick and David Stocker, a local couple who had recently celebrated the birth of their third child. Over the next few days the story became an international phenomenon and reappeared in other newspapers, magazines, and blogs around the world. Readers were eager to have their say and the comment sections of major online publications soon overflowed with their opinions on the new arrival. Some were supportive and congratulatory, but many contributors met the news with confusion or denial, and, in some cases, outright anger and condemnation. The source of their grievance was Witterick and Stocker's decision not to publicly announce the sex of their baby, Storm, a gesture intended as "a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation" (Poisson, 2011).

The publication of the story in the online edition of the UK's second best-selling newspaper<sup>1</sup>, the *Daily Mail*, attracted 431 comments from readers, many of which challenged the 'political correctness' of the couple's decision ("XX = Girl, XY = Boy. No amount of PC will ever change that simple fact") and expressed alarm and concern for Storm's mental health ("Why can't these idiots just let their child grow up normally without any pressure?"). However the key derisive point made throughout many of the comments was based on the couple's ignorance of 'the facts of life': "Stupid parents, you can't argue with

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<sup>1</sup> The *Daily Mail's* national daily edition recorded a circulation of 1,692,610 in September 2014, second only to *The Sun's* 2,019,032 (*TheGuardian* 2014).

biology. This poor kid is either male or female, full stop” (all comments: *Mail Online*, 2011).

This apparently high level of public critique<sup>2</sup> flies in the face of over twenty years of sociological research working within the paradigm of poststructuralism, which has seen increasing numbers of researchers explore gender in childhood as a manifestation of relations of power. This research, reviewed in chapter two, has produced evidence to argue that gender and/or sex and/or sexuality are, at least, partially socially constructed elements of identity, created and altered through social interaction and cultural experiences, and subject to change over time. It also ignores significant political developments in our society; through the struggles of the feminist movement and the efforts of campaigners and supportive politicians, gender equality in the UK has advanced considerably in recent years. We currently benefit from increased legislation to prevent discrimination, and growing cultural awareness of misogynist and patriarchal discourses. Many of the arguments driving these changes are based on the notion that stereotypical gender roles and preferences are a product of cultural conditioning. This approach has inspired attempts to change that conditioning by campaigning organisations through education (for example, *E Skills UK* seeks to attract women and girls to the IT sector, while *STEMettes* attempts the same with the STEM subjects). However early childhood is often excluded from drives to change stereotyped ideas of binary gender roles and educational reform has failed to address this absence, despite much research supporting increased focus on this age group.

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<sup>2</sup> It must be admitted that the *Daily Mail* website is a convenient place to collect such views, given that the politically right-wing stance of the paper attracts a like-minded readership who are willing to criticise radicalism and ‘political correctness’. However the UK’s bestselling left-wing broadsheet, *The Guardian*, also featured a (generally supportive) article on baby Storm and attracted many similar reader comments still available for perusal, including: “Sex and gender are the same bloody thing. Maybe a tiny number of people are trapped in the wrong body. but essentially our sex determines our behaviour [*sic*]”, though there is clearly a higher proportion of neutral and positive comments than under the *Daily Mail* article (Bindel and James, 2011).

Denial or unawareness of this academic and political critique is not limited to newspaper comment boards; a continuing understanding of binary gender in childhood as 'natural' and based on normative developmental stages is also visible in government and media responses to the high profile 'sexualisation' debates in the UK and elsewhere. The 2010 UK Home Office *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (Papadopolous, 2010), and the subsequent Bailey review on the same topic (Bailey, 2011) have been critiqued for their largely unproblematised evocation of normative gender to support their arguments (Barker, 2011; Barker & Duschinsky, 2012; Duschinsky, 2012). Meanwhile prolific parenting lobbyists, Mumsnet, set up a campaign to influence government policy on sexualisation which openly rested on the notion of 'natural' gender and the need to protect it from sexualising influences, by insisting, "Let girls be girls" (Mumsnet, 2013). The very underpinnings of the sexualisation debates rest in a popular interpretation of developmentalism that influences ideas about age-appropriate knowledges and performances of gender and sexuality.

It is clear that the idea of sex and gender as 'natural' and biologically or developmentally inevitable from birth remains embedded in the public mindset despite academic efforts to dislodge it. When the issue is raised of whether it is morally right to withhold the public knowledge of a baby's sex, as it was in the case of baby Storm, the level of public emotional and intellectual investment in that belief is evident. This leads to the question of why knowing a baby's sex is so important that it becomes a moral issue? Why are the people who made the above comments so invested in clear, definable, and knowable sex and gender in early childhood and infancy? And are they right: can we really not argue with biology?

In a way, that *Daily Mail* reader's assertion summarises the critical battleground between anti-essentialist gender equality campaigners - who view discursive influence as the primary cause of gender differences - and naysayers who insist that the biological fact of the sexed body and its influence on behaviour cannot be denied. In other words, it is discourse 'arguing' with materiality, set against each other in a binary division that sits at the heart of our understandings of sex and gender.

The young child's sexed body is allotted a binary gender category, with traits attributed to those categories of male and female as if they were an innate part of the material design of those sexed bodies. Gender, therefore, becomes sidelined as a concern or even as an observable process, and the management of perceived issues arising for those bodies assumes the responsibility of either encouraging or controlling those bodies 'natural' traits<sup>3</sup>. Many posthumanist academics are challenging such binarism in childhood research (for example: Jones, 2013a; Jones et al., 2014; Osgood, 2014), seeking ways to accommodate discourse and materiality when explaining the origins of social phenomena. In this thesis I contribute to these efforts in relation to gender by offering my own study of the relationship between discursive and material gender in childhood. To do so, I draw primarily on the new feminist materialism of Karen Barad, discussed at length in chapter three, to conduct an analysis of semi-longitudinal ethnographic data produced within a state-run preschool classroom.

Through this thesis I aim to contribute to the ongoing feminist research task of making gendering processes visible, seeking out the moments in children's lives where they experience and produce gender through and around their bodies. By locating the exact material-discursive points where gender emerges in their lives, and thinking through these moments as productive of gender rather than symbolic of interpreted meanings, it becomes possible to denaturalise binary gender assumptions and discover opportunities to help children escape from the expectations and assumptions represented within social discourses

## Chapter Structure

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the 'crisis' in the education of boys with their 'unruly bodies' (Arnot et al., 1999; Francis, 2000; Ivinson, 2014; Jackson, 1998) which leads to stereotyping policy advice such as that contained within the *Confident, capable and creative: Supporting boys' achievements* (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007) document. Meanwhile, debates surrounding fears of 'sexualisation' produce girls' bodies as inherently (hetero)sexual, desirable, and dangerously desiring, yet also naïve and innocent (Faulkner, 2011; Robinson, 2008; Woodrow, 1999).

In the remainder of this chapter I introduce the focus of and issues addressed by this thesis through presenting a data extract for discussion that features a play episode between three girls in a nursery 'home corner' setting. The context and trajectory of their play produces gender through a variety of discursive and material channels: speech, human bodies, non-human bodies, the space of the home corner, and my (re)production of the incident in writing for analysis. Through a discussion of the extract I demonstrate the analytic method implicated by the new materialist theoretical framework I employ here and introduce some of the key aspects of my argument. I justify the use of ethnographic methods, explain the genesis of my research design, and illustrate how I will be using posthumanist and new materialist theory to work with the data. Employing this discussion here serves to establish a number of analytic reference points that I return to over the course of the thesis that are intended to evoke familiar concerns for gender and childhood researchers whilst simultaneously indicating new possibilities contained within new materialist analysis. This extract also introduces one of the key themes of this thesis: the notion of desire, which repeatedly emerges with my analysis as the embodied, emotional response to and, simultaneously, catalyst for particular iterations of gender. The use of this concept is what grounds my theoretical analysis in the 'real world' of young children's lives and helps to identify where changes in adults and institutional approach to gender could be most effective in improving their experience.

Following this, I provide a summary of the project, introducing its origins formed through feminist political engagement and immersion in poststructuralism and social constructionism. I then discuss the theoretical concepts with which it engages, which shifted to posthumanism and new materialism in order for me to better understand the data generated through the project, before summarising my methodology, research design, and implementation. I also introduce the research site, and outline the basis of my engagement with my participants in relation to researcher-participant positioning and reflexivity.

I conclude this introduction with an overview of the thesis structure to aid the reader's navigation and anticipate the development of my argument over these chapters.



## **“You’re not coming to my party”: Desire, Gender, and Boundaries of Subjectivation**

This section introduces one of the key themes which emerges from my analysis: the emergence of gender through enactments of agential desire that compelled children to enact particular embodied subjectivations<sup>4</sup>, but also determined their inclusion or exclusion from them to constituent their emergent subjectivity (Butler, 1993). This analytic theme manifests the social operation of gender within my data, illustrating how gendering material and discursive expressions became desirable, dismissible, or repulsive. It demonstrates how heteronormative gender was produced within the nursery in ways that could be deeply emotional for the children, as their desire to embody certain gendering subjectivations were successfully pursued or disappointingly thwarted. It follows the flows of desire as a channel of agency through materiality and discourse that temporally inscribed gender on activities and bodies. Moreover, it shows the critical nature of gender in the nursery and supports efforts to interrogate its emergence within early years practice for the wellbeing of young children and their future life experiences.

The extract I share to introduce this argument is rather long but captures many of the key issues that emerge in my data analysis. It follows the activities of three girls moving in and around the home corner space in the nursery: Katie, Chloe, and Lauren. My discussion of the extract is arguably more humanist in nature than my later analysis as I wish to emphasise the impact on individual emotional experiences that gendering processes have, however it also provides support for the posthumanist angle that I develop later on.

*17<sup>th</sup> January, 2012*

*After snack-time, Katie and Chloe go straight over to the dress-up corner and put on princess dresses. I go to them to see what they’re up to and they tell me that they’re having a party and have dressed up for it. One of the new children, Lauren,*

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<sup>4</sup> A Baradian term used to describe a particular iterative emergence of subjectivity. Please see chapter three for more details

has latched onto Katie and Chloe and has also followed them to the dress-up corner and chooses her own dress to put on, asking me to help her. Lauren's relationship with Katie and Chloe is quite interesting to me – she clearly wants to be friends with them and often tries to join in with their activities but the pair are quite resistant to this, often ignoring her presence, relegating her to less desirable roles in imagination games (like the dad, the brother, or the dog, as opposed to the mum, the sister, the princess or the cat – all popular roles for the girls) or sometimes explicitly rejecting her (“You're not coming to my party”, “You're not my friend”)... Lauren's body and behaviours contrast with Katie and Chloe's in several ways: though she is roughly the same height as Katie, her body is stocky and she is a little overweight, while her facial features and complexion are not delicate like theirs. She also has long blonde hair, but rather than being fine, silky and ornately arranged like Katie and Chloe's, it is thick, wavy and frizzy, escaping out of her (unelaborated) plait. Her voice is deep for a young girl and possibly because she is slightly younger than they she often seems to find it hard to keep up with their conversations – she often phrases things clumsily or blurts out unrelated or inappropriate statements. For example, during the incident at hand where Katie and Chloe are planning and carrying out a make-believe party, once Lauren has her dress on she moves to join Katie and Chloe who are packing food for their party in a bag. As they discuss which food and utensils they require Lauren stands to the side for a moment watching them, then interrupts their discussion by stating, loudly, “When I have **my**\* party at **my** house **you** and **you** are allowed to come”. Neither Katie nor Chloe respond to this, instead remaining silent for a moment and glancing over to her, before continuing with their food arrangements. This is a typical incident for Lauren – she seems to find it hard to successfully integrate into a pre-existing conversation, though she continually attempts it with Katie and

*Chloe. Lauren herself is also silent for a moment and watches the pair, twisting her hands in the fabric of her dress. Then she goes to get her own bag from the dress up corner and moves to join them in the kitchen, gathering plates and cutlery together and packing them in her bag. She occasionally comments on their decision making (for example, Chloe picks up some silicone cupcake cases and suggests to Katie that they are for the birthday cake. Lauren looks up and passes over some plastic food to put in the case, saying, "This is the cake". Chloe looks to her with a frown, but after a moment she takes the proffered item silently and puts it in her own bag with the cupcake cases).*

\*lengthening and emphasis on bold type

In this extract from my research diary field notes Lauren is excluded from the social space of Katie and Chloe's party, prompting me to ruminate on her character, appearance, position within the nursery and relationships with other children. I note the ways that embodied gender appears constantly to be tied to social inclusion for Lauren, and how she struggles to occupy feminine subjectivities to enact the desires that work through and around her. The extract also captures Lauren's emotions regarding this ongoing struggle, as I observe her awkwardly twisting her hands in her dress, unsure of how to penetrate the social boundaries that Katie and Chloe establish around their play. For me, Lauren's experiences highlight the critical nature of gender in the early years classroom and social groups, providing a route through which positive or negative effects on self-esteem and social skills can emerge.

As the extract begins, Katie and Chloe's party is established as a bounded space of social inclusion and, with the addition of the princess dresses, femininity. This space is constituted materially – through the home corner zone of the classroom, the food and utensils, the princess dresses worn by the girls and the girls' bodies themselves – and discursively, as the girls plan this party and negotiate the introduction of Lauren's own future party. The boundaries of this space are set to enact privilege on those within in ways that are inextricable from heteronormative femininity, with Katie and Chloe's alliance locating the pair at the centre of this privilege. Katie and Chloe are two of the

eldest girls in the nursery and are also the most consistently feminised, delighting in dressing up, make up, and hairstyling. Through the feminising of their party, the girls explore some aspects of heteronormative gender roles: they do not perform the activities of *enjoying* a party (such as dancing, playing games, or singing) but are more concerned with preparing both themselves and the party structure, beautifying their bodies with the dresses and preparing the refreshments. In doing so they appropriate the power and authority of coherent adult femininity: beautiful, glamorous, capable, and caring.

Katie and Chloe are popular within the peer group and their articulate confidence makes them a prominent presence in the classroom. Their party is, therefore, a desirable event to be involved in and the girls sustain that desirability by policing its boundaries through a silent exclusion of Lauren. Nevertheless, Lauren repeatedly tries and fails to permeate their social space. Her abrupt announcement of her own event belies her interpretation of the meaning of parties. She identifies the boundaries of inclusion it articulates and attempts to locate herself, not only within those boundaries by attending parties *with* Katie and Chloe but at the centre of power by hosting her *own* party, with its incumbent rights of invitation and refusal. She emphasises this grasp at inclusion with her possessive statement (“**My** party at **my** house”) locating Katie and Chloe as the outsiders who are being invited in. Unfortunately for her, this attempt is also unsuccessful as the others do not deign to reply in a way that might validate it.

As I note in the extract, this is not an isolated incident; indeed, this is perhaps one of their softer exclusions of Lauren, as they do not directly tell her to leave as they do at other times. My reference to her position in role play games is telling as to the undercurrents of gender and power that inform the girls’ relationships, as Lauren is repeatedly excluded from desirable enactments of femininity like mum, sister, princess, or cat<sup>5</sup>, relegated instead to the masculinised roles of dad, brother, or dog that were usually taken by boys. Notably, she is also not allocated the privileged masculine role of ‘prince’,

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<sup>5</sup> I discuss the gendering implications of animal play further in chapters six and seven.

preventing her from engaging at all in heterosexualised narrative play<sup>6</sup>. Lauren's desires to engage in gendering roles and enact her own embodied subjectivity as heterosexually desirable is therefore continuously stifled by Katie and Chloe.

I describe Lauren's appearance and countenance at some length here and it seems not insignificant to me that her body contrasts with the parameters of idealised girlhood that are embodied by Katie and Chloe. She is not physically delicate or highly feminised through clothes and accessories. Her hair is unruly where theirs is silky, her voice is deep and her words often awkward as she struggles to relate to the articulate Katie and Chloe (I speculate in the extract that this may be due to her younger age but it could equally be a product of her awareness that they wish to exclude her from conversation). When helping her into princess dresses, I often find it difficult to fit them onto her body due to her large frame, and am selective about the dresses I help her choose to avoid her feeling like they will not fit, as most of them do not. In all these ways, Lauren *does not fit* the gendered body that she desires and that Katie and Chloe seem to embody so comfortably, and it seems no coincidence to me that she is repeatedly excluded from their feminised social space.

The princess dresses themselves mark a critical entry point of new materialist analysis as the shape and styling of the garments transforms the sexed bodies of the girls to produce a 'hyper-femininity'. This is an exaggerated performance of female gender stereotypes that foregrounds the shape of heteronormatively desirable female bodies; curvaceous but slender, graceful, elegant, richly accessorised to project wealth and enhance physical features (Murnen & Byrne, 1991). Additionally, their ostentatious appearance demands attention from others, making 'princesses' girls<sup>7</sup> highly visible in the nursery.

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<sup>6</sup> Katie and Chloe's exclusion of Lauren from any heterosexualised desire – masculine or feminine – is partly the subject of chapter eight.

<sup>7</sup> There was not a single incident of a boy wearing a princess dress during the year I was at the nursery. On one occasion, featured in a later extract, I help one of the younger boys to choose a dressing up outfit and suggest a princess dress. It is Lauren herself who blocks this suggestion, scolding me with an assertion that boys do not wear princess dresses (see chapter eight).

Discursively, the dresses carry allusions to heterosexual romance (a princess, by nature, requires a prince or king either as husband or father) and social privilege. Successfully wearing a princess dress from the dressing-up box was highly desirable for the nursery girls, but Lauren's body, despite being a sexed female body, makes it more difficult for her to achieve the hyper-feminisation enjoyed by some other girls. Gendering her sexed body is not a simple equation for her, and demonstrates the problems that naturalising gender creates.

Lauren's reaction to the situation gives a negative impression of her experiences, and it would be easy to position her as the 'loser' in a game of successful gender enactment, missing out on the privilege that Katie and Chloe enjoy, however it would be erroneous to imagine the other girls as 'winners'. As is demonstrated in many of the data extracts I share in my analysis chapters, they - and Katie in particular - are acutely aware of the value of coherent feminine embodiment and put significant effort into creating situations where desirable feminine subjectivations become available to them. As such, Katie and Chloe's activities circulated almost exclusively around the home corner and its feminised gendering potential<sup>8</sup> and other gender-neutralised activities like drawing. They never took aggressive roles in games and rarely played in physically boisterous ways. Their appearance - again, particularly Katie - needed constant maintenance, with the putting on and (reluctant) removal of princess dresses, re-plaiting of hair, fixing of accessories, adjustment of tights and shoes, and even, occasionally, the application of make-up, producing heavy material restrictions on Katie and Chloe's activities if they were to maintain their feminised gender enactment.

Through the analysis I conduct in this thesis, I seek to understand how the physical and linguistic aspects of the children's lives (referred to as the 'material-discursive') created or closed off opportunities to enact gender within the nursery, and explore how the children engaged with these opportunities and what social and emotional effects this produced. Becoming gendered - as opposed to the physical occupation of a sexed body - is not a linear development in young children's lives but is continuously (re)negotiated within

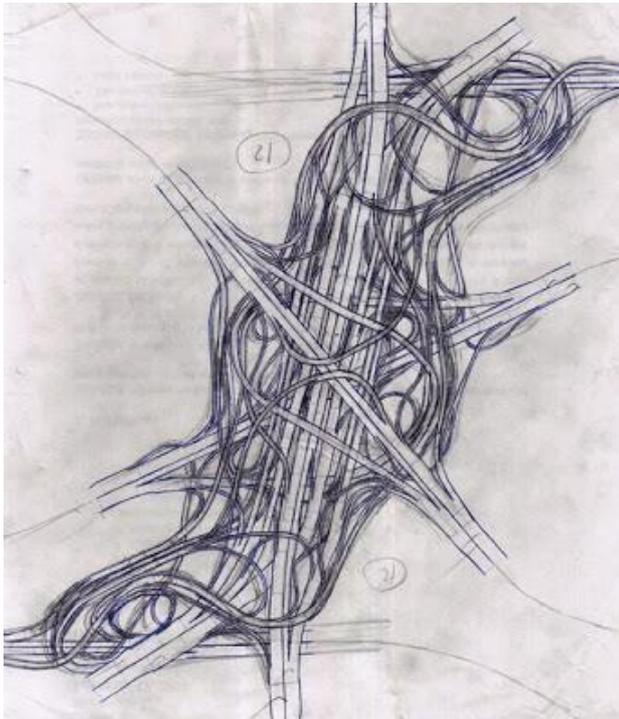
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<sup>8</sup> For discussion of this please refer to chapter five.

their engagements with other children, their own bodies, and the material space and non-human bodies (objects) of the nursery. Notions of ‘correct’ gender as understood and circulated by the children and their desire and/or ability to perform that gender with their bodies and words is critical to their social experience. A posthumanist, new materialist reading of my ethnographic data enables a way of looking differently at the children’s gendering engagements with material objects, like the princess dresses, and the body transformations they enact through play, like Lauren becoming ‘dog’ rather than ‘cat’. This adds further dimensions to the progression in our collective understanding of gender in early childhood that poststructuralist analysis has achieved. As I discuss in my conclusion, this understanding can inform early years teaching and parenting practice to locate further points of possible intervention and adaptation to encourage the social acceptance of a wider range of possible gender subjectivations, and better support children in their ongoing negotiations of gender roles in early childhood and beyond.

## Project Summary

### Origins, Beginnings, and (Never)Endings



*12 Way Spaghetti Junction*: Unattributed (Suspension of Disbelief, 2009)

My initial interest in studying gender and childhood was primarily theoretical in nature. Inspired by learning about feminism in literature during my undergraduate years, and subsequent pre-PhD forays into queer theory and social constructionism, I became fascinated by the denaturalisation of gender and sexuality that I found in Foucault and Butler, and the notion of these aspects of identity as discursively

performative. Through local activism I grew increasingly involved in feminist politics, which had its own satisfactions (and frustrations) but I continued to pursue deeper theoretical knowledge of the subject. The texts I read seemed to have a great deal of interest to say about adults but the question I inevitably always returned to was, “Where and when does social gendering begin?” and none of the books I could find had a satisfactory answer, which I was sure would involve early childhood.

With my present access to academic literature, I know now that, in fact, many people had been working on this question, but when I first determined to answer it through further formal study I knew nothing of their work (nor, indeed, of what postgraduate research would entail!) In my naivety, my initial aim was therefore completely exploratory and based almost entirely on Butler’s notion of performativity and Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus. I intended to explore how gender discourses emerged in young children’s lives during their earliest social engagement beyond the private sphere, which for many is the preschool nursery or crèche. Based on my ‘layman’s’ reading of Butler and Foucault I imagined that I would observe children learning and reproducing gender roles through social performance, creating stable notions of themselves as gendered boys and girls within their peer group, and becoming ‘indoctrinated’ into heterosexuality and its constituent masculine and feminine gender roles. This interpretation of my data remains possible, though its simplicity jars as I recollect it in the present time. Though my general research aim has remained the same – to better understand gender in the early years – the route which my analysis took developed substantially in light of the data I produced with the children in my study. In this section I outline the research approach and methodology that I employed and indicate some of the key findings of my study, but I wish to avoid giving the impression of a stable research trajectory that followed a cleverly predicated path of theory-design-implementation-interpretation. As with any research which attempts thorough reflexivity, the twists and turns of the project formed a tangled spaghetti junction of ideas around which I continue to circulate, forever turning around on myself. My understanding of the data I produced (and continue to produce through my iterative analysis) persists in its progressive emergence and here I offer a snapshot of its current state.

## **Research Aim**

For the initial design of the project I wanted to contribute to what was then a very small body of qualitative research conducted in the UK on gender and the early years undertaken from a social constructionist perspective. This entailed an exclusive focus on how discourse on gender was (re)produced through children's relationship cultures. As time passed, research on this topic increased both locally and internationally, whilst simultaneously a reflexive approach to my data led me to move beyond social constructionism and a theoretical alignment dominated by Foucault and Butler. Due to the nature of the data I produced, the aim of my research shifted to an attempt to account for the material as well as the discursive, demanding a new theoretical focus on posthumanism and new materialism.

This change is important as the data I analyse here was produced with only discursive elements in mind, and it was only after I completed data production that I realised the material and temporal aspects of gendering were critical to my understanding of what was happening in my participants' lives. Although this presents an added layer of complexity to analysis, I would also argue that it increases the integrity of the research. I began with preconceived notions of what I would find and the conclusions I would draw about how children were experiencing gender, but instead I found my data leading me to find alternative explanations and discovered some unexpected interpretations. Therefore, while the aim of my research has remained to contribute to the knowledge of how young children experience gender, my understanding of what this aim entails has shifted significantly over time.

The final aim of the study is therefore to track the 'micro' moments in nursery life where gender emerges as a temporal phenomenon through combined material and discursive activity, and to explore how these moments affect children's subjective life experiences in gendered/gendering ways.

## **Theoretical Framework: A New Materialist Approach to Gender in Early Childhood**

New feminist materialist approaches differ from prior feminist materialism, though they share some of the same concerns. As Hird describes:

*The latter field is concerned with women's material living conditions – labor, reproduction ... and so on ... What distinguishes emerging analyses of material feminism... is a keen interest in engagements with matter”*  
(Hird, 2009:329-330)

Although I introduced this chapter with a critique of the tendency to reduce gender to innate biological imperatives, the significance of bodies themselves – both human and non-human - for the production of gender and sexuality is a central theme of this thesis. However, exploring this significance requires a more complex understanding of the role of materiality in producing our experiences than a reliance on reductive biological assumptions (or, indeed, discursive ones) allows. There are many different strands of what Lykke (2010) calls ‘post-constructionism’ that have emerged in recent years; for the data I produced I found Barad’s framework of new materialism to be the most helpful in exploration and analysis. This approach requires attention to the ‘smaller’ moments of life where discourse and materiality intra-act and agential-cuts are made to create observable phenomena. An extended discussion of Barad is included in Chapter 2, and here I will give a brief outline of what she terms an ‘agential-realist onto-epistemology<sup>9</sup>’ and how I have related it here to gender and early childhood.

Barad’s theoretical concept of ‘agential-realism’ is derived from her work in quantum physics in combination with a reading of Butler’s performativity. She relocates agency as external to human and non-human bodies and troubles the nature of subject-object relations in the production of phenomena, providing an innovative engagement with posthumanist understandings of discourse and materiality that proved immensely helpful to my understanding of particular aspects of gender and early childhood.

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<sup>9</sup> “The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse. *Onto-epistem-ology*—the study of practices of knowing in being—is probably a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter” (Barad, 2003:829).

*Bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material-discursive phenomena.*

*(Barad, 2007: 153)*

At the core of Barad's theory is the disruption of the nature/culture and material/discursive binaries through perceiving subject-object distinctions as temporally emergent. That is, our understandings of subjects and objects (which include an understanding of 'gender') can only relate to particular material-discursive configurings of the world in any given moment. These configurings (termed 'entanglements') produce an impression of distinct subjects and objects, with properties that we imbue with meaning (like gender). These are necessarily iterative in emergence as the boundaries around subjects and objects continuously shift according to reconfigurings of their relations through 'intra-activity': a revision of 'interactivity' that refers to agential relations between material and discursive bodies (human and non-human) that serve to produce distinct 'subjects' and 'objects'. These relations are agential in that they produce observable phenomena but the agency to do so is not located within subjects or objects, human or non-human bodies. Barad's theorising of agency is complex and I address it further in chapter two; in brief she argues that it "is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world" (2003: 818), a drive or metabolic force that works through material and discursive bodies to produce change.

*Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity. It is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices... through the dynamics of intra-activity.*

*(Barad, 2007: 235)*

Agential-realism can be helpful for the study of gender because it shifts the terms of a debate which rests on the properties of 'matter': the location of gender as an inherent characteristic of sexed material bodies visible in the assertions of biological determinism cited in the debate over baby Storm. This serves to naturalise a plethora of characteristics, skills, and inclinations grouped together as 'gender', tied indelibly to sexed human bodies, and carried over to

the kinds of objects and experiences considered socially appropriate for those bodies. While a sociological focus on the role of discourse in gendering was, for a time, critical in exploring the social construction of gender and disputing this essentialism, the binarism inherent in separating discourse and materiality as producers of gender limits analysis and understanding. At the core of this limitation is the location of agency in producing gender, allocated either to discourse or materiality (or to each in varying degrees) as if they were oppositional powers fighting to create social life according to their own distinct images. What agential-realism offers in the analysis of gender is the chance to step away from that conflict and accommodate both discourse and materiality in an understanding of how gender emerges. Furthermore, Barad's focus on temporality and iterative emergence enables gender to be considered on feminist terms as unstable performative phenomenon, rather than as a permanent, fixed attribute of bodies and things.

Using Barad to understand my data has many important methodological implications that are addressed in chapter three. Chief among them is a focus on the seeking of *effects* rather than causes, looking for how gender emerges in (re)configurations of human and non-human bodies rather than where it comes from, producing a temporal displacement that looks to the consequences of gendering intra-activity on those bodies in entanglement. When considered as a performative phenomenon, gender is not *matter* or a discourse that *interprets matter* but as something that *comes to matter* through the iterative becomings of subjects and objects in space and time. An analysis based on this perspective recognises the flexibility and transformative capacity of gender, rather than viewing it as an inherent property of bodies or a monolithic pre-existing law that governs social behaviour. Secondly, a meticulous examination of gender as it emerges through material and discursive channels is arguably a highly practical approach for political and educative application through the ability to identify multiple points of potential intervention.

### **Methodology and Research Design**

To explore these opportunities here I analyse extensive ethnographic data that I produced with a nursery class of three and four year olds over the course of one school year, from September 2011 to July 2012. Through talking to,

playing with, and observing the daily lives of these children, I wrote about how they negotiated the tensions between their sexed bodies, socially circulated gender roles, and the materiality of the world around them, which could prompt or undermine binary and heterosexualised sex/gender identifications. I have attempted to capture a holistic representation of these children, allowing me to appreciate the nuanced and complex relationship between material and discursive explanations of gender, which leads to the enactment of boy bodies and girl bodies by those children, their peers, and the adults who feature in their lives. My analysis of this data explores the emergence (or, the 'doing') of gender in early childhood with the intention to build on discourse-based analysis via a new materialist approach and inform future developments in gender equality policy and practice.

In order to fulfil my research aim I elected to conduct semi-longitudinal ethnographic research with young children themselves, rather than collecting adult views or quantitative measures of activity and behaviour. I discuss the methodological reasons for this at length in chapter four; in brief, these reasons are as follows:

### ***Political***

Children are a vulnerable group in society. Their voices are frequently marginalised in research that focuses on their lives in favour of adults – usually parents and education practitioners – who are considered to have the right to consent to research and give their views on their behalf (Clark, 2005; MacNaughton et al., 2007; Messiou, 2006). Children are therefore disempowered and constructed as incompetent to inform change in their own lives (Grover, 2004; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Qualitative research has the ability to research with children as opposed to on them (Christensen & James, 2008) and although the children in my study were not sufficiently verbal to interview or otherwise gather their voices directly, documenting their lives ethnographically offered the opportunity to become familiar with their views and experiences. I could then attempt to represent them as fully as possible (though, as I discuss later, there are problems with claiming full representation of children's interests, see Gallagher, 2008a). Ethnography also foregrounded my role in the study as participant in phenomena, rather than constructing me as a dispassionate, objective observer, enabling a reflexive approach to

research power relations in alignment with feminist objectives (Coffey, 1999; England, 1994) and attentiveness to intersectionality (Christensen & Qvortrup Jensen, 2012; Davis, 2008). In addition, my research is inspired and informed by feminist and queer theories and approaches to conducting research, each of which demand complex, multi-layered data production and analysis which seeks the intersections and fluidity of lived experiences (Davis, 2008; England, 1994; Letherby, 2003; Warner, 2008). Ethnography is arguably the method most useful to such research.

In order to generate ethnographic data that captured relations of power between children I elected to research in a local nursery that would provide access to a large group of similarly aged children who spent extended periods of time together. I originally intended to collect multiple forms of data: audio, video/photography, and ethnographic notes in the form of a research diary, however due to constraints imposed by the nursery I was ultimately only able to produce the latter. I also visited the homes of three children to gain a fuller understanding of their lives, and conducted ethnographic interviews with these children's mothers, however these interviews are not used as data in this study as their analysis required quite different demands than could be accommodated in the overall argument of this thesis<sup>10</sup>.

### ***Ontological/Epistemological***

Both my initial theoretical approach of feminist poststructuralism and new materialism require experience of participants' social lives to conduct analysis. Direct immersion into a community's everyday life can capture the flows of power and shifting subjectivities that underlie these approaches as they occur. The extensive written notes that I produced allowed me to maintain a flexible focus to research and pursue a variety of analytic strands. As it transpired, the

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<sup>10</sup> The absence of the interview data is primarily for reasons of space and clarity – I initially attempted to incorporate analysis of the transcripts but as I conducted the interviews from a humanist standpoint – trying to gather the life histories of these three families – I found it difficult to cohere this analysis with my developing posthumanist approach. I intend to publish on this in the future in the form of papers where I can better represent the data and my interpretations of it, perhaps with different analytic tools.

'real time' nature of producing ethnographic data became critical as I realised how useful agential-realism could be in analysing my data due to the importance of temporality for this approach.

### **The Research Setting and Implementation**

The research site, Hillside Nursery<sup>11</sup> was a state preschool nursery attached to a primary school in a South Wales suburb on the outskirts of a large town. It accepted children from the age of three for the 15 hours childcare a week that was provided by the state, and children would attend for approximately three hours each day, regularly attending either morning or afternoon sessions. I researched with the afternoon class of 27 children, though the population changed regularly as children came and went from the school. I gained consent from parents to research with 20 of the children at the start of the school year, and by the following summer 15 of those children remained in the class, the rest having left for other nurseries.

The Hillside Estate suburb consisted mostly of affordable and council housing, with a small pocket of private homes that were averagely priced for the area. Many of the children in the nursery originated from poorer homes and class background was an important factor in my choice to research at Hillside. The class was ethnically diverse for the area, though was still predominantly white British<sup>12</sup>.

I usually attended Hillside for two or three afternoons a week over the school year, spending approximately 150 hours with the class over this time. I became deeply engaged with the children on a personal level, playing with them, reading to them, and helping them with work and other activities, building personal bonds with many of them. As such I was privileged to produce data with them that captured a wide range of their experiences, from quiet, private moments in corners and hidey-holes to large scale group games that spanned the playground and most of the class population. This deep level of engagement and familiarity with the children produced data that was particularly

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<sup>11</sup> All names and places have been changed and/or anonymised

<sup>12</sup> For further description of Hillside, please see chapter four

suitable for new materialist analysis compared to that which would be created through static observation.

### **Research Questions**

In line with changes within the field of gender and early childhood research, and my own shift from a social constructionist to a new materialist understanding of gender, my research questions have altered to better reflect what it is possible to perceive through my present analytic framework. Due to new research on gender and childhood in the years since I began my PhD (see chapter two), these questions also reflect the present knowledge gaps in a field which has placed increased focus on gender as discursively produced, as was the focus of my original questions. My revised research questions to guide analysis of data are as follows:

- How is gender produced in the social spaces and relations of early childhood?  
*How do notions of gender emerge materially, discursively, spatially, and temporally within the specific locality of Hillside Nursery?*
- How do human and non-human bodies become gendered in early childhood?  
*How does gender become naturalised to particular bodies? When and where do boy-bodies and girl-bodies, material objects and discursive narratives become 'masculine' and 'feminine'? What happens when binary (heteronormative) gendering is diverted/refused/failed?*
- How do young children experience gender and sexuality?  
*What are the emotional effects of gendered/gendering experiences on individual children?*
- How can understandings of these productions, becomings, and experiences be usefully applied to early years pedagogical practice and policy?  
*How can young children be better supported in relation to gender, and how can their experiences within preschool education be improved?*

Working with agential-realist theory entails a focus on how materiality engages with gendering that are reflected in these research questions. It dislocates the concept of gender from a purely discursive phenomenon, and decentres the pre-existing subject and adherence to the notion of consistent life narratives (the resultant instability being captured by a reference to 'experience' as a transient material-discursive term). It replaces the notion of the subject with the material-discursive body, both human and non-human, and analyses how bodies are produced as gendered and gendering. Finally, it turns away from seeking out traditional flows of cause and effect and instead searches for moments of emergence and becoming in material-discursive (re)configurations of the world, asking not 'why' but 'how' gender happens in the nursery. Through an analysis guided by these questions, I have identified the specific contributions that applying agential-realism to gender and early childhood can offer to the field. In the next section, I explain how this analysis is produced throughout the thesis.

## **Thesis Outline**

In this introduction I have explained the inspiration for my study, which is the origins of binary sexing/gendering and how this emerges in early childhood as a socially defining trait. I shared a data extract to illustrate what value a new materialist approach to analysis can offer to knowledge, which also served to demonstrate my research practice and introduced some of the issues at stake in this study. I then outlined the study's aims, theoretical framework, methodology, and research design, before describing the fieldwork setting and sharing the research questions that have guided my analysis. Over the course of the following chapters, I first explore the literature that has informed my work, incorporating a range of research areas that contribute to our collective sociological understanding of gender and early childhood. I then devote a chapter to theoretical discussion where I explain the shift in my analytic thinking to the new materialist approach which I elected to employ. A chapter on methodology and research design follows this, where I translate my theoretical approach into research practice, and also explore the various ethical and analytic challenges that were produced through this practice.

My three extended data analysis chapters begin with chapter five and starts with a focus on space and place, before moving to consider non-human, and finally, human bodies in the nursery. I also continue the above discussion of Lauren, Katie and Chloe by asking what the consequences of their gendering intra-activity are for the individual. The study concludes in chapter eight by returning to my research questions and considering what I have learnt during this study and how the knowledge it creates might be put to use in practice and in future research.

### ***Chapter two***

In the next chapter I review a range of literature relating to various elements of gender and early childhood research to introduce the field and identify the knowledge gap to which this study contributes. I review various developmental perspectives borne from psychology that remain deeply influential on perceptions of gender and early childhood, including Freud, Piaget, and Kohlberg, providing context for the genealogical progression of the field. The chapter then moves to discuss sociological investigations which provide the background of this study, and I begin here with research regarding the pedagogy of gender in schooling. Much of the literature I discuss here concurs on the implicit 'heteronormativity' (defined at the start of the chapter) of early education that exists alongside a silencing of discourse on sexuality within the institution. Analysis of peer relationships in the early years classroom has been one of the most prolific areas of the field in recent years, and was a powerful influence on my own original direction as a poststructuralist researcher. The focus in this area has been to understand how children emerge as active agents in their gendering, rather than acting as passive subjects to socialisation. I then provide an overview of current critical literacy research which examines the reciprocal relationship of young children with the cultural texts of early childhood. This research provides further support to the notion of children as capable social actors, with agency to interpret gender narratives through their own understandings. Finally, I address the research that relates most to this present study; that conducted in the light of posthuman and new materialist theory. These studies focus on the relationships of children with the objects and spaces of the classroom, as well as the material aspects of social life, where gendering bodies meet other gendering bodies. I conclude this chapter

by summarising how these various aspects of the field have influenced the trajectory of this study towards a new materialist, posthuman approach.

### ***Chapter three***

In chapter three I present the theoretical framework to this study, which draws primarily on Foucault's understandings of relations of power; Butler's notion of 'performativity', and Barad's agential-realism, and argue in support of this theoretical application in order to best capture the relations of power in gendering emergent space, time, and matter. This is a key chapter as this research has its origins in my theoretical interest in gender and sexuality, and deeply engages with questions of ontology and epistemology. Here I define the key concepts applied in this study and explore the relevant work of the above theorists whose work informs my analysis. My argument progresses towards a thorough consideration of the implications of a Baradian application that views phenomena, like gender, as iteratively emergent through the spacetime-mattering of intra-activity; the entanglement of spaces, places, temporality, human bodies and non-human bodies, which combine to produce gendering effects on those elements. I carry through this discussion an appreciation for Foucault's conception of relations of power, which emerge through that gendering intra-activity to produce reciprocal domination and submission, and for Butler's performativity, itself a key touchstone for Barad's agential-realism, that provides an understanding of subjectivity as unstable and multitudinous in character, and of phenomena as detached from notions of 'truth' or inherency. An important implication of this discussion is the dislocation of agency from human or non-human bodies, instead perceiving it as a flow that incorporates elements in productive intra-activity; this shift produces an analytic focus on effects, rather than causes, and this methodological point is highly influential on the analysis I conduct thereafter.

### ***Chapter four***

Here I explain the methodological genesis and design of the study, considering how the research objectives and questions, and the theoretical framework outlined in chapter three, have been realised methodologically in a discussion of conducting feminist ethnography in the early childhood classroom and home. This chapter includes reflections on ethical study, the relational

positioning of myself as researcher and my participants in the spaces of research, and the methods of writing and analysis employed. It also includes a discussion about an element of data generation that is not included in this thesis: visits to three children's homes where I conducted semi-structured interviews with their mothers.

The key points in this chapter are the ethico-political implications of an agential-realist approach, which Barad centralises in her work as accountability for the intra-activity of which we are a part. This materialises in research practice by viewing the researcher as active participant in the production of phenomena, like gender, in two ways: our responsibility for intra-activity in the field of which we are a constituent part, and the 'agential-cuts' that are made through observation and analysis which determine which iterations come to matter. In this way, this research (re)produces the gendering that I 'find' in the nursery. Other critical discussion here include my relations of power with my participants and the details of the implementation of my research design, along with the challenges that I faced along the way.

### ***Chapter five***

This chapter constitutes the start of formal data analysis. The relational analysis that I have pursued gradually 'zooms in' to position the children's lives within the complex material-discursive structures that they are constituted through and of, and begins in this chapter with a discussion on space and place as temporally emergent through gendering intra-activity. It explores how agential-realism can enhance our understandings of how space and place are entangled with bodies and discourse to produce gender and sexuality in early childhood. The chapter centres on three locations in the nursery, the 'home corner' and 'small world' spaces in the classroom, and the scramble wall apparatus in the playground, and considers how gender and sexuality are emerging intra-actively through and within those locations as the nursery children use and experience them. I argue in this chapter that temporality, space, and place iteratively materialise through their entanglement with bodies – human and non-human – and this entanglement opens possibilities not only for binary gendering but also for the subversion and disruption of gender. In this way, the design and ongoing configurations of classrooms and playgrounds have a critical part to play in producing gender and must be deeply considered

in attempts to improve children's experiences of gender that take place through, within, and between their structures.

### ***Chapter six***

This chapter moves from the 'macro-materiality' of space and place to the 'micro-materiality' of smaller, transient objects that move around the classroom, playground, and the human bodies that engage with them. As before, I do not look to inherent gender properties of these objects but instead seek the effects of their entanglement with the children's bodies and the possible becomings opened up by that entanglement. I consider how small objects can act as moving bodies that produce relations of power between children engaged with them, and the gendering effects that can be enacted through them in their transience. Costumes, non-human bodies that transform the aesthetics of human bodies, become an important part of this chapter's analysis, as I examine several data extracts involving the dress-up box. 'Princessing' through the Disneyesque ball gowns and 'wild animalising' into lions, wolves, and crocodiles through costume produce various gendering effects and lend themselves particularly to subversion of normative gendering, enabling escapist fantasy that frees children to explore subjectivations ordinarily closed off to them in 'real life'. The chapter concludes with a discussion of doll play and argues that the plastic bodies of the dolls transform them into 'proxy (sexed) subjects' through which the children can explore emotions relating to gender without risk of social conflict. In this way, dolls are critical non-human bodies in the nursery in relation to producing gender. Through this analysis I argue that we need to shift focus from the apparently inherent gender of objects in the early years – like dolls or cars – and instead look to what gendering effects are produced when these objects become entangled in intra-activity. It is therefore not objects *per se* that should be examined in the name of change, but rather the entanglements and, hence, gendering becomings that they make possible.

### ***Chapter seven***

In my last data analysis chapter I turn, finally, to human bodies. Here I share a number of extracts where children enact gendering becomings, largely without the aid of props or other objects. These becomings instead rest on the transformation of the body into something/one else, and often have rather

different implications and trajectories than those produced in relation to objects. I explore this first through data featuring children who are animalising themselves without the aid of costume or puppets, including the rampantly popular 'monster' game that pervaded the playground throughout the year. Here I argue that without non-human props, children's potential gendering becomings are more restricted and opportunities for gender subversion more obscure, though still possible. I then examine data where children's bodies become vulnerable, strong, powerful, or aggressive, finding many points of pleasure in both submission and domination within the relations of power that emerge through their intra-activity with others. Through this discussion the social metabolism of the nursery - what Barad might call its dynamic agency - becomes vibrant and visceral, with gender as continuously emergent within its temporal iterations.

I conclude this chapter with a discussion on desire and gender, which returns to the activities of Lauren, Katie, and Chloe in the remainder of the research diary extract partially featured in this introduction. I continue to follow Lauren as she moves around the nursery, first with Katie and Chloe, and then with a younger boy who wishes to join their party. Here my analysis focuses on how Lauren, shut out of a heteronormative gender becoming and the social privilege it affords, then herself solidifies the very material-discursive boundaries of heteronormativity which prevent her from realising her desire. I then visit another extract featuring the same three girls as a wedding narrative is constructed. Here we see Lauren shut out from gendering desire, refused a becoming either as object or subject, while a zone of social privilege is enacted to enclose Katie in an iteration of hyper-femininity, where her desires are realised untrammelled. In the last of the three extracts, Katie and Jack are entangled in a mobile narrative of heterosexual desire around the playground, illustrating how gendering early childhood iteratively transforms into (hetero)sexualising intra-activity. In my analysis here I focus on the pursuit, fulfilment, and denial of desirable gendering becomings and the privilege they offer in localised relations of power that sets heteronormative gender enactments at its peak, and argue that gendering is very much a matter of material-discursive bodies intra-acting with space and time, producing critical

power relations that magnetise those bodies to certain becomings that offer privilege and, ultimately, safety.

### ***Chapter eight***

My concluding chapter is structured around the four research questions set out above; in each case I reflect on the knowledge I have produced through this thesis in relation to it, explore its implications for research and practice, and suggest potential future research directions to further understandings of the relevant areas. The findings of the study can be collected under the following: how gender emerges from the collective and connected social practices of spaces, places, and bodies in the nursery; how spaces and bodies come to matter as gendered/gendering in iterative temporal agential-cuts; what opportunities for change that agential-realist analysis produces through the disturbance of traditional causality. The suggestions for practice focus mainly on the organisation of space and objects in the nursery, with ideas for ways that new kinds of entanglements may be encouraged and, hence, different gendering becomings opened up within the nursery. Future research directions include more work in the home environment to better understand how that location intra-acts with the nursery as institutional bodies; further longitudinal research to observe the same children and classroom across extended iterative emergences to perceive how gender sediments into apparent coherence; work incorporating the use of visual and audio data to facilitate a more complex agential-realist analysis; and theoretical work to explore the place of emotion and desire within agential-realism, which offers potential to better understand embodied subjectivity.

# Chapter 2: Contested Subjects

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## Introduction

In this chapter I review recent and classic international research on gender in early childhood<sup>13</sup> in order to provide a summary of the extant research underlying my own work and also to identify the new directions of analysis driving the aims and design of this study. I discuss the key qualitative researchers who have informed my approach and shaped the field by progressing understandings of gender and sexuality in early childhood. Motivated by developments in feminist and childhood theory, researchers have identified and considered a multitude of avenues through which gender is experienced by young children. This work has also enhanced the knowledge and appreciation held for children's agency and power to direct, construct, reproduce, or resist these experiences. I also discuss the contribution to knowledge that it offers through the application of recent 'new materialist' theory to ethnographic data. Through this theoretical engagement, this study considers alternative ways of thinking about gender in early childhood which holistically combine social, material, and temporal experiences.

## Chapter Structure

I begin the section with a look at developmental perspectives that remain critical to understandings of gender and early childhood in pedagogy. I discuss how Freud's theory of sexual development in early childhood has influenced later developmentalist views on gender, such as Piaget and Kohlberg, and how these views have become entrenched in current pedagogical guidance.

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<sup>13</sup> Although my work relates specifically to the preschool years of three and four years old, many of the studies referred to here address children between the age of five and seven. This has been unavoidable due to the relative scarcity of sociological research with the preschool age group in many areas, leaving this literature as the closest possible reference points.

Although this study does not deal directly in the formal pedagogy of gender in the classroom, this discussion is relevant when the underlying assumptions of early years practice regarding gender materialise in classroom practice, shaping the ways that practitioners, parents, and policy treat gender in early childhood.

I then move from macro approaches to policy and pedagogy to looking at studies that have been conducted within the early years classroom to explore gender and childhood. Much of the research referenced identifies heteronormativity (defined below) permeating learning and play spaces, as well as emerging through practitioner speech and action, but the studies concentrate on discursive constructions rather than on melding materiality and discourse as I have attempted in this study.

A particularly fruitful line of inquiry for gender and early childhood researchers has been how gender takes place within peer relationship cultures; the friendship and feuds that develop within the social world of preschool classrooms, and that is the subject of the next section. Once again, heterosexuality is found to be a key structuring factor on the ways that children interact with one another, and this research captures the interplay of power relations between children where heteronormativity is produced but also challenged during play and learning.

Following this, I review another critical area of research in the field: critical literacy. This research addresses the ways that young children engage with the narratives they are exposed to through books and stories, but also through advertising and other media channels. It challenges the notion of young children as absorbent 'sponges', passively soaking up information on gender, as the studies reveal the potential and, indeed, inclination of young children to treat cultural texts flexibly and rework them through play and their own storytelling to create different ways of performing gender. This literature contributes to the work of researchers to position children as active co-creators of gender in their own local preschool communities.

Finally, I discuss the burgeoning field of research that seeks to better account for the role of materiality in gendering. Much of this work draws from Deleuze and Guattari (2004) to apply the notion of material-discursive 'assemblages' of human and non-human bodies. Using these studies, I think about the role of new materialist approaches such as that of Barad to progress

not only our understanding of gender and early childhood, but also as a productive movement to identify new points of intervention and change. This then leads to a summary of the knowledge gaps that the research questions set out in the previous chapter seek to address.

### **A Note on ‘Heteronormativity’**

The concept of heteronormativity is referenced repeatedly throughout this chapter as many different researchers in studies of gender and childhood have usefully applied it; therefore, it is necessary here to define it before proceeding. It is a central concept in feminist and queer theory as an explanation for the social production of binary gender and heterosexuality. It refers to the assumption of heterosexuality in society and its normalising promotion through a variety of social channels that position non-heterosexualities as abnormalities and marginalises those identities in public and private life (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Jackson, 2006; Rich, 1980). It is inherently tied to notions of binary and fixed male-female gender identities, the key elements of which embody attractiveness to the opposite sex and an orientation towards upholding traditional family dynamics. For example, the idealised heteronormative woman is attractive to men, often through having a slim yet voluptuous body, and takes care over her appearance to remain so; has a caring, nurturing disposition that aspires to producing children; and takes pleasure in performing a submissive role to the men around her in both sexual and non-sexual contexts. The idealised heteronormative man, meanwhile, also takes care over his appearance but aspires to having a physical strength and power that is reflected in his body. He is career-minded and excels at work, bringing home a good wage to his family, and possesses a virility that makes him constantly hungry for sex (Hollway, 1984) whilst simultaneously remaining a supportive and sensitive partner<sup>14</sup>. These characteristics link together the concepts of ‘natural’ gender roles and heterosexuality through the conflation of (hetero)sexually attractive traits and the cornerstones of the gendered division of labour.

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<sup>14</sup> These archetypes refer to Western concepts of heteronormativity – other constructs across the world differ in their desirability (for example, female modesty in dress).

The term was popularised by Duggan (2004) but the same phenomena was previously described in other terms: it has also been referred to as ‘the heterosexual imaginary’ (Ingraham, 1994) and, in terms of the mechanisms of its operation in society, ‘the heterosexual matrix’ (Butler, 1990). It produces the binary division of gender into the exclusive categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ as based on physical attributes which are presumed to relate to unified and coherent sex, despite the experiences of many contradicting this ‘biological fact’ (Carrera et al., 2012; Fausto-Sterling, 1993; 2003). The conception of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ identities, is assumed to correlate with binary gendering to justify this normalisation (Sedgwick, 1990). Therefore, when we speak of ‘gender’ we speak also of (hetero)sexuality, as the symbiotic relationship between the two apparently separate concepts acts to make their division fundamentally problematic.

Heteronormative discourses are socially circulated, privileging knowledges that inform verbal and physical performances of heterosexual gender and sexuality. These discourses are particularly powerful in early childhood contexts where heteronormativity is implicitly linked to child protection narratives. As discussed below, in order to protect children’s ‘natural’ heteronormativity, it is thought necessary to ensure that they are not exposed to narratives which contradict or problematise binary gender and normative heterosexuality. As child protection discourse rests on notions of childhood as asexual and ‘innocent’ (Faulkner, 2011; Robinson, 2012) this idealised protection is extended to all sexual knowledge relating to pleasure or harm (and, in many cases, any sexual knowledge at all, including basic physiological understandings. See, for example, Cameron, 2009). Critically, although heteronormativity holds significant discursive power in western societies, it can be, and has been undermined through personal and political action (Rossi, 2011). Many researchers discussed here critique the ubiquity of heteronormativity in early childhood and aim to discover how it can be challenged and dismantled as a political imperative to promote equal rights and recognition of LGBTQ+ identities in childhood and beyond. However, recent attempts to promote sexual equality in schooling have been criticised for sanitising and normalising gay and lesbian identities in a form dubbed ‘homonormativity’ (Bryant, 2008).

## Developmental Perspectives

*How early childhood traditions and ‘truths’ exclude difference and restrict potential is complex. They do so by relying on understandings of childhood that present simplistic images of how children learn, know and live gender. They do so by insisting that the best way to know and to interact with children is developmentally.*

*MacNaughton, 2000: xiv*

*There is no such thing as a normal psychology which holds for all [of humanity].*

*Horney, 1937 (In: Simon, 1996: 27)*

Developmental perspectives are perhaps the most influential construction of early childhood that continue to emerge in early years policy and practice discourse (MacNaughton, 2000; Maynard et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2010) and developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) has significant implications for the framing of gender in early years education. Rooted in Freud’s writing on sexual theory, and applied through Piagetian pedagogical theory by Kohlberg and Bem, developmental perspectives on gender apply normative stages to early childhood and view gender as a product of psychological and cognitive processes, the results of which are expected to vary in predictable patterns according to social exposure. Although heavily problematised from its origins in psychology (most prominently by Horney, quoted above) and revised by post-developmental sociologists critical of its reductive, normalising potential (Brooker, 2002; Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Osgood, 2014) classic developmentalism is still a significant influence on perceptions of early childhood and gender. It informs early years teaching, practitioner and parent understandings of gender, and, due to its widespread incorporation into social understandings, public beliefs<sup>15</sup>. Some newer developmental theory from

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<sup>15</sup> Some argue that the coalition government established in 2010 have moved away from developmentalism in early years teaching guidance; for example: Broadhead and

Piaget and Kohlberg takes a more flexible stance in regard to the range of factors thought to create a person's gendered sense of self and allots greater agency to the individual. These more recent perspectives can be viewed as supporting complex, multi-layered, and non-deterministic understandings of gender in early childhood as opposed to seeking predictable patterns of psychological behaviour.

Freud's work on 'psychosexuality' (2001) first introduced the notion of sexual development stages that dictated a person's gender identity depending on points of interruption within those stages. His revolutionary work centralised early childhood experiences to gender identity and proved to be both boon and iron cage for non-heteronormative gender. While he recognised and popularised the notion of diverse gender and sexual expression within binary male and female sex groups (Rubin, 1977), he also located a central normative development of masculine or feminine gender (tied inherently to biological sex group) that positioned all such diversity as 'abnormal' and potentially preventable depending on a child's social relationships and experiences (Johnson, 1988). Problematically, his theory has popularised a conflation of gender and sex-group and the belief in a normative, predictable progression through stages of psychological development to result in observable gender identity (though this is a rather simplistic reading of his work). An important feminist critique of Freud (which is also levelled at Piaget) is the phallogentrism of his work, which establishes the male as 'correct', constructs morality and ethics as 'masculine' and female identity as 'a problem' (for example, in his written lecture *Femininity*, 1965<sup>16</sup>. See de Beauvoir, 1993; Felman, 1981 and Horney, 1924). Nevertheless, Freud's contribution to gender and sexuality theory and the primacy he placed on the early years of childhood to the

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Burt, 2012; Stewart and Obolenskaya, 2015. However current early years practitioner guidelines issued by the Department for Education continue to centralise developmentally appropriate care (Early Education, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Though here Freud is also at pains to denaturalise gender roles by emphasising the role of socialisation. For example: "Suppression of women's aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses" (1965: 2)

establishment of gender identity have heavily influenced later developmental theory like that of Piaget, and the psychological understanding of sex roles demonstrated by Kohlberg (1968) and Huston (1985).

In his theory of psychosexuality, Freud argued that the child's sexual desire for the mother is resolved through conflict and then identification with the father for boys, who aspire to embody the father's phallus, and identification with the mother for girls, who aspire to embody the object of the phallus's sexual desire, as well as desire for the father. Appropriate management of 'phallic stage' desire solidifies a child's burgeoning gender identity through identification with the correspondingly gendered parent (according to their possession or lack of the phallus). Critical to his theorising of this stage of childhood is the construction of masculinity as 'active' and the feminine as 'passive' in relation to the pursuit of the sexual object of the mother. Freud states

*There is no pure masculinity or femininity either in the biological or psychological sense. On the contrary every individual person shows a mixture of his own biological sex characteristics with the biological traits of the other sex and a union of activity and passivity.*

*(Freud, 1930: 77, n.8)*

However, the linguistic alignment of these categorisations prompts the very collapse that he warns against (visible in later uses of his work in early childhood development, for example: Parsons, 1983) while providing enough allusion to flexibility to evade interrogation. This characterisation of preschool boys as 'active' and the centralising of their experiences above those of 'passive' girls remain visible in early childhood practice discourse (for a particularly acute example, see Santer et al., 2007: xiii).

Despite heavy criticism of Freud's view of early childhood and gender development, the acceptance and application of psychosexual development by highly influential childhood scholars such as Erikson (1951), a focused application of psychodynamic approaches to childhood by Freud's daughter, Anna Freud (1980), and the incorporation of his assumptions into the developmentalism of Piaget (1962; 1971) and Bowlby (1953) has carried his work through into later understandings of early childhood. Piaget's pedagogical

theories have proven fundamental to the design of contemporary early years education in Westernised countries (Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2000; Smidt, 2007), and were a heavy influence on other key developmental figures like Vygotsky and Kohlberg. Although Piaget did not directly address the formation of gender identity, the principles of his work on cognitive and moral development have been applied to it. For Piaget the early years of childhood (for age two to seven), which he termed the 'preoperational' period, are in part characterised by a propensity for fantasy and role play. Through this type of play, he argued, children 'assimilate' experiences in the practice of identities and are able to locate themselves in relation to others and identify with role models (1952). This complements Freud's argument that children of this age seek identification with the mother or father in order to resolve sexual desire, resulting in the formation of a gendered sense of self. A further important feature of Piaget's work is the increasing awareness of young children that identity remains stable despite temporal and superficial changes in appearance or action, which he claimed has solidified by age five. It is this feature of Piagetian theory which underlies Kohlberg's relation of his ideas of gender (Golombok & Fivush, 1994), as it permits an understanding of gender as constant and universal and as being key to the formation of a personal identification.

Kohlberg centralises an interactional exchange between cognitive and cultural influences in his application of Piaget's cognitive development theory to gender identity. Though he naturalised 'sex role attitudes' as a universally consistent feature of human life, he also insisted that age-related changes in children's understanding of gender and sex are caused by the "cognitive organisation of social role concepts around universal physical dimensions" (1966: 82), rather than through physical maturation as Freud argues. Indeed, Kohlberg is quite critical of Freud's collapsing of sexual (and, hence, gender) identity to instinctual biological impulse and abnormalities to its 'critical period' disruption in early childhood (1966: 83-88). As such, Kohlberg (along with Vygotsky) forms an important bridge between developmental and social constructionist perspectives on gender identity.

Despite distancing his work from that of Freud and consciously aligning himself within a Piagetian framework, Kohlberg agrees that the preschool years

are pivotal for our development of later gender identity. For Kohlberg, children of three and four years old are transitioning from the 'gender labelling' stage, where they understand gender to be signified by superficial appearance and consider it to be flexible according to that appearance, to the 'gender stability' stage, which culminates at the age of six. According to Kohlberg, the gender stability stage brings children a growing awareness that gender remains a constant aspect of identity regardless of superficial appearance, and this encourages them to form their own stable sense of gender identity based on role models of the same-sex (1966). Stereotypes hence become helpful to the children as they learn how to inhabit femininity or masculinity, complementing their newfound appreciation for the stability of gender.

Like Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg have been critiqued by feminist psychoanalysts for their centralising of male development and side-lining of female experience, including the characterisation of feminised morality such as nurturing tendencies as lesser on a hierarchy of development (Gilligan, 1982). Furthermore, both theorists insist on universal age-related development, deviation from which in the individual being a problem for pedagogy to address and 'fix'. As MacNaughton (2000) demonstrated in her work with early years teachers, such views create expectations of children and acceptance of normative values – regardless of their social desirability or context. Finally, cognitive-developmental understandings of early years gender identity are limited by their focus on the internal processing of external stimulus; while they may offer useful explanations of how young children construct a sense of gendered self, they cannot interrogate the sources of gender roles, values, and inequalities (unlike Freud, who attempted this – albeit problematically). This has the effect of closing off interpretation of gendering processes by locating its emergence within the body and mind, rather than as a flexible phenomenon; even when proponents like Kohlberg emphasise the important role of the social, he calls gender "the most stable of all social identities" (1966: 92). This fixes gender as a singular, coherent identity that individuals occupy, rather than as a tapestry of multiple subjectivities that we move through and between (Morrow, 2006), as later feminist and queer thought perceives it to be.

Salamon (2011) draws on several Australian studies to contradict the normative developmentalism that has promoted the idea of children as

essentially passive. She argues that young children have greater social abilities as they enter nursery than is accepted in early years pedagogy, a point supported in relation to gender by multiple studies which highlight children's active engagement with the production of gendered power relations in early years classrooms (Blaise, 2005b; Care et al., 2007; Jones & Brown, 2001; Markström & Halldén, 2009). Moreover, children of nursery age already show both the ability and inclination to challenge power relations of their own volition in relation to gender, often defying adult conceptions and restrictions (Epstein, 1996; Gunn, 2011; Markström, 2010; Skånfors et al., 2009; Robinson, 2005a). Even those who work within developmentalist paradigms have pointed out that the acquisition and construction of gender knowledge is insufficiently recognised in the early years, and that developmental theory must be developed to reflect young children's 'real world' experiences of gender and their ability to both reproduce and challenge stereotypes (Ashley, 2003; Burman, 2008; Lloyd & Duveen, 1992). Below, I review a range of research that positions preschool aged children as active social co-constructors of gender through peer relationships, troubling the above notions of internal developmental processes as formative in this regard. First, I look at research that examines the early years classroom as institutionally gendered and heteronormative.

### **Schooling Sexualities: Gender and the Early Years Classroom**

Many sociologists of education have argued that schools are inherently gendered (and heterosexual) institutions (for example: Epstein, 1993; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Renold, 2005; Thorne, 1995); these arguments are predominantly based on studies which take the primary or secondary school as their focus. Similarly to peer culture research (see below), there is increasing recognition of the fact that preschool institutions operate in the same manner as the classrooms of older children and researchers have worked in recent years to fill the void of evidence on the subject identified by Delamont in 1990 when gender and early years research remained limited.

Recent research has found that binary gender stereotypes pervade teachers' talk and pedagogical methods (Surtees, 2005), regulatory practices to control behaviour (Brown, 2007) and the materials used for classroom activities

(Gilbert & Williams, 2008). It has also been linked to teachers' reported and observed tendency to treat young children as simultaneously heterosexual and asexual in accordance with popular constructions of gender-appropriate childhood (a)sexuality (Allan, 2009; Gunn, 2011; Robinson, 2005a), where parental pressure is identified as a key factor in influencing their practice (Surtees, 2005). In fact, as Ivinson identifies, the UK government's recent approach on the matter of gender and early years pedagogy has been somewhat contradictory: at the same time as the problematic document *Confident, Capable and Creative: Supporting boys' achievements* (CCC) was published the Department for Children, Schools and Families (then the Department of Education) commissioned the practitioner guidance document *Gender and Education – Mythbusters* which was published in 2009. This guidance in many places directly contradicts the advice given in CCC, problematising the assumptions about gender gap statistics by arguing that "there is little evidence to suggest that neurological ('brainsex') differences result in boys having different abilities/ways of learning to girls" (2009: 4) and that "designing a 'boy-friendly' curriculum has not been shown to improve boys' achievement" (2009:6). While it is heartening that this document was produced at all, the continued focus on gender and early years test results in statistical reporting and other policy guidelines demonstrates that its message is being lost in subsequent review and reform.

Cahill and Adams (1997), MacNaughton, (2000) and Surtees (2005) interviewed early teachers concerning their classroom speech and practices, finding that the - overwhelmingly female - participants admitted to using language which reinforced gender stereotypes, and basing decisions in teaching and regulation on those stereotypes. Surtees argued that her participants talk performed two key functions: normalising children's gender and sexuality (using words like 'normal' and 'natural' and evoking developmentalism and biological imperatives) and minimising children's identities (using words like 'abnormal' and 'unnatural' in relation to non-stereotypical or non-heterosexual behaviour). Similar findings are reported by Souto-Manning and Hermann-Wilmarth (2008) and Robinson (2005b), who assert that early years teachers actively attempt to shield children from knowledge of gay and lesbian identities,

and this 'protection' contributes to the pervasive heteronormativity of the preschool classroom.

Regarding sexuality, which, through omission, is often treated as a distant relation to gender and as irrelevant to early years research (Theilheimer and Cahill, 2001), Gunn argues that "practices in early childhood education that produce children as gendered also work to produce them as heterosexual" (2011: 281). Osgood (2012) points out that the imperative of early years institutions to protect 'innocent' children (appealing to the Rousseauian imaginary described in *Emile*, 1762) which influences their design and organisation, holds implicit that those children are asexual and must be 'allowed' to develop their 'natural' sexuality, which is always assumed to be heterosexual. However, despite this popular developmentalist discourse, the arrangements of nursery classrooms do not simply protect children from sexuality but instead are repeatedly shown in research as prompting and facilitating heterosexual responses from the children who play in them. The play scenarios supported by role play areas have come under particular scrutiny for this encouragement, especially the ubiquitous 'home corner' which is often shown to be a key site of heteronormative constructions and resistances in nursery classroom life (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Paley, 1984; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005).

## **Preschool Peer Relationship Cultures**

The poststructuralist epistemological turn of the late 20th century shifted the focus of both childhood and gender sociology away from early essentialist developmentalism and led to a new sociology of childhood emerging in the 1990s which treated children as social actors with agency and power (Corsaro & Eder, 1996; Qvortrup, 1994; James et al., 1998). This paradigm shift has proven extremely productive for understanding how personal relationships contribute to these experiences.

This notion of children as influential social actors has gained wide acceptance in childhood studies as recognition of children's critical abilities and agency has been framed as a universal ethical concern, as much as an epistemological one (Prout and James, 1997; Morrow and Richards, 1996). The new interest in early childhood interactions and peer relationships has

proved particularly productive for research concerned with gender and sexuality. While there has been a greater focus on the primary school years (for example: Allan, 2009; Connolly, 1998; Epstein et al., 2001; Francis, 1998; Read, 2011; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005), the links between preschool peer relationships and early experiences of gender are increasingly being explored.

Similarly to primary schools, in nursery and preschool classrooms the holding of knowledge about gender, and the enactment of this knowledge through performance and recognition (or rejection) of other knowledges and performances is a key site where power relations between children are articulated. Popularity in the nursery peer group has been related to 'coherent' performances of femininity or masculinity, with social desirability being linked with stereotypically gendered pursuits and attractive appearance. Failing to locate oneself within these identities holds the risk of being alienated from the social world of the nursery prompted by a lack of gender recognition (and therefore, recognition as a *person*) by peers (Burman, 1995; Duveen, 1992).

Corsaro's (1985; 2003) landmark ethnographic study on friendship and peer cultures drew widespread sociological attention to the importance of exploring the social world of the preschool nursery. He defines peer cultures as "a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, and concerns that children and youth produce and share with peers" (2003:148), and it is the focus on independent production and interactive circulation of ideas which has captured the attention of researchers influenced by the new sociology of childhood and continues to inspire contemporary studies.

Löfdahl (2006) draws on Corsaro's work to illustrate the wide range of criteria used by preschool children to produce and regulate social status, including "age, appearance, clothes, and other personal traits" (2006: 85). She argues that power organisation is mediated through the use and interpretation of such 'props', imbued with meaning by children and adults, which, as her data shows, could be extremely precise yet flexible in their application. Löfdahl and Hägglund (2007) further developed understandings of power orders in preschool in a later paper based on the same ethnographic data; this showed friendship preferences for children of the same age and gender, which the researchers interpreted as a manifestation of the heterosexual matrix in the social group. The study also showed children exerting agency over a teacher-

organised game through the selection of roles, allocating prominent roles to high status children and adapting the game's meaning in order to produce and maintain the social status of themselves and other children.

The primacy of gender in young children's social perceptions has been supported by a number of psychological studies that illustrate understandings of gender in early life. Martin et al. (2002) showed that by the age of 18 months infants reproduce gender stereotypes in their organisation of objects into 'male' or 'female', and are able to correctly identify other children by gender. Ruble and Martin (2004) argue that this early knowledge of gender is manifested in notions of identity and belonging, which are solidified by the age of five in what they call "an impressive constellation of stereotypes about gender... that they apply to themselves and others" (2004: 67).

This gender-related social hierarchy exists alongside, and outside of the sanctioned pedagogy of the early years classroom and acts to produce and regulate young children's identities, as well as the spaces around and through which these identities are performed (Paechter, 2007; Read, 2011; Wohlwend, 2009a, 2009b). Blaise (2005) writes that this social regulation of gender relies on a set of discourses, which in her study of an American kindergarten she described as "wearing femininity, body movements, make-up, beauty, and fashion talk" (2005: 92). This criteria bears resemblance to Ruble and Martin's 'constellation of stereotypes' which circulate in the nursery peer group and affect how children interact with each other. Like Löfdahl and Häggglund (2007), Blaise terms this set of discourses a 'heterosexual matrix' operating in the classroom which determines the construction and intelligibility of gender and sexuality, and whose power is rendered through the agency of young children in determining peer relationships (Wohlwend, 2007).

Research on gender and social relationships with children of nursery age remains limited in the UK and this study contributes to this academic conversation through a focus on the emergence of gender within peer exchanges. As well as the discursive aspects of social life in the nursery, I also address the materiality of sociality – how children's bodies meet socially with other human and non-human bodies through the spatial apparatus of the classroom and playground in intra-activity. This adds a critical extra dimension

to the research that allows me to explore how these social relationships take place materially as well as discursively, as the above studies tend to focus on.

### **Active Agents: The Critical Literacy of Early Childhood**

Despite the pressure identified above for young children to conform to gender stereotypes and heteronormative identities, they are not passive victims of their peer group or institutional discourses. Research has highlighted the ability of preschool children to consider narratives critically and reconstruct them in ways which may challenge or deny those discourses. This ability, frequently termed 'critical literacy', forms a site of resistance to heteronormativity, where children can perform gender and sexuality in ways which undermine these hegemonic identities.

Studies which consider critical literacy primarily focus on narratives in reading and writing stories, where researchers actively engage children with storybooks and ask them to reflect upon or alter the contents, or, alternatively, ask them to create their own stories and analyse the themes and content. The most prominent and influential application of these methods was implemented by Davies (1989) who argued that it is language that defines our identities: availability, access, versatility, and traditions of use all define and restrict our definitions of gender and sex. Her semiotic focus positions 'male' and 'female' as structural elements of our society, as they both "condition and arise from social action" (1989: 14). Davies is also insistent on the non-binary nature of gender, and describes the social power of this particular discourse and the penalties for getting one's gender 'wrong', including the breaking of the moral imperative (p.22) to be the 'correct' gender.

Davies explored her conceptual framework with preschool children in two ways: observation in classrooms and individual engagement with gendered narratives in storybooks. In this dual approach, Davies formulates what is perhaps one of the most successful explorations of young children and gender roles in the history of childhood studies. Using stories to prompt the children's discussion and elucidate their opinions, Davies gathers a large amount of rich data and then supplements this with observations to confirm her suspicions that children draw from cultural discourses to form their gender, regardless of how they are treated or what they are taught at home. In her discussion, Davies

describes how children “collude in the establishment of a particular social order” (1989: 45) in support of her poststructuralist reasoning which argues that children are not passive absorbers of discursive powers but rather actively engage with creating these discourses. Davies’s study intends to discover how children draw from cultural texts to co-create this ‘social order’. Her analysis represents this perspective as her extensive data illustrates this process not only in inception but execution through her observation of preschool children in the classroom. This two-pronged data analysis shows the reader first how children interpret the stories she reads them, sometimes rewriting the narrative or dismissing it altogether to support the gender beliefs and inclinations they have already been exposed to or created, and also how they perform their gender through play and conversation. Many of the children are shown to accept and enforce heteronormative discourses with which they are familiar through interpretations which are disapproving of gender-bending characters to the extent of cruelty (claiming that they would join in with teasing them as their peers do in the narrative of *Oliver Button is a Sissy*). Davies also finds that a minority of children are willing to defend them, with enthusiasm for adult approval and, equally, for correcting those who fail to meet the adult standard of ‘a good child’ (1989: 55-57). This fondness for correction is also apparent in their outspoken dismay at non-normative gender roles in Davies’s study. She also comments that the moral order which children understand is “not experienced as an external imposition, it is experienced as a set of self-evident meanings through which the world and one’s various positioning within it are maintained” (p.53), emphasising the naturalisation of discursive powers. Nevertheless, the data she presents to support her rejection of binary gender positioning illustrates how children are able and, sometimes, willing to themselves reject limited normative roles and construct identities that sit outside of the binary, either temporarily or consistently, though it is unclear in her work what leads some children to be able to do this and not others.

Davies’s success has prompted several studies that adapt her methods to early years critical literacy research. Jackson (2007) explored depictions of occupations in early years storybooks, interviewing children about illustrations of women and men's work in two books. Insisting that "children are active and critical readers" (2007: 63) and can overlay their own experiences and

interpretations on their content, Jackson argues that children can draw on texts and engage critical literacy to interpret and produce stories which reflect their world view. Her data shows children producing original and diverse meaning, rather than passively absorbing narratives depicted in the books; when meanings were ambiguous, her participants could imbue those depicted with agency and power. They drew on personal knowledge and experiences to construct the story and characters, which did not always result in challenges to heteronormativity. Although female characters were often interpreted flexibly by the children (for example, one illustration of a woman working in a garage prompted the alternative descriptions of 'mechanic' or 'servant') when male characters were discussed their identity was fixed under notions of hegemonic masculinity. Jackson points out that the men depicted working in the garage were never construed as 'servants' but always as skilled mechanics. Therefore, feminine identities were perceived as more flexible than male.

Other researchers have attempted innovative ways of involving children more creatively in critical literacy research. Änggård (2005) asked four to six year old children to produce their own storybooks, including illustrations to accompany them. Children chose gendered themes to construct their stories: the girls wrote about romance and everyday life, while the boys wrote about heroism and action. One research transcript she shares shows the participating boys trying to help one of the girls come up with a story, and instead of suggesting themes similar to their own that they found stimulating, they suggested themes that they associated with femininity: horses, princesses, and Barbie. Änggård argues that the children 'shaped' their stories to suit their own ideas, giving the women in their stories active, directive roles. However the storylines remained consistent with heteronormative themes: the girls positioned romance and beauty as primary aspirations for their female characters, while none of the boys' stories featured any female characters.

Khimji and Maunder (2012) also asked children of five and six years old to produce stories but provided them with illustrative prompts to aid their creativity. The children drew on the different cultures to which they belonged to construct narratives that reflected their own familial, religious, or ethnic backgrounds. Khimji and Maunder argue that storytelling creates space for children to construct and explore worlds of both imagination and reality, and this enables

them to experiment and test the boundaries of their lives, as well as create shared cultural systems with other children. Their data suggests that critical literacy is necessary in order for this exploration of new worlds and concepts to take place, where it can provide the tools to resist hegemonic discourse and create new empowering narratives.

Critical literacy has also been investigated outside of reading and writing activities. Marsh (2000) and Wohlwend (2009a) have each considered how in role-play scenarios children produce narratives which utilise and consolidate hegemonic gender positions. In Marsh's study of 'superhero' play, a 'bat cave' which was set up in a classroom was used by the boys to explore the hyper-masculinity of male cultural icons, but also offered girls the opportunity to challenge stereotypical gender roles. The girls constructed their own active narratives and chose to construct powerful roles for themselves in the bat cave, using critical literacy skills to adapt the scenario in ways that accommodated their power and agency. However, the boys were resistant to this and attempted to disrupt and undermine their play narratives through overt regulation (challenging the roles constructed by the girls) and subtle influence (suggestions of alternative narratives which reposition the boys in more powerful roles). Therefore, whilst role-play can be a powerful tool to challenge hegemonic gender roles for both girls and boys, it can also be a space where that hegemony is produced and circulated. Furthermore, Marsh's observations of girls' use of the bat cave showed a significant increase in their interest from the area's previous incarnation as a space station, and she attributes this to an intensive period of preparation for the play scenario. This preparation included showing the children episodes of *Batman*, discussing gender and sexism within superhero narratives, and promoting the bat cave as a space specifically to try out different ways of doing gender. It was this focused preparative intervention that, according to Marsh, appeared to have encouraged the girls to challenge masculinised notions of superheroism.

Outside the classroom, Pilcher (2011) showed that primary age children (from the age of five) hold extensive awareness of fashion and knowledge of clothing brands and their varying prestige. The image-conscious children could be critical in their assessments of those brands and use them to 'achieve' their desired identities, with even the youngest of the child participants showing

sophisticated reasoning concerning how their appearance might affect their projected identity. Whilst the study supports the understanding that children are capable of thinking critically about consumer items, rather than being positioned as passive imitators of others, and are thus able to utilise critical literacy in varied contexts outside of learning and play, it also raises concerns about children's reliance on consumption to achieve desired identities. Wohlwend (2009a), discussing how children reappropriate Disney stories and characters in their doll play, remarks that although the girls in her study tended to allocate greater agency to female characters in their stories, they "still maintained masculine/feminine hierarchical relationships... by using princess dolls to write and play family-focused stories, and by culminating... books and plays with weddings for happily-ever-after endings" (2009a: 79). Therefore, despite the desire for greater agency, hegemonic gender and sexual discourses circulated through consumer products and marketing continued to heavily influence the imaginary worlds that children can create and explore.

The ability and inclination of young children to engage critical literacy skills when apprehending or producing gender and sexuality is of key importance when considering their experiences of gender and sexuality, as many debates regarding what knowledge children do or should have hinge on an understanding of this skill. As such, those short but frequent moments where children make decisions about how to act or speak in a given situation are a primary focus of this thesis.

## **Assemblages and Becomings: Materialism, and Early Years Research**

There is an increasing body of early childhood research that scrutinises the relationship between the material and the discursive in the formation of children's experiences. Jones, MacLure, Holmes, & MacRae (2011) discuss how discursive meanings applied to certain toys and games leads to them being treated as 'transitional' objects, in that they are used to aid children's adjustment to the normative institution of schooling, or 'arrested' objects, deemed inappropriate, for various reasons, to enter the space of the nursery or reception class and thus detained 'at the door'. These objects hold the capacity for agency in the social-discursive sphere; they have the potential to

disrupt or damage (a *Bratz* doll), but also to comfort and nurture (a long-loved soft toy). Epstein (1995) and Wohlwend (2009a) also consider how some objects become saturated with meanings which prompt particular gender responses from children: the blocks in Epstein's study become 'for boys only' through the children's physical and discursive actions, a label which as a teacher she takes steps to counteract by protecting girls' constructive play. Wohlwend examines Disney princess dolls as 'identity texts' which 'inspire' children and convey discursive messages about femininity and desire through their design and styling, conveying an agency which is reliant upon the creativity of the Disney Corporation and the culture that has emerged surrounding it (see also Renold and Mellor, 2013).

These papers have a common approach to this relationship: objects are considered as representational symbols: carriers of discourse, matter which represents perspectives, emotions, and social interactions, and the task of the researcher in each case has been to examine the nature of that symbolism. Both Jones et al. and Wohlwend reference the work of Rowsell and Pahl (2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010) as informing their approach. Rowsell and Pahl situate their work within theories of 'multimodality', interested as they are in texts (writings and drawings) as material artefacts of identity. They distinguish this study from that of 'materiality', which they describe as "micro, fine-grained analysis of specific artefacts and how their content and design relates to the text maker... what choices did the producer have?" (2007: 393). The theoretical approach termed 'materiality' then, even as distinguished from multimodality by Rowsell and Pahl, still relies on implanted discursive meaning (the 'text maker') to inform analysis. This treats the material as consequential, existing in its state(s) due only to the discourses which shape it (the 'choices' that the producer made), and Barad warns that this 'cheat[s] matter out of the fullness of its capacity' (Barad, 2003: 810). Material objects have their own life after their initial production and can command multiple interpretations, however in multimodal and materiality analysis there is a clear hierarchy of meaning which views agential materiality as secondary. In the search for implanted meaning in both multimodal and material analysis as described by Rowsell and Pahl, concern for the changing physical properties and dynamic state of relevant objects or spaces, and what reactions or engagements they may prompt as

they apprehend discourse is prioritised below the examination of implanted meaning.

New materialist and posthumanist theoretical approaches rework methods and interpretations of gender and childhood research to foreground the intra-activity of material and discursive bodies in producing phenomena and challenge understandings of possessive agency – whether attributed to humans or objects (as in ANT). Deleuze and Guattari's combined theoretical work has proven particularly useful for researchers working within this paradigm, particularly their concept of 'assemblages', where bodies, human and non-human, and ideas combine in productive and unpredictable relationships (Delanda, 2006). Blaise (2013) uses the notion to consider the complex connections formed upon her introduction of Bratz dolls into the early years classroom, whilst Holford et al. (2013) explore how the action of the kiss in a preschool social group emerges in various posthuman assemblages to form a range of potential 'becomings'. Thinking in terms of assemblage allows for the anti-monistic consideration of emergent phenomena as produced through both the material and the discursive, making it possible for us to disrupt hierarchies of interpretation (Taguchi, 2012).

Drawing from Braidotti's posthumanism (2013) and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming' (2004), Osgood (2014) argues passionately for the possibilities of disruption that posthumanist approaches can offer to early years research and practice, and has applied these to 'reimagine gender' in early childhood (2015). She calls for the recognition of children as "a series of multiple becomings set in an early childhood assemblage comprising objects, emotions, sensory incidents, social interactions and un/intentional events" (2015:49). In later work with data produced during her work on the project focused on reputations of naughtiness in reception classes (Jones et al., 2008), Jones (2013a) uses this concept to explore assemblages and capture the engagement of various material and discursive bodies in the production of gender in early childhood. Here she demonstrates how understanding young children as continuously engaged in iterative gendering becomings opens possibilities for challenging "standard ways of behaving and performing" (2013b:294) (which she interprets as masculinity but that I would argue can be applied cross-gender as heteronormativity) in a disruption of gendering

expectations through different engagements with matter. As these becomings operate through movements, sounds (including words), and material-discursive connections between bodies, a new materialist approach that focuses on these aspects of social life exposes the fragility and instability of apparent coherent identities and, by locating it as performative, carries an inherent possibility for change to or (temporal) escape from rigid subjectivations of gender.

Whilst gender and early childhood work engaging with Deleuze and Guattari is increasing, research engagement with Barad in the field remains limited. Jones (2013b) has considered how using Barad (2007) and Grosz (2009) is helpful in finding potential points of resistance and change. In this paper she focuses on the 'physical frisson' (2013: 609) between human and non-human bodies that constitutes power and/or force in the agential production of bodies within the reception classroom; for example, when a child sits on a designated carpet, producing a normative pedagogical discipline through their intra-activity. In this example, the child and the carpet are produced as boundaried subject and object of discipline, but the potential of a new materialist analysis leads Jones to speculate on how we can 'tamper' with classroom assemblages to activate 'different relations and sensations' (2013: 608). Such exciting tamperings become immanently possible when viewing data through a Baradian lens, as rather than bodies carrying the weight of pre-existence they become anew with each moment. Intra-activity necessarily engages with prior experience and knowledge of emergent subjects and objects; through embracing the performative nature of phenomena, agential-realist analysis can reveal the underlying instability of interpreted meaning. Jones suggests that the mere relaxing of human bodies to informality and intimacy on the carpet could produce radically different 'relations and sensations', and, indeed, a radically different notion of how early years pedagogy operates through classroom spaces. It is this potential of new materialist approaches to identify new points for change, where different becomings are possible that enable young children to experience gender outside of imposing heteronormative boundaries, which makes this theoretical work so intriguing for me. It is this potential as explored by these researchers that led me to approach my data from a new materialist perspective, and in the next section I explain what my study can offer in terms of expanding our field of knowledge.

## New Directions?

*How much of our understanding of the nature of change has been and continues to be caught up in the notion of continuity?*

*(Barad, 2010: 249)*

This chapter has detailed a linear trajectory of early childhood research leading to posthumanism and new materialist theoretical approaches and has argued that these 'new' ontologies holds great potential for early childhood research through a rethinking of agency in bodies, objects, spaces, and places in the classroom (Taguchi & Palmer, 2013; Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Ivinson, 2013). I have framed this trajectory as a 'progression' or 'development' of knowledge and the contribution of posthumanist work as an 'expansion' of the field, however Barad herself challenges the very notion of linear progression of knowledge, as well as the notion of linear time itself:

*The past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold; the 'past' and the 'future' are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetime mattering*

*(Barad, 2010: 260-261)*

For Barad's version of new materialism, phenomena always emerge with the iterations of past, present, and future possibilities contained within that emergence. This applies to theoretical concepts, which raises a critical point for those engaging with this paradigm: the trouble with positing 'posthumanism' as a radical progression that corrects the oversights of a research field like gender and/or childhood studies, feminist theory (Ahmed, 2008; Hinton & Liu, 2015) or, indeed, humanist ontologies as canon is the evocation of a settler colonialism identified by Snaza et al. (2014). Referring to Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández's (2013) critique of curriculum requisitioning of indigenous knowledges, Snaza et al. express concern that an artificially unified yet, in actual fact, disparate range of theoretical approaches termed 'posthumanism', that are promoted as innovative and politically radical, risks the re-territorialisation of *knowledge that counts* while erasing the achievements of other possible understandings in past-present-future matterings in the manner of humanism itself. It is therefore important to retain a sense of non-linearity that refrains from claiming such notions of 'progression' or 'development' in the

vein of a ‘civilising’ humanism. This intention is complicated in the present work by my own experientially (if not *actually*) linear experience of changes in my theoretical alignment and exposure to new knowledges that have precipitated the narrative that I describe below, and further in Chapter 4, and I cannot claim to have totally avoided these colonial tendencies in the sense-making construction of my personal research narrative (which I have openly related in the task of advocating my responsibility for the interpretations I produce here).

## **Innovative Contributions of this Study to Gender and Childhood Research**

In this study I apply Barad’s agential-realist theory to explore the intra-activity of discourse and matter in the production of gender and sexuality. While some of the above studies apply new materialism to research during the first year of school (reception class), current application to the preschool years based on empirical research is extremely limited (see Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Taguchi, 2010; 2012) and has not yet, to my knowledge, been applied with gender as the main focus as I have in this study.

A limitation of many new materialist studies on gender and childhood has been their length of time in the field; when engaging with Barad, temporality comes to the fore as a critical dimension for the emergence of phenomena. According to agential-realism, “spatiality and temporality must... be accounted for in terms of the dynamics of intra-activity” (Barad, 2007: 180) and conducting studies using data generated during a short period of time in the field cannot perceive the “iterative (re)structuring of spatial relations” (2007: 181) that produces phenomena. In this study I was able to spend an entire school year with the same nursery class, in the same room, and therefore was able to observe the (re)configuring of the space and its bodies over an extended period. Through the longitudinal data produced for this study I am therefore able to explore a dimension of reality that has been closed off from other new materialist studies.

In this chapter I have reviewed a range of literature concerning the production of gender in early childhood, including peer relationship cultures; preschool education and institutions; children’s critical literacy skills, and the materiality of their everyday lives. A substantial proportion of the early years

research referenced has been conducted in countries other than the UK, most frequently the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Sweden, despite my concerted efforts to source UK references wherever possible. This is problematic when considering the experiences of UK children due to social and cultural differences (the disparity between Sweden and the UK in terms of gender equality being one such example). A further absence arises in consideration of the fact that much of the referenced early years research refers to children between five and seven. Although only a year or two may separate them from nursery-age children of three and four, these children are immersed in the social world of the primary school, which exposes them to a wider and larger peer group and entails many different social demands. It is crucial that in the UK we continue to build a local evidence base focusing on preschool children's experiences of gender and sexuality so as to avoid generalisation or the conflation of influences. This study, as UK-based with preschool participants, joins what continues to be a relatively small number of such studies focusing primarily on gender.

Finally, the majority of attempts to research gender and early childhood have been restricted to parent and/or practitioner focus group and interview data (such as that produced for the Papadopoulos report) which prioritise adult views over the observation of child actions and their interpretations. Researchers who wish to represent children's lived experiences must base their analysis on data conducted with those children, rather than relying on a second level of interpretation (beyond the interpretation of the researcher) to transmit these experiences. Once again, as an ethnographic study conducted with children themselves, rather than based on reports of their behaviour, this study joins a significant minority in the UK field of gender and early childhood research.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed a wide range of research on gender and early childhood produced since the popularisation of developmentalism, including the recent work referenced above which has incorporated aspects of the body and material experience, attempting to move beyond the dichotomous thinking described in the previous chapter. The topics span a range of identified contributing factors to how children experience gender: how the preschool

classroom and teaching practice is inherently gendered; how relationships with peers circulate gendered practices; how critical literacy – the ability and inclination of children to evaluate and judge narratives and discourses in relation to themselves – informs gender knowledge; and children’s relationships and engagements with human and non-human material bodies.

This later new materialist work on the emergence and experience of gender in early childhood has formed the inspiration for the research questions above and contributed valuable guidance during the design, data production and analytic stages of this project. While I discovered potential paths to explore during my research, and learnt some of what I may encounter in performing qualitative research in the nursery, I established a theoretical framework which developed significantly during the course of the research, as I shifted from a social constructionist perspective to incorporating more aspects of materiality and the body. In the next chapter I discuss the various strands of theoretical thinking which influenced my work throughout the project, including my ethics, methodology, and analysis, and discuss how I have applied the work of Foucault, Butler, and Barad.

# Chapter 3: Theorising Gendered Subjectivity in Early Childhood

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## Introduction

To progress our understandings of how young children experience gender, it is important to find alternative ways of thinking about subjectivity that move beyond the notion of constant, stable being which so beguiles us all. The linear life-stories we construct for ourselves and for others comfort us that our lives progress through logical steps and all our actions accumulate toward something, making us someone. To claim such singular possession of one's life appears increasingly naïve: as multi-faceted humans we have always dipped in and out of a plethora of subjectivities according to social contexts, however now that we spend so much time connected to disparate parts of life and the world, communicating through machinery, those facets have innumerable expanded. A sociology that searches for what we are, pinning human subjects like butterflies to a board, and proclaims with certainty how we might know the world from that singular perspective, no longer functions adequately in a world of rapidly accelerating change that continuously demands new persons of us all. The nomadic subject that Braidotti (1993) described, continuously travelling between and within identities in attempts to negotiate societies of increasing risk (Beck, 1992) and the fleetingness of desire nurtured by modern capitalism (Bauman, 2000) commands increasing salience to today's children of the internet age. The wealth of the world's knowledge/ignorance, and the infinite plethora of potential standpoints and social locations that it offers, lies constantly at their fingertips through technological engagement. The idea of the self as independent, singular, and uniquely human disappears as the global brain networks through synapses of screens and servers to produce cyborg subjects, precariously balancing us in-between nature and artifice, the discourse and the materiality of human and non-human bodies and technologies (Bloom, 2000; Haraway, 1991). To insist, in such a time, on

ourselves as fixed beings, grounded in discourse and meeting experience as pre-existing subjects, collecting these experiences to expand ourselves cumulatively, cannot possibly capture these contemporary conditions of continuous change, precariousness, and multiplicity. Posthumanist and, subsequently, new feminist materialist conceptualisations of the self have emerged to account for them.

New feminist materialism is not solely concerned with matters of gender or sex, but attempts to shift understandings of truth to capture the ambivalence and precariousness of subjectivity that feminism identifies. Moreover, the applicability of this theoretical framework is not limited to the new challenges of sociology in increasingly technologically reliant societies. The new ways of thinking about subjectivity that such developments have prompted have opened up the possibilities of analysing our relationship with our own bodies. Not as restrictive 'containers' for the thinking, speaking subject but as material properties of existence through which we physically engage with the world which also produce us through material conditions and changes over which we may have little control (like race, age, and shape). This way of seeing the body does not deny the critical importance and continuing salience of traditional feminist materialist analysis – the weight of race, class and gender within subjectivity are as relevant as they ever have been – however their fundamental properties and characteristics have shifted beyond the static conceptions that those approaches could account for. This theoretical move is not a break or a denial of prior understandings but a movement forward of those ideas into the conditions of a present that demands ever-greater levels of posthuman understanding. To accommodate this movement, my theoretical discussion maintains a continual focus on temporality and locality, reading subjectivity as transient and unstable, while still finding much of use in humanist theory.

Children of preschool age occupy a unique position in relation to embodied subjectivity; their material (gendered) bodies are developing at an exponential rate in conjunction with an equally rapid expansion of their social awareness and engagement. For those attending nursery or group childcare for the first time, they are on the cusp on engagement with the first public social institution (outside the family) of which they will be aware – the education system. In a tangible sense, they are 'entering' society and experiencing discourses external

to those entering the controlled home environment through other children, teachers, and the resources of the preschool institution. They must negotiate these new material and discursive demands simultaneously and will form a new relationship with their material and discursive selves as they do so. The specific subject of my own interest, and of this thesis, is how this process affects their material-discursive experiences of gender, and this chapter explains the theoretical framework underlying this inquiry.

## **Chapter Structure**

This chapter addresses a number of key concepts applied within my analysis – subjectivity, power, performativity, desire, and intra-activity – by thinking through a variety of different ways of understanding gender and subjectivity in early childhood. I begin by explaining how I am interpreting and using Foucault's conception of the subject alongside Barad's temporally emergent subject to think about gender and power in early childhood. I then move to a discussion of various ways of theorising the gendered subject. This covers a range of explanations that, variously: conflate or separate gender and the sexed body; locate gender within structuralist or post structuralist power dynamics; and find a material or discursive basis for gender/sex difference. In order to illustrate how these theorisations are both helpful and necessary to this project, I introduce one of the participants in my study, Maya, through a data extract that discusses her embodied gendered subjectivity. I refer to this to work through the various understandings of data that I discuss, and argue for the benefits of a new materialist analytic framework.

Though I set out on this project with a poststructuralist view of the subject and gender informed by Foucault and Butler's work, my data analysis demanded more from my theoretical approach than their work could offer as materiality became increasingly visible and vital to me, and agency departed from the subject before my eyes, moving vibrantly through and between space-time-matter. However, while I employ a Baradian understanding of the subject as emergent through intra-activity in order to analyse the data in this study, I have found it necessary to retain the conceptualisations of gendered subjectivity contributed by Foucault and Butler in order to better accommodate understandings of power and how its relations constitute the emergent

gendered subject. I consider an understanding of power as particularly crucial for the political stance of this project: my interest is in identifying ways to improve young children's experience of gender, an ambitious aim that is made more improbable without a clear notion of how these experiences relate to other aspects of life and our relationship with society. The movements of power, the contradictions and performances of subjectivities, the exertions and conflicts of agency; these are the mechanisms through which gender and sexuality make themselves known to us, and through which we rewrite, produce, and circulate them with our bodies and minds.

After discussing ways of theorising gender, power, and subjectivity, this chapter turns to Barad, as I did myself, to further explore the relations of materiality, temporality, and subjectivity. Barad describes the basic ontological units of reality as emergent phenomena, which may be experienced materially and discursively through intra-activity; here, I consider how the gendered subject emerges in this way through a discussion of agency and sexual desire. The employment of Barad entails an approach to data analysis that focuses on outcomes and production, rather than intention and design; by adopting this approach, my analysis attempts to grasp a full and complex picture of the emergence of gender that does not exclude the interactions between different spheres of experience. I hope that by doing so I can contribute new ways of thinking about gendering in early childhood and make positive interventions more realistic and successful.

## **Power and the Foucauldian Subject**

*Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate through its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only the inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application*

*Foucault, 1980b: 98*

The theory of personhood and identity formation applied in this study is based on Foucault's notion of the subject as created and continuously recreated through, within, and of networks of power. For several decades, Foucault's notion of 'the subject' has dominated sociological understandings of the self, particularly for those exploring the realities of subjugated or oppressed social groups. Very young children exist in a constant state of heavy regulation by adults, who determine their 'appropriate' behaviour, beliefs, appearance, and development, and are usually afforded little opportunity to make meaningful decisions regarding their daily lives as they are deemed incapable of complex and logical thought. Therefore, social relations of power operate to produce young children as subjugated with the explicit intent of protecting and nurturing them (Stoler, 1995). Equally, according to Foucault's conception of subjectivity, although they are a group marginalised from many arenas of social power children are also able to assert power through resisting and subverting their subjugation. Occasionally they are even able to dominate the adults around them, as might be seen in an overrun and chaotic classroom, or a child's tantrum overwhelming their parents and pushing them to tears. Foucault's theory of the subject supports investigation of these relations of power that produce experiences of gender and sexuality in early childhood. This prepares the ground for later discussion of how agency, materiality, and desire feature in these experiences.

The appeal of Foucault for the politically motivated researcher lies in his rigorous historical mapping of the argument that the subject is produced through relations of power which use discourse to operate on and through the individual (Dews, 1987). These operations are classified by Foucault as either domination (powers which seek to influence and/or regulate people) or resistance (powers which seek to prevent or alter that regulation), but in every case they are productive, rather than negating, as they produce ways of being and knowing in the world (Foucault, 1977: 174). According to Foucault, we are all 'agents' of power in that we are all simultaneously engaged in dominating and resisting a plethora of power operations, and unless one is enslaved and restrained physically and verbally, we all possess the ability to exert power. Even in extreme cases of domination, where we appear to be powerless to alter events or resist their regulation, Foucault argues that we continue to possess the

power to commit suicide or murder the agent of dominating powers (Fornet-Betancourt et al., 1987). In this poststructuralist framework, power as a possession of dominating groups (as it is in Marxist perspectives) is relocated as a transient force through which individual agency can be enacted; it is in the uptake and rejection of discourses that subject positions, and the subject as a collection of varied and, perhaps, contradictory positionings, is constructed (Foucault, 1980b: 151). In this way, Foucault's theory of the subject offers both an explanation of the mechanisms of oppression and regulation and an understanding of how resistance to dominant social groups can emerge through individual or group action.

This framework has proved politically appealing to many and thus has been widely adopted by feminist scholars who find in Foucault's subject an opportunity to disrupt patriarchal power structures, where the former paradigm of structuralist oppression proved inadequate (Bartky, 1988; Grosz, 1994; Radtke & Stam, 1994). Particularly compelling is Foucault's 'power/knowledge' nexus that attributes language-as-discourse as the vehicle through which power operates in modern society. Developing and refining this concept throughout his career, Foucault argued that the regulation of the subject's mental disorder (Foucault, 2003), criminality (1995) and sexuality (1980a) occurred through the production of discourse and, hence, knowledge concerning those 'subject positions' (potential identities adopted by or imposed upon the individual) through increased discussion and recording of their classifications in society. Through this method, a framework of language is socially constructed to contain and regulate those subject positions, and these frameworks are commonly referred to in sociology as 'discourses'. For example, heteronormativity, as described in the previous chapter, operates as a discourse that creates ideas about how subjects should be as gendered and sexual individuals, and constructs heterosexuality as their normal expression.

Though Foucault focuses heavily on the role of language in the construction of the subject, he also incorporates some discussion of embodiment and materiality (though it was Butler who realised the full potential of perceiving the construction of the body through language). For Foucault, the construction and reproduction of knowledge acts as a site for power relations to operate on the mind and the body (1980b: 98). In *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* he identifies

the creation of the female condition 'hysteria' in Victorian medical discourse, the designated treatment of which involved sexual stimulation to release tensions and alleviate anxieties, as a site where patriarchal power attempted to oppress and regulate female sexuality. In such a way, knowledge constructions can channel dominating power to operate directly on the minds and bodies of subjects. Opposing discourses, such as women's liberation, can also engage sites of power to resist that operation, and enact alternative ways of constructing subjects - in this case, women as sexual and desiring subjects (Foucault, 1980a: 103-105) - through the inherent fluidity and multiplicity of power (Morgan, 1989: 325).

### **“Foucault’s Vanishing Body”: Critiquing the Poststructuralist Subject**

Despite the pervasive sociological application of power/knowledge, Foucault's account of the subject has been critiqued for its theorisation of agency. Some feminist scholars have argued that his notion of power imagines a passive, docile subject who is at the mercy of whichever discourses they encounter and, thus, is socially deterministic and damaging for the feminist cause, which seeks to animate the active subject (Deveaux, 1994; Hartsock, 1990). Even Fraser's sympathetic reading of Foucault recommends a “healthy dose of skepticism” regarding the potential objectification of subjects in his account (1989: 63-64). These criticisms originate from Foucault's description of the institutionalised subject in his discussions of disciplinary strategies in medical clinics and prisons. Here he speaks extensively about powers of domination exerted by those institutions, and powers of resistance from their incarcerated against that domination, but seems to cast their occupants' subjectivities as entirely formed by those particular relations of power, rendering them consumed by the institution itself. This is problematic as it does not account for the ways in which subjects can not only disrupt but fundamentally alter or destroy the institutions which dominate them, as has occurred through feminism and the civil rights movement in the USA, among others. When Foucault was challenged on this point in 1984, he admitted that he had not been clear enough on this subject and accepted that he had seemed to characterise power as purely oppressive or dominating (Fornet-Betancourt et al. 1987). McNay (2000), and, despite her concerns, Deveaux (1994) argue that

Foucault does indeed attempt to clarify the matter through his conception of the ethical subject produced through 'arts of existence', "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being" (Foucault, 1990: 10-11). By identifying the self-constitution of the ethical subject, McNay and Deveaux acknowledge that Foucault had extended his original genealogical analysis to render the subject as active agent rather than passive pawn of discourse, though Deveaux maintains that his general inconsistency is cause for a re-examination of his theoretical framework of subjectivity.

Entangled with these questions of agency, Foucault's apparent social constructionism is also taken to task by critics who argue that his account of the subject-as-body is problematic. Shilling accuses Foucault of constructing the body as an 'inert mass' (1993: 70), a sentiment echoed by Latimer who places his work in a 'world reflecting' tradition which displays a "tendency to treat the body as a kind of Platonic wax" (2009: 5). This accusation is due to his apparent view of the body as mere carrier for political inscription through the discourses and personal ethical constructions which shape it. The notion of body-as-political-resource is referred to by Foucault as 'biopower' (1980a), a concept that encompasses a specific type of dominating 'sovereign' power over social collectives, the machinations of which take place on the material, bodily level. Nealon (2008: 46) points out that this proposal of political bodily regulation relates to demographics rather than individuals, thus it does not preclude the subject's distinctive expression through the body. It may seem reasonable to suggest that the body can be shaped by a variety of sources, of which political power and the ethics of the self are Foucault's two primary examples. However, materialist critiques of such discursive inscriptions have problematised the relationship of the poststructuralist subject with the material body sufficiently to warrant significant theoretical focus on reconciliation of the material and discursive realms and the enactment of political powers on the body (Gilleard & Higgs, 2013: 6-7). Fraser argues that Foucault's work reflects the truth of current power relations, and while there may be problems with his approach (specifically, she points out, an inadequate imaginary of alternative relations) she forgives these flaws on the basis that his critique of this

objectifying system has opened up discursive space for fundamental shifts of power to be articulated (1989: 60-66). The boldest and, arguably, the most extensively debated of these resulting explorations is Butler's performativity theory, which goes on to form the basis of Barad's agential realism.

### **Merging Foucault and Barad**

The key aspect of Foucault's work that I use in this study is the concept of the subject as constituted through relations of power (and incorporates Foucault's acknowledgement that those powers are able to be resistant as much as dominating). The consequence for my analysis is that I always seek to identify what privileges, exclusions, and pleasures are being activated within the data shared here. Foucault also prompts careful consideration of what opportunities for subjectivity are created through language, bringing attention to what notions are introduced as 'truth' that work to shape the world and the children themselves. Thinking with Foucault also produces powerful effects on research practice through bringing awareness of one's own position in these relations of power, not only during fieldwork but also within the writing process as I produce (rather than 're-produce') knowledge of the children's lives through an incitement of discourse within this thesis. The key areas where I diverge from Foucault emerge from my engagement with Barad and centre around my theorisation of temporality and agency: this engagement disassociates the possession of agency from subjectivity or social structures, instead locating it as productive force that works through material and discursive means (including the material-discursive subject) to produce observable phenomena. This theoretical shift moves focus away from the pre-existing, cumulative subject engaging with an external world (as discussed in the introduction to this chapter), positioning us instead as part of entangled assemblages of human and non-human bodies. This has significant consequences for my methodological and analytic approach, emphasising the transience of emergent relations of power and creating 'subjectivations' as temporally-located and spatially-localised manifestations of the self. The effect of this is to trouble notions of 'meaning-making' in ways that stabilise the subject and phenomena, creating even more possibilities for producing disruption and change.

## The Subject of Maya

*September, 2011*

*Maya is 3 years old. Her skin is a warm tone of the deepest brown and her hair is knotted with black double-knit into mock dreadlocks, multicoloured plastic beads adorning the wool in a style that is reminiscent of a lion's mane. It sits about her face like a halo, accentuating her toothy smile and wide eyes, and her pierced ears twinkle gold hoops through the strands. She is not especially short for her age but Zadie, her closest friend in the nursery is especially tall, and as the pair are always to be found in close proximity, one obtains the impression that Maya is small. Boisterously physical, she bubbles over with energy as she plays, her movements confident and assertive in a manner that matches her character. Her sulks are marked by stillness, an inversion so opposed to her usual countenance that it is noticeable from across a room; they are, however, always short-lived. She always wears dresses and skirts, and her favourite shoes are a pair of medium-height heels, worn to nursery several times a week. They are white and sparkly, but scuffed and worn; the teachers frown as she clomps past in them and mutter their disapproval to each other. Maya either doesn't notice or doesn't care, as she doesn't so much as glance at them.*

One of approximately 27 children attending Hillside Nursery's afternoon nursery, Maya's physical appearance amply illustrates a complex interweaving of multiple subjectivations upon her body. There are elements beyond her control: her skin tone and natural hair indicates African descent, the height and shape of her body, among other things, shows her young age. However the majority of physical characteristics listed here are borne from performance: either her own, her parents, or a mesh of them both. The wool knotted into her hair exaggerates her racial heritage, both in colour and style. Her smile is friendly and approachable, with more than a hint of cheeky boldness that seems to betoken a confidence rarely knocked, complemented by her buoyant movement around the nursery and playground. Countering this, the manner in

which she expresses displeasure – stilling her body and raising her face to reveal a pouting mouth, but eyes very rarely tear-filled – impresses anger and self-righteous betrayal, rather than the helplessness and confusion that some of the other younger children exhibit during conflict or sadness. Then, there are her clothes and accessories: the pastel-shaded beads in her hair, often accompanied by matching clips; her pleated school dresses and skirts that sit halfway down her calves; and her distinctly non-approved heels. Everything Maya wears on her body declares femininity and she expresses an active interest in these markers, often wanting to wear the princess dresses from the dress-up corner, and showing fascination with the necklaces, earrings and bracelets I wear to nursery, often asking to try them on. Yet these impractical feminine adornments sit at odds with her highly practical and active character: Maya is loud and brash and can often be dominating or even rude (though apparently always with playful rather than offensive undertones). When she plays her style is bold and decisive, sometimes throwing toys about or knocking them down. She moves about the nursery quickly, frequently changing activity, and when we go outside she is always first to jump on a bicycle and spends her time racing around the painted track at high speeds. Even when playing with the baby dolls in the home corner, rather than quietly dressing or feeding them she usually pushes her chosen doll around the nursery in a pram, visiting the other groups of children dotted about the play areas.

Myriad shards of subjectivity continually burst from Maya's being; she both is and produces race, class, age, ability, activity, gender, and sexuality. I argue here that although the primary element of her experience which I explore in this thesis is gender, this is inextricable from those other beings and productions which constitute 'Maya'. These subjectivations and relations of power are not stable but rather are incrementally changing, adapting to the situations she faces, her own emotional state, and the discourses she is exposed to. Therefore her subjectivity is continually emergent, rather than stable, responding to and producing notions of gender in material and discursive ways. In this study I explore how Maya, along with all the other children featured in this study, is continuously materiality and discursively constituted as a gendered person and how she experiences gender in relation to all the other aspects of

her subjectivity. My analysis seeks to answer the question of how Maya *becomes* a girl; how, where, and when is her body ‘girlled’?

## **Theorisations of Sex/Gender and the Gendered Subject**

### **Structuralist Sex/Gender Dualism**

One of the most frequently cited feminist theorisations of gender originates from Gayle Rubin who introduced an idea that was to prove immeasurably valuable to the development of later understandings and my own perception of gender: compulsory heterosexuality<sup>17</sup> and its role in creating the gendered subject. Rubin (1977) proposed a dualism of sex/gender which separated the two terms whilst acknowledging their complicity. Her discussion locates ‘biological sexuality’ as being ‘transformed’ by society into a ‘sex/gender system’, where socially created needs are satisfied (Rubin, 1977:28). Attempting to trace the roots of misogyny, Rubin argued that “the social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality” (1977:40). Though she proposes from her exploration of global history and tradition that the functional impact of the sex/gender system is waning (as she relates it to Lévi-Strauss’s theory of kinship), she warns that it “still carries the social burden of sex and gender, of socializing the young, and of providing ultimate propositions about the nature of human beings themselves” (1977:54).

Through Rubin’s logic then, Maya becomes a girl because the genital embodied aspect of her sex has positioned her as one to be exchanged, subordinated, and used decoratively and functionally in the private sphere, all through the structures of the heterosexuality that is assumed for her. Thus socially recognisable markers indicating ‘femininity’ are written upon her through clothing and bodily decoration of hair and skin by her relations to prepare her for this role, and her attraction to these markers is encouraged and developed. While she may retain to adulthood her proactive and practical character, these traits are vulnerable to gendered socialisation and might be expressed solely in the system-approved sphere of family and home, continuing the gendering of

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<sup>17</sup> Also heavily associated with Rich (1980)

her sexual body. She is female because of her body, but she is a girl because of social transformation. These feminine markers do not make her a girl, but the recognition of them by others in her society effectively does.

Rubin's essay is a key influence on later theories of gender due to her meticulous examination and critique of phallogentric gender theories. She accounts well for the origins and interactions of power dynamics in reproducing gender roles, but simplifies the matter on two counts: the interaction of social processes with the material body and the individual's personal engagement with their own 'gendering'. In Rubin's explanation, the body (specifically the genital body, since at birth it is all that visibly distinguishes us, though developments in science have revealed to us the complexity of genetic sex) acts only as an initial trigger for gender; a 'birth mark' that reveals to the parents which path their child has been allocated either through fate or design. Yet Maya's body will continually influence both her own and other's conception of her girl/womanhood throughout her life, and in turn her material body and biology will be altered by her actions and experiences. For example, neural pathways in the brain and hormone levels including oestrogen and testosterone are not fixed but shift and change according to the experiences of the young child, an ongoing malleability that intra-acts with discourse to produce the body in a phenomenon that neuro-scientists refer to as 'plasticity' (Eliot, 2012; Fine, 2010). Therefore, Rubin does not adequately account for the reciprocal aspect of gendered subjectivity where the individual is not simply subject to external, heterosexualising powers but is engaged in continuous, iterative negotiation of gender and sexuality. This makes the location of agency within Rubin's argument troubling – here Maya has minimal agency to affect her own gendering, instead moulded by a structuralising agency of patriarchy.

Maya is not simply a passive object of exchange, yet validation of Lévi-Strauss's kinship theory by Rubin externalises subject formation in a way that does not account for observable temporal shifts and localised variations in the emergence of gender. Furthermore, Rubin argues that compulsory sexuality 'socialises the young' in an evocation of developmentalist discourses that positions children as whittled pegs to fit into adult-determined holes. However, even in the earliest stages of childhood concerted attempts have been made to recognise and understand the nature of children's active engagement with their

social identity formation (Qvortrup, 1994; James et al., 1998). The understanding of children as individual social actors holding social power within their spheres of influence was a dominant feature in the 'new sociology of childhood' that evolved throughout the 1990s and it remains a key focus in the field as a glance at any early childhood journal will tell. This developed in no small part due to benchmark studies in childhood peer friendship cultures in the early years (such as Davies, 1982 and Corsaro, 1985) which revealed a complex social world hitherto unexplored to any significant degree by sociologists. The sharp contrast this created with previous conceptions of early childhood as a stage of 'becoming' rather than 'being' (in the words of Qvortrup, 1990) illustrates a significant shift in understandings of the childhood social experience and thus in the ways in which they might experience and express sexuality. Young children have been increasingly credited with constructive powers rather than being perceived as passive absorbers of external values and their social engagement and learning was focused on rather than their psychological or biological development.

This shift in the ontology of childhood has wide-ranging implications for my study, however the posthumanist solution I draw from does not simply deposit agency back within Maya's hands but removes it from possession entirely by structuring powers like patriarchy and from individual subjects. Agency is instead perceived as working through material-discursive means, incorporating human and non-human bodies in the production of phenomena, the drive to produce gender affecting macro social bodies like politics and the media, and micro social bodies like Maya. This approach problematises the notion of patriarchy as a force governing bodies, and instead attends to the circulations of power working through personal, localised relations. This enables research to observe gendering as an everyday practice that takes place in Maya's material-discursive world, identifying the exact temporal-spatial points where she is girded. As a consequence of this, better support for children's experiences and challenges to gender stereotyping become viable.

A further issue raised by Rubin's work is the idea of stable identity which evolves cumulatively over time, which later poststructuralist and feminist work have undermined in favour of multiple, discontinuous subjectivity. The implication of assuming stable identity as opposed to multiple subjectivity is that

it ignores the consequences of intersectionality; Maya is not only a girl, but is also young, black, Welsh, and from a large immigrant family – and these are only the interacting elements of her experience that are discernible to me as a relative stranger. Maya's girlhood is different to anyone else's, in part due to this unique intersectionality. Rubin's theory does not account for these cultural and experiential differences, assuming a universal experience for women under patriarchy – a consequence of a structuralist approach. It is impossible to dissect Maya's full life experience in order to identify the exact causes of her gendering, making interpretations of causality deeply problematic. Posthumanist approaches offer some solution to this, as instead of fixing the researcher's interpretations of intent or meaning on observations of Maya, a new materialist methodology seeks the localised effects of what observably happens to Maya. It is, however, important to bear in mind that this can only refer to the elements of her experience that are visible to me as researcher, and accepting that there is much hidden from view that this study cannot understand. This prevents potentially misleading assumptions regarding Maya's personal experience of girlhood, and makes research claims involving her more modest and, simultaneously, more realistic.

### **The Gendered Foucauldian Subject in Early Childhood**

*The internal discourse of the institution... was largely based on the assumption that this sexuality existed, that it was precocious, active, and ever present... the sex of the schoolboy became... a public problem*  
*Foucault, 1980a: 28*

In *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1* Foucault explains how the regulation of childhood sexuality provides an apt illustration of how power/knowledge relations are enacted in the institution. He argues that the narrative of oppression relies on not only acknowledging the power of the opposing discourse and social group, but actively produces and fosters that power to justify its own necessity. In this example, the denial of childhood sexuality was premised on the fact that it did indeed exist, and if left untrammelled, would rampantly proliferate out of control and threaten the status of sexuality as an adult privilege/responsibility. Through circulating knowledge discourses

concerning the phenomenon, medical and educational institutions sought to shape children's politically 'dangerous' sexuality into a palatable form that retained power over that knowledge for adults, producing it as a threat to morality and order. In this way, the construction of 'childhood innocence' is a political act veneered with the imposition of a morality and truth as stabilising cornerstones, and while an ongoing moral debate on this issue may indeed be justifiable, open discussion is foreclosed by the political narratives which permeate it (Faulkner, 2011; Robinson, 2013).

The possibilities of power/knowledge for understanding the childhood subject is not limited to sexuality and the implications of Foucault's work have been extensively explored within early years research. Much of this work constitutes the early childhood classroom as blunt, literal enactment of the power/knowledge nexus, with teachers employed to construct knowledge through pedagogical discourses and children employed on the task of waylaying, disrupting, or complying with that pedagogy. Millei's account of the power relations of discipline and regulation in the nursery finds continual interplays between the young pupils and their teachers which produce them as unstable subjects continually shifting between dominating and resisting positions. The teacher interview data she draws upon depicts a variety of methods in which teachers try (and, often, fail) to retain their nominal control over 'misbehaving' children through a Foucauldian use of discourse and surveillance in the nursery (2005. See also Gibson, 2013; Holligan, 2000). Her participants expressed universal concern for the 'betterment' of children whom they perceived as ill behaved, and the emergence of difficult situations was characterised as a failure of that surveillance system. A discourse of 'naughtiness' which stipulates correct behaviour in the classroom therefore creates knowledges of 'good' and 'bad' children, which produces those subjects in the service of its deployment (MacLure et al., 2012). Simultaneously, the teachers themselves are under a system of surveillance and regulation that seeks to evaluate, in part, their ability to exercise that control (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007).

These relations of power are not limited to pedagogical strategies; a number of studies have explored how discourses of power/knowledge circulate within the early childhood peer group. Young children are not oblivious to the

attractions of yielding power politically, as Jones and Brown observe: “when playing, the children themselves are playing with notions of identity which in turn plays with concepts of power and power relations” (2001: 718). In empirical studies preschool children have repeatedly been shown to have increasing awareness of power relations and the social hierarchies they produce, particularly in relation to gender (Blaise, 2005b; Brooker, 2006; Davies, 1989; Maclure et al., 2012). This awareness increases with the acquisition of language, which provides a tool for understanding the world, and immerses children in the wider structures of discourse that organise it (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Foucault’s notions of power relations have been combined with children’s rights discourses to support calls for increased participation of young children in research, with several researchers arguing that this would lead to improved data production and is more ethically and politically sound than replicating the adult-child power relationship through research methods (Bath, 2013; Holland et al., 2010; Kallio, 2011). Caution has however been recommended by several researchers: Holland et al. (2010) warn that a meticulously reflexive approach is necessary to avoid erroneous assertions of ‘better’ data, and that participatory research may not always be in the child’s interest. Meanwhile, Gallagher has insisted that the aspirations of empowerment which underlie participatory research design conflicts with Foucault, as power is not a possession to be shared or bestowed (2008a; 2008b; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008. See also Duffy & Bailey, 2010). Instead, Gallagher recommends a careful rethinking of power and ethics, arguing that power should be viewed as productive and therefore can be used to produce resistance strategies against dominating powers in research, rather than denying it altogether (I discuss the methodological implications of this debate further in the next chapter).

### **Subjects of Inequality: Gender and (Compulsory) Heterosexuality**

*Stopped as an attribute of a person, sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women*  
Mackinnon, 1987:6-7

Further development of sex/gender theorisation was instigated by Catherine Mackinnon (1987; 1989) who proposed that the institution of gender is based upon male sexual domination and the submissive nature of women, not just ultimately, but directly and tangibly in everyday activities. Also published in 1987, West and Zimmerman's *Doing Gender* is an attempt towards the 'theoretical reconceptualisation' of gender as an "accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction" (1987:125), a thesis which proved highly influential on social constructionism and had its roots in interactionism. For Mackinnon, and West and Zimmerman, gender became, if not illusory, then certainly not founded in biological or psychological impulse, emerging rather as the result of social interactions in varying forms.

When applied to early childhood, an age group strongly socially aligned with the concept of 'innocence', this feminist theorising of gender attains a slightly sinister undertone. Mackinnon reverses the traditional causality of gender begetting sexuality and moves gender from a structural to a relational concept. However, there are troubling implications of Mackinnon's thesis: her controversial work has been accused of essentialism and objectifying the subject (Stone, 2004). Mackinnon's gender represents sexual inequality and hence Maya is a girl because she is presumed to be preparing for a subordinate role in (hetero)sexual relations (a 'straight', normative sexuality being assumed for her). As such, she is already sexualised, and has been from birth. Furthermore, when the theory of West and Zimmerman's is considered alongside this perspective, Maya's gender becomes non-existent beyond a social assumption of it borne from sexual inequality tied to her body shape.

These theories have some important similarities with Foucault and Butler's notions of subjectivity by reading heterosexuality as constructive of the gendered body and, in the case of West and Zimmerman, denaturalising gender as a facet of the material body. Butler herself has been critical of Mackinnon's work as a reductive simplification, arguing that her work "assimilates any account of sexuality to rigid and determining positions of domination and subordination, and assimilates those positions to the social gender of man and woman" (Butler, 1994: 7. See also: Butler et al., 1994). Butler's work instead troubles the very categories of 'man' and 'woman', and locates the achievement of (gendered) subjectivity as resulting from temporal performance which must

be continually reiterated to produce apparent coherence as a gendered being due to its inherent instability, and it is her work which I now turn to.

## **Butler, Bodies, and Subjectivity: Locating the Performative Subject**

*The heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. ... The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which ... is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation.*

*Butler, 1993: 3*

In this section, I explore the implications of performativity theory for understanding the gendered subject and discuss the application of Butler's work in early childhood studies, which can help to explain how young children produce gender with their bodies and words. Performativity can be applied to all areas of identity, however it originates from Butler's interest in gender and sexual identity and the sophistication of its development in this field has led to a certain ubiquity of application in recent research, particularly that which seeks to engage with queer theory and politics; this study is no exception. That given, although many researchers have considered how cultural discourses function performatively in early childhood education, few have examined how the early childhood subject is performatively constituted on an individual level, which is of particular interest here as I am primarily concerned with the individual child's experience of gender rather than the structural gendering of early education.

Butler's theory of subjectivity draws extensively on Foucault's work and is aligned with many of his epistemological principles (relations of power and social recognition of subjectivity forming the groundwork for her thesis), however she focuses specifically on developing understandings of the production of subjectivity on an individual level, a matter on which Foucault was

somewhat reticent (Butler, 1997: 2). Her theory of performativity constructs a framework through which the effects of discursive powers upon the body can be perceived through the individual's 'performance' of gender, producing an apparently-coherent, but inherently disparate, contradictory, and unstable 'corporeal style' of subjectivity (Butler, 1988: 521). Through these temporal, cumulative performances we are produced as gendered and sexual subjects and can lay claim to achieving a particular identity. Butler's discussion is not limited to epistemological matters; our complicity with the powers we choose to enact through our own performances transposes Foucault's system of knowledge-as-regulation from the discursive to the material realm, with drastic consequences. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) her argument positions the individual as a whole – both mind and body – as discursively formed, with a dismissal of realist ontological perspectives which present the body as material fact outside of discourse. She argues that as the material body cannot be known outside of the meanings we allot its features, and therefore the apparent naturalness of sex and gender is a sham, and all their manifestations simply performances of discourse. Where Foucault's notion of 'biopower' understood the body as pawn of discourse, Butler pushes further still to argue that the body is constituted from discourse, as the concept of a gendered body is produced through a discursive notion that interprets identity meaning from genital function.

### **Performing the Embodied Subject**

*Culture constructs the biological order in its own image*

*Grosz, 1999: 381*

Following Foucault, Butler emphasises the social formation of the subject through circulating powers, and our dependency on them to articulate our being (Butler, 1997), however performativity theory fundamentally shifts the ontology of the subject. Butler transforms Foucault's 'docile body' laden with discourse by locating the body as formed by discourse; with no observable 'fact' beyond our discursive constructions of it. This move creates a subject that is infinitely malleable and produced on the understandings of discourses that it seeks to take on or resist. Though her thesis has wide ranging applicability, in much of her early writings Butler takes sex and gender as her illustrative phenomena, arguing that gender does not exist 'before' or 'beyond' the subject but rather

that it is the effect of the subject's engagement with gendered discourses (1990). Drag queens and kings are Butler's epitomical example of the body's malleability, in that the gender they (literally) perform exposes the inherent instability of supposedly 'natural' binary sex as itself an imitative performance (Butler, 1990: 187). The repetition of performances across multiple sites of gender and sexual meaning creates the illusion of the coherent, stable masculine or feminine gendered subject (1990: 41-42). Therefore if I look at Maya and think 'she is a girl', it is a plurality of discursive powers marked upon her which I read, and not any inherent gender or sex that is apparent to me. Maya is a girl because social discourse denotes her body as such and nothing more.

Crucially, Butler emphasises the potential for the inversion of normative discourse that such repetitions provide, as "the very notion of the subject, intelligible only through its appearance as gendered, admits of possibilities that have been forcibly foreclosed by the various reifications of gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies" (1990: 44). In other words, if it is accepted that identity has no inherent anchoring stability or 'truth' then alternative ways of being can be performed to produce alternative subjects. It is this performative potential that provided the groundwork for burgeoning 'queer' theoretical perspectives, which pursue those foreclosed lines of gender and sexual inversion to expose the artifice of identity and the humanist self. The application of queer theory to educational contexts has proved immensely productive in sociology by dismantling the heteronormativity of classroom pedagogy and examining the positions taken up by pupils and teachers in the construction of the school and the self (Luhmann, 1998).

### **The Constitution of the Subject through Desire**

*Desire, in a critical sense, is not really desire for something or somebody, though it is often experienced that way, but rather what we expect to experience from something or somebody.*

*Desire is not reducible to an appetite, a drive, an instinct. Desire does not create the self; rather it is part of the continuing process of creating the self.*

*Simon, 1996: 43*

Butler (1987) takes influence from Hegel to characterise desire as a pursuit of the object with the intent of assimilating it into the constitution of the self through internalisation, expanding the subject. Desire therefore “always signifies ontological rupture, the insurpassability of external difference” (Butler, 1987: 8), and its satisfaction “is the transformation of difference into identity: the discovery of the strange and novel as familiar” (1987: 9). This ontological violence that Butler’s Hegelian conception of desire wreaks on the subject prompts Barad’s conception of temporally emergent subject/object relations that dismiss the notion of the pre-existing subject. Shifting, darting, transient desire continually remakes us and defines us in relation to objects of desire or repulsion, each time setting new boundaries around who we are, who we were, and who we wish to be. In this way, desire is by definition agential – it changes us and the things and places around us, whether it is satisfied, denied, or compromised. I discuss how I use Barad to think through desire later in the chapter.

### **Critiquing Butler’s Subject**

*There is no ‘being’ behind doing... the deed is everything*  
(Nietzsche, 1969: 45. In: Butler, 1990: 34)

Butler’s radical work has been subject to intense critique, particularly for her argument that the body is formed through discourse (she recounts a frequent problem-posed-as-question, “What about the body, Judy?” in the preface to *Bodies that Matter* (Butler, 1993: ix)) and in her subsequent writings Butler was keen to emphasise that it had not been her intention to dismiss materiality. In fact, from her earliest publications she emphasises her focus on ‘the field of bodies’ (1988: 525). Nevertheless, performativity theory has become emblematic of the most radical social constructionism and has prompted a controversial reception at times. Salih (2002: 59-60) provides a succinct summary of some key criticisms of Butler’s work, many of which focus on problematising her Nietzschean subject<sup>18</sup> and location of agency as outside of the subject and social structures. She cites Benhabib’s fears for the already

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<sup>18</sup> These critics would doubtless recoil in horror in response to Barad’s development of Butler in her extension of the temporally emergent subject.

unstable female sense of self in Butler's constitution of the subject through performative acts alone (Benhabib et al., 1995). Salih takes the claims of Hood Williams and Harrison (1998) and Moi (1999) more seriously, who argue that Butler does not address the 'oppressive' and 'violent' possibilities of power to destroy as well as produce the subject. This argument is later echoed by Boucher (2006), who also takes issue with what he perceives as an extreme individualism, distancing her work from institutional interrogation and producing an enforced ignorance of wider power structures.

Despite these challenges to the overall philosophical coherence of Butler's performative subject, her work remains profoundly helpful for politically-informed research that seeks to challenge essentialist and deterministic approaches to gender and sexuality. I would disagree with these critiques of Butler's conception of power as, by locating its effects in the construction of the self, she recognises the true violence of oppressive powers in not only their regulation but creation of the gendered subject in ways that favour heteronormativity. This violence becomes tangible if the emotional effects of rigid heteronormative regulation are recognised; the suffering of many people born intersexed is an extreme example as they are literally cut into binary gendered body shapes, often resulting in lifelong pain and a troubled sense of selfhood (Harper, 2007), as well as the experiences of transgendered people and marginalised sexualities. Butler's work has highlighted the critical importance of troubling binary gender subjectivity and also provides analytic tools to accomplish this. It has also touched feminist theory across the world, developed understandings of the contemporary gendered subject, and provided the groundwork for the new feminist materialist onto-epistemology that is the primary theoretical source for this study.

### **Using Butler with Gender in Early Childhood**

Many researchers have found Butler's notion of performativity helpful in understanding how early childhood is constructed as an identity outside of essentialist or determinist discourse, particularly in relation to heteronormativity. For example, Robinson (2005b; 2013; with Davies, 2008), Blaise (2005b), Taylor and Richardson (2005) and Gunn (2011; with Surtees, 2011). This work frequently uses Butler to inform notions of compulsory heterosexuality within

childhood as instigating performances of gendered bodies that give the appearance of a naturalised heteronormativity, evading questioning or critique in an effective self-concealment that denies sexuality within childhood.

Early childhood research that draws on Butler and performativity has repeatedly highlighted the 'invisibilisation of heteronormativity' (Robinson, 2005a: 21) within early education as a pressure on children to construct coherent and peer-recognised heterosexual performances while, simultaneously, adult discourse constructs childhood as free from matters of sexuality, leading to a diversion of attention from their experiences in this field. Robinson argues that this denial of sexuality itself is inherently heteronormative, splitting off 'gender' (which is an accepted character trait from birth) from 'sexuality' (which is only accepted from the teenage years onwards), hence, naturalising gender as originating from biologically sexed bodies, rather than as an effect of heterosexuality (Blaise, 2005b: 22). This trick of heteronormative discourse demands performances of sexual innocence from children in order to recognise them as socially acceptable subjects, and conceals the pressure on them to conform to notions of heterosexuality that permeate their upbringing. In this way, Robinson locates gender in childhood as a performance of heteronormativity that effectively conceals its origins by producing sexuality as unacceptable within childhood whilst simultaneously relying upon it as motivation for that performance.

One particularly popular concept has been Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' (in *Gender Trouble*) or 'heterosexual hegemony' (as she rewords the concept in *Bodies that Matter*). The former term has become more commonly used but each describes the assumption of heterosexuality and the organisation of social interaction, and indeed society, based around this assumption. Blaise (2000), Robinson (2005a), and Renold (2005) among many others have all drawn on the idea of the heterosexual matrix to explore gender and sexuality with primary school aged children (ranging from ages 4-11) with great success, showing not only how children are vulnerable to its influence, but can and do also use their constructive, performative powers to rewrite and disrupt it, 'queering' their gendered childhoods.

If Maya has active agency in both creating and disrupting her gender identity, then the image of her as passive victim that is implied in Rubin's

ontology is diminished somewhat. In an ontology influenced by performativity, Maya can alter the nature of her gendered childhood through queer performances, and I would argue that she is already doing so with her free expression of traditionally masculine traits and actions sitting at odds with her enjoyment of feminine appearance: she's a tomboy with high heels on. Another attraction of this ontology is that it is not fatalistic: Maya does not become a fixed heterosexual or homosexual woman or girl. Her actions and interactions instead act as performances that may be read as a coherent gender identity (despite the tomboyish performances that I see, Maya may well be read throughout life as a completely heteronormative, feminine girl/woman). It is within her power to accept and reconstruct, or rebel and deconstruct the heterosexual matrix and therefore her own gender/sex and sexuality, within a brief moment or over a sustained period of time. While it is crucial to respect Maya's power of constructions and disruptions, as a researcher I must also remain vigilant to the discourses that may work upon her person in negative ways that she is unable to resist (Renold & Ringrose, 2008).

In this study I apply a performative lens to consider how the children and adults in the nursery produce gender and sexuality through their words and actions. I attend particularly to disruptions of those performances, where the children challenged or resisted normative gendering and, through that resistance, altered how gender and sexuality were produced in the moment and over time in the nursery. Yet while I have always found Butler's work to be productive in its radical ontology and useful in thinking about the nature of subjectivity, as I gathered data in the nursery it slowly dawned on me that it was not only subjects who, throughout the year, were being constructed in gendered ways. The very material and temporal structure of the nursery was emerging in gendered ways, continuously slipping and shifting between ways of being that were formative to a localised production of gender that encompassed all the human bodies, non-human bodies, subjects, objects, places, and spaces which made up this assemblage of Hillside Nursery.

### **Breaking the Binary: Forays into New Feminist Materialism**

In her own challenge to the naturalising of sex and gender, Fine (2010) examined research concerning the relationship between the material and

discursive elements of gender and sexuality. Rather than the casual relationship often claimed of nature leading to culture, on reassessment of many neurological and psychological studies frequently cited in such arguments and the introduction of other robust yet marginalised studies Fine found evidence that this relationship is reciprocal. The socially sexed and gendered material body impacts our discursive engagement with those around us and our internal perception of ourselves in society. In return, these discursive engagements affect the material functioning of our bodies; adjusting hormone levels in response to events and emotions; 'customising' our bodies in gendered and sexualised ways, such as the growing, cutting, dying, and removal of body hair; stuffing breasts into bras to form desirable shape or firmness, or pumping iron to inflate muscles, which in turn produces more testosterone hormones and genders bodies further still. Therefore, while it seems to many that boys and girls 'naturally' play and learn differently due to their biological differences but have not reached the age of self-conscious physical gendering which many adults are so preoccupied with, Fine argues that both conscious and unconscious customisations of the body are working to gender and sexualise the young child's body, whether due to their own actions or those of their parents.

As I came to the end of my fieldwork for this project and began to think about the formal analysis process it became clear to me that the social constructionist framework I had thus far worked within was inadequate to understand many of the gendered experiences I had observed. I realised that gender in the lives of young children was not only experienced socially but materially, however this realisation was distinct from traditional biological explanations of gender that offer a causal relationship between the body of genes, hormones, genitals, and the gendered mind. Instead, the materiality of gender that I read in my field notes was a dynamic, reciprocal process involving both human and non-human bodies.

The children did not merely inhabit gendered bodies but were actively involved in shaping them through their social experiences, iteratively reproducing and changing the way that they represented gender with their bodies. Thus their clothing, hairstyles, accessories, physical activity choices and capabilities, loudness, and movements, all of which changed day-by-day

and throughout the school year, were all employed by the children to create particular bodily manifestations that usually had gendered implications. I also knew from other research that many invisible gendered changes were occurring in the children over time as a result of their social experiences, as aggressive situations like fighting aroused testosterone hormones, while caring for dolls in the home corner raised oestrogen, whatever the gender of the child engaging in the activity. The neurons in their brains, rapidly developing at this age, were also shaping the physical structure of their minds to best adapt to the situations and experiences they faced; when they encountered gender in their experience, their brains were responding by preparing them for similar future experiences, leading to gender-adapted minds (Fine, 2010).

The material aspect of gender I observed was not limited to human bodies; in fact, the first time I needed to incorporate the material into my analysis was when considering how the physical space of the nursery – a non-human ‘body’ of material structure filled with objects – was changing in ways that related to notions of gender. I discuss this in detail in chapter five: in summary, the material nursery had changed and adapted in gendered ways as it simultaneously changed and adapted the way that the children within it played in gendered ways. This was a reciprocal relationship where gender circulated through discursive and material mediums, human and non-human bodies, changing the nature of those mediums and bodies as it circulated. I took for granted the notion that the human bodies in my research possessed agency to act and influence their experiences, however I also began to see agency in the space and objects in the nursery, not as a possession but as an abstract driving force behind those circulating ideas and manifestations of gender. This agency employed both material and discursive resources to produce gender in the nursery. Moreover, material bodies were ‘acting’ in ways that were not explicitly suggested by their design. As I discuss later in chapter four, objects like the scramble wall in the playground which took a hand in gendering activities and bodies held a position in the nursery well beyond a simple climbing apparatus and its presence prompted a range of creative uses from the children who developed ideas of gender with it. This was beyond the limits of social constructionism to explain and I decided to seek out new theoretical approaches that could illuminate and contextualise my observations. After

discussion with Emma Renold I discovered the work of Barad and while her theories were challenging to me (especially at such a late stage of my PhD study) the chord they struck with the data I had produced was so loud that it was impossible to ignore.

### **Intra-Action and Agency in an Agential-Realist Theoretical Approach**

*Agency is not about choice in any liberal humanist sense; rather, it is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices.*

*Barad (In: Dolphijn, & van der Tuin, 2009)*

Barad's agential-realism offers an onto-epistemology that situates emergent, observable phenomena (under which category gender is located) as necessarily produced through the 'intra-action' of the material and the discursive. Barad is a quantum physicist and her work draws extensively on this field, particularly Bohr's argument that material properties emerge and can be known only through measurement (e.g. observation) by apparatuses which are themselves products of human conception (i.e. discourse). This emergence produces phenomena characterised by an 'inseparability of the object and the measuring agencies' (Barad, 2007: 139), and Barad labels this productive material/discourse relationship 'intra-action'. This inseparability constitutes 'onto-epistemology' not only due to the impossibility of knowing the material world before we intervene in it through measurement, but also due to the principle that through observation and interpretation we reconfigure both the material and discursive elements of phenomena.

*Matter is substance in its iterative intra-active becoming – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency.*

*Barad (Kleinmann & Barad, 2012: 80)*

Agential-realism offers a way of comprehending the (re)configurings of both ourselves and our environment through proposing a 'mutual entailment' of discourse and matter (that is, phenomena always emerge from a combination of both factors and never from one alone, a relationship which she calls

'entanglement'). The entangled material and discursive agencies 'intra-act' (a neologism which establishes an ontological break from 'interaction' – an agential relationship between two discursive entities) and these intra-actions produce phenomena that we can observe. Phenomena emerge through materiality in a 'congealing of agency' as matter, as Barad terms it above; matter is agential phenomena as an ongoing "differentiating of the world" (Kleinmann & Barad, 2012: 80). This 'mattering' (matter-in-doing) is a "discursive production in the posthumanist sense that discursive practices are themselves material (re)configurings of the world through which the determination of boundaries, properties, and meanings is differentially enacted" (Barad, 2007: 151). This approach, that Barad terms 'posthumanist performativity', constitutes a radical reworking of Butler's theory of performativity which shifts sociological methods of understanding phenomena by rigorously complicating the "unreal opposition" between realism and social constructivism (van der Tuin, 2009. See also: van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). She accomplishes this through dismissing the notion of pre-existing entities prior to the emergence of their produced phenomena, instead suggesting that bounded subjects and objects are produced through temporal entanglements defined through 'agential cuts', where the manifestations of agency occur and their effects are known.

Barad's approach sits in a tradition of posthumanist theoretical configurings and perhaps bears most resemblance to Latour and Law's 'Actor Network Theory' (ANT). Latour's critique of the 'strong program' in the sociology of knowledge and his subsequent forays into ANT troubled the dualistic distinction between nature and society and seeks to identify the agency of objects as comparable to that of humans (1993; 1999; 2005). A frequent issue for the many vocal critics of Latour has been his formulation of non-human agency, of which he is accused of bestowing humanist qualities such as intent (Bloor, 1999; Kusch, 2012; Vandenberghe, 2002), and fears of an implied amorality in work which dislocates that intent (and, in Winner's terms, its consequences and impact) from solely human sources (Winner, 1993: 368).

Barad proposes a radical posthumanist relocation of agency as external to both human and non-human bodies, equating it to 'enactment' and refusing the term 'agent' (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2009). This makes her work subject to

many of the same criticisms as Latour, however her conceptualisation of it arguably changes the entire notion of agency where ANT sought to simply transpose its properties to materiality. For Barad, agency works *through* materiality and discourse in intra-activity; therefore, while objects, spaces, and places, as well as humans, hold the ability to influence the manner in which discourse intra-acts with them, influencing the phenomena produced by their observation, she explicitly removes agency as a property or possession. Instead it becomes more akin to a 'life force' or vitalism (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 454) that propels productions of phenomena and can incorporate any human or non-human, material or discursive bodies in its path. This relocation creates a difficulty in relation to the question of human free will, making agential-realism even more vulnerable than Latour to accusations of amorality and political limitation (Jørgensen, 2012). I consider Barad's response to this accusation below in a discussion of 'Baradian ethics'.

### **Baradian Agency and the Production of Gender**

*Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has... agency is "doing" or "being" in its intra-activity.*

*Barad, 2007:178*

Thinking about agency in terms of agential-realist theory locates it as the productive force that works through material and discursive, human and non-human bodies to construct, alter, or divert phenomena. It is a highly abstract concept and yet I found that once I had identified it, I could observe what Barad calls an "ongoing flow of agency through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world... in the making of spacetime itself" (2007: 140) in every activity or situation in my field notes. I found that an awareness of agential operations in production enabled me to undertake a more complex analysis and better comprehend exactly how gender was being experienced by my participants. It also altered the way I perceived the production of my data and this thesis, shifting from an already reflexive, feminist stance to a perception of it as an ongoing series of agential-cuts that are 'doing' and 'being' gender in early childhood, as Barad puts it in the above quote. As I discuss in the next chapter, doing research on this topic agentially enacts

particular becomings, the 'spacetimematterings' of gender, and I am as much an active participant in this as the young children in my study.

Agency is the drive (or 'force') for the production, persistence, evolution, and repression of all observable phenomena, which she characterises as "differential patterns of mattering ("diffraction patterns") produced through complex agential intra-actions of multiple material-discursive practices" (2007: 140)<sup>19</sup>. I find a helpful way of characterising it is as the metabolism of the world, producing the ideas, meanings, and interpretations ('emergences') we, as a society, hold about (for example) gender and sexuality in early childhood through creating boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. Through constant change and adaptation, these emergences do not remain static or permanent; gender and sexuality constantly evolve to accommodate localised human and non-human, material and discursive bodies.

As agency is articulated only through entanglement where it enacts boundaries and exclusions on bodies as they come to matter, it cannot be possessed by anyone or anything. While people or objects may exert agency through entanglement, it is a drive and not a resource. Though we cannot retain it as a possession, we all have the potential to engage in its enactment regarding local emergences of phenomena (as do non-human objects and bodies), even if by resistance which, in itself, produces another emergence. For example, if a young girl refuses to wear the frilly dress that her mother has given her to wear – perhaps crossing her arms and turning away – she enacts a resistance of a material facet of young femininity, simultaneously agentially

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<sup>19</sup> Barad uses the physics phenomenon of 'diffraction', where the wave-like behaviour of light can be identified (as opposed to particle behaviour). This behaviour can be characterised by the tendency of waves (as material 'disturbances') to combine in their effects and change their anticipated trajectory. In doing so, a combination of effects called 'superposition' is produced where the "the resultant wave is a sum of the effects of each individual component wave" (2007: 76), creating difference through entanglement. This finding forms the basis of quantum mechanics and also for agential-realism, where Barad finds support for her radical onto-epistemological shift. She locates thinking 'diffractively' as a distinct break from thinking 'reflectively': "whereas the metaphor of reflection reflects the themes of mirroring and sameness, diffraction is marked by patterns of difference" (2007: 71).

producing a variant which refuses such an appearance. Yet neither mother nor daughter possess an agential ability to define femininity as a concept – they may only engage with its emergence in their experiences.

Agency works through entangled material and discursive resources to enact phenomena. According to the principles of agential-realism, all phenomena are produced through agential intra-activity between these resources and structured through ‘agential cuts’ that delineate subject-object relations imbued with power (as I discuss further below). This approach to agency affected all aspects of my analysis when seeking the emergence of gender in my data, prompting me to seek complex material-discursive entanglements as the source of gender, rather than identifying individual agents of free will or design underlying its production.

‘Gendering’ or ‘gendered’ are used to identify emergent phenomena or subjectivations that reproduce binary gender on human and non-human bodies. These words are employed to emphasise the productive nature of gender in that it is not a pre-existing property of bodies but is emergent as a recognisable phenomenon through intra-activity, serving instead to describe gender as a process. Discourses (socially circulated ideas) of masculinity and femininity apprehend the intra-activity of binary sexed bodies to gender humans, objects, places, and space, but by employing an agential-realist analysis it is possible to explore the exact points of gender emergence and denaturalise gender, perceiving it as an interpretation of intra-activity, rather than its cause. This can lead to alternative interpretations of gendering phenomena, and open up possibilities of intervention and change.

### **A Baradian subject?**

The understanding of subjectivity that I engage with here is specific to Barad’s agential realism but is the product and close relation of Foucault and Butler’s conceptions of the subject as formed through power and performance. Feminist notions of subjectivity can be more correctly conceived of as ‘subjectivities’ in contrast to the structuralist notion of identity: a stable, static understanding of self influentially employed in Althusser’s Marxist subject (Althusser, 2001). ‘Subjectivities’ produces a concept of selfhood and personal experience that does not act reductively on the fluidity and contradictions

inherent in experiences and standpoints (Braidotti, 1994; Ferguson, 1993). Our multiple subjectivities are the sum of our experiences *in* and views *of* the world – social and material. The various narratives of our lives interweave to create a vast collage or tapestry of conflicting or complementary selves which may emerge or be concealed according to the situation. Crucially, these selves are relational to others and the boundaries that demarcate the individual are blurred and permeable (Chodorow, 1978).

These relations of power are central to poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivities as the channels through which knowledge, acceptance, dominance and resistance permeate the self (Foucault, 1980a). Foucault's subject has been critiqued as "an assault on the possibilities of agency" (Caldwell, 2007) as in his argument that social discourse produces subjects can be read as a passive disempowerment of the self in the face of external powers, but many later feminist and queer revisions of subjectivity have developed Foucault's ideas to create the self as both active and reactive to discourse (Butler, 1990; Grosz, 1994; McLaren, 2007; McNay, 2000).

Barad's agential realism has shifted the terms of this debate about how to theorise agency effectively within the formation of subjectivity, and the extent to which we can presume temporal stability in conceptions of self. Her acutely posthumanist perspective dislocates agency as possession of either individuals or institutions, instead conceiving of it as a flow of power that operates through material and discursive contexts, human and non-human bodies, to produce observable phenomena that we might otherwise read as the product of people or, less commonly, places and things (Barad, 2007).

In relation to subjectivity, manifestations of agency (emergent phenomena) are always reliant on relations of power between individuals, collectives, and/or institutions, and here a posthuman understanding of ethics can be identified. Sites of power relations offer opportunities for agency to operate and for phenomena to emerge. Relations of power also constitute the individual subject within society and it is in that continuously shifting and diverse intra-activity that agency produces narratives and experiences.

Barad's emphasis on agency as a productive process relies on contextual temporality that denies the pre-existence of the subject and she refers instead to 'subjectivations' in emphasis of this emergent temporality. Baradian

subjectivations are subject positions and possibilities that are created through a subject/object distinction, and emerge within intra-activity while maintaining no temporal stability. In other words, subjectivities continuously shift and change through flows of agency and are inherently bound with the objects spaces, and places within and through which they emerge. This understanding of subjectivity relies on the notion of multiple, temporally-located selves and positions the individual and groups of individuals as loci of power relations which they contribute to but cannot freely direct. This discussion is expanded in chapter three but the critical aspects of Baradian subjectivity which emerge in this chapter and the next are that the (gendered) self temporally emerges through a combination of material and discursive intra-activity, and that analytic focus should be directed towards the production of phenomena and subjectivations, rather than the interpretation of meaning.

### **Desire and Agential Cuts: Defining Subject/Object Relations**

In a humanist approach that takes Butler's definition as a basis, desire as an possessive agential force propels transformations of the subject: we are able to agentially pursue (or attempt, at least) our desires, and may be met with force from a discordant agency originating from another, or find sweet synchronisation that produces a realisation of our intent. However, since Barad locates agency as an enactment, rather than a possession, desire then becomes a flow of powers – we do not possess desire but, rather, experience it as it materially reconfigures 'possibilities of change' in our subject/object relations. Desire emerges through these reconfigurations that locate us within material-discursive entanglements.

Barad establishes the notion of the 'agential cut' to explain how subject/object distinctions are formed and meaning produced from intra-activity. Agential cuts are dynamic, temporally-bound enactments of "agential separability" (2007: 140) that emerges as intra-activity takes place and defines subject and object through their relations, producing meaning of matter. To be 'cut' as subject and object accommodates the destabilisation of pre-existing, linear subjectivity and, as a measurement of our being-in-phenomena, causes meaning to emerge – in the present case, gender. 'Gendering', therefore, is the enactment of agential cuts – measurements/analysis of behaviour - that

apprehend gender-desire-agency in its flows and define material-discursive subjects and objects in relation to it.

For Barad, therefore, there is no subject before an agential cut, an internal awareness or external observation that temporally defines an emerging phenomena, produces the division between subject and object. These proposals are anathema to essentialist approaches to identity, creating endless possibilities and potential becomings for each individual that, while they may be unbounded by determinist notions of biology and social structure, remain deeply politicised by virtue of bounded enactments of subjectivity – like heteronormativity – and the nature and consequences of those agential cuts which serve to locate the subject in relation to those around them and the phenomena forming their shared experience.

### **Free Will and Agency: A Baradian Ethics**

*Ethics is... not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.*

*(Barad, 2007: 393)*

Despite concerns about the ‘amorality’ of posthumanism, ethics and responsibility are at the heart of Barad’s agential-realism. These ethics relate closely to her concept of agential cuts and how they relate to accountability for intra-activity. In an interview with Dolphijn & van der Tuin (2009), Barad has directly addressed concerns of amorality in new materialism, stating that her understanding of agency “is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices”. By speaking of exclusion and boundaries, Barad’s language here is steeped in relations of power, identifying them as productive and providing the groundwork for her ethical stance. Though she acknowledges a nervousness surrounding the removal of agency from the human subject in terms of free will and accountability, she argues that examining the “specificity of intra-actions speaks to the particularities of the power imbalances of the complexity of a field of forces”. By displacing the focus on human will when accounting for power relations, agential-realism forces a wider focus on the material-discursive

conditions that produce observable phenomena and troubles the directional causality associated with analytic approaches based on free will. This avoids an epistemological oversimplification of attributing phenomena to human or non-human bodies, instead attending to how they work together in intra-activity, in ways that become politicised through their exclusions and boundaries. This is not an amorality or lack of accountability but, rather, a realism in appreciating the complexity of recognising the complex entangled sources of phenomena, rather than searching for a 'straw wo/man' underlying them.

In the above quote, Barad explains that practicing agential-realist ethics means acknowledging the non-pre-existing subject that, rather, emerges through relationalities within entanglement. As we emerge through intra-activity with other bodies, "the materiality of human embodiment... always already entails "an exposure to the other" " (Barad, 2007: 392). Only where agential-cuts are enacted do we become distinct and power relations produced. For Barad, therefore, an ethical stance is to be located in the nature of the agential-cuts that we make, resulting in accountability for the boundaries and exclusions those cuts establish. This does not diminish our responsibility for our intra-actions; rather, it increases it (2007: 394). Barad suggests that responsible intra-action means "meeting each moment, being alive to the possibilities of becoming" (2007: 396) and this is where the title of her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* originates from, as she argues that we need to take "responsibility for the role that we play in the world's differential becomings". This responsibility plays such a central role in her argument that she has even re-termed her theoretical contribution as an 'ethico-onto-epistemology' (Kleinmann & Barad, 2012).

In relation to research practice, a researcher's involvement in participant's lives, the writing down of data, its analysis, and the subsequent authorship of a thesis form a critical differential becoming and enactment of boundaries and power relations. When entangled with these processes during this study there were many moments when I stepped back from my work and questioned which boundaries and exclusions it was enacting and whether these were becomings that I was willing to take my share of responsibility for. Often this would result in dismantling the academic assumptions and shorthand in common use that I was applying within my work without renewed consideration. For example, in

the many early drafts of data analysis work I consistently referred to children and actions as ‘heteronormative’ as if this were an unproblematic descriptor of who or what they were. There are two main problems with this from a Baradian ethical perspective: first, labelling people, things, or incidents as ‘heteronormative’ is atemporal, producing the impression of stable, fixed boundaries around the interpretation of intra-activity rather than capturing its fluidity and multiplicity. Second, it assumes objectivity, leaving no opportunity for intra-acting bodies to be read differently. I attempt to remedy this by identifying heteronormativity as a produced ‘effect’ observed in the agential cuts of my analysis, rather than as an objective label, making clear that the boundaries and exclusions this interpretation creates are specific to my own reading. In this way I take responsibility for the enactments of my work and try to remain alive to alternative possibilities of becoming that the reader (including my future readings) may find within it.

### **Using Agential-Realism to Understand Gender in Early Childhood**

My writing about the children’s behaviour, as some of a myriad series of agential cuts seeking to find their subjectivity, ‘genders’ them; it is not a matter of identifying and capturing their genders in observation. Instead I have endeavoured to pay careful attention to agential cuts – whether borne from my own or the children’s observations – and the points of emergence they facilitate for gendered phenomena and gendered subjectivities. In the first case, I am interested in how gender as a phenomenon emerges in the lives of young children. In the second case, I am interested in how gendered subjectivities emerge in early childhood. Gendered relations of power pervade both parts of this analysis; gender-as-phenomena influences the structures and operations of power through determining points of domination and resistance; the emergence of gendered subjectivities both positions the individual child within relations of power and engages them in restructuring those power relations through their specific performance of their gendered subjectivities. A confident, expressive queering of gender can have equal impact on power relations as an aggressive assertion of normative gender roles – it is through the tussle of domination and resistance that children’s gender subjectivities are formed and defined in ways that will impact their social and personal experiences for the rest of their lives.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have established the theoretical approach that guides my investigation and analysis in this thesis. I have identified parameters of gender that position it as mutually entailed through discourse and materiality, and experienced by the individual through performative speech and actions that are both produced by, and also influence and reproduce social relations of power. I have explained how this approach has led me to focus on temporal points of gender emergence in my analysis - primarily in individual children but also in the nursery social group as a whole and in the material environment of the nursery – working outward from those points to establish the complex entanglements of material and discursive elements which constitute them, and to trace the agential cuts which define them.

Where, then, does this discussion leave Maya and her girlhood? In applying Barad to my reading of Maya, I must abandon attempts to 'fix' her as gendered and instead seek out the exclusions and inclusions that form the boundaries of gender (and race, class, age, and locality) through which she materially and discursively *becomes* as gendered subject. This entails looking for the effects of her entanglements with other bodies – human and non-human – and locating the points at which gender is produced which involve her body. It is at these points that gendering relations of power can be understood in their effects, one of which is to produce Maya as an apparent 'girl', whilst at other times shifting notions of what 'girl' might be in Hillside nursery and in Maya's life. The gender contradictions that I observe in Maya – her dainty sparkling shoes and her boisterous, active play – trouble the boundaries that heteronormativity purports to be rigid and coherent. This ultimately undermines the impression of heteronormativity as natural or universal in a robustly political attempt to challenge and change the perpetuating of those damaging 'truths' behind gender and sexuality.

# Chapter 4: Conducting New Feminist Materialist Ethnography

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## **An Introductory Note on Becoming Ethnographer**

The decision to employ ethnographic methods in this study was one I made early and firmly, and this is as much a reflection of my background as it is of my epistemological and ontological standpoint, or the practical necessities of sociological research with very young children. When I began my postgraduate education I was new to social science, arriving with a head full of undergraduate literary theory, a recently acquired passion for feminist activism, and a longstanding distaste for that 'science' suffix that had simmered away contentedly since the sulphuric days of comprehensive school laboratories, filled with textbooks teaching everything about life and nothing about living. Science lessons, in fact, were far from the most paramount of my fears in youth. Ruefully I must accept that I fitted the socially awkward and painfully introverted academic archetype, finding the people around me incomprehensible in their reasoning and terrifying in their actions. The familiar strangers who surrounded me were far more intriguing and mysterious than the numbers, laws, and, as I saw it, mundane predictabilities of the STEM subjects (though sidling solitary around deserted concrete parks during school hours it was unclear to me which of the two it was more crucial to evade). This ill-ease with others manifested in an alienated fascination which was to lead me to this present discipline, however it was literature - subjective, poetic, and perceptive - which proved my initial guide to social life, seemingly so much more vital than the aspirant objectivity and parade of numbers (yet more numbers) which formed the limited range of sociology which I was then aware of. Novels, then, were my textbook to humanity. The disparate epic of Balzac's human comedy warned of those driven by power or sadness; Camus shattered my illusions of ethical certainty (they are still not whole again); Tolstoy portrayed the delicate perpetual dance of entwined romantic, familial, platonic, and political relationships of which I

knew as little as ballet. With the help of storybooks I gained entry to the minds of others and made sense of the social world they all (I supposed) sat so comfortably within, and in doing so I eventually found a tentative perch for myself.

McNamara (2009) describes feminist ethnography as ‘storytelling that makes a difference’ and it was in this somewhat idealistic spirit that I settled so quickly on the method. Surely if storytelling could change a mind, it could change the world? The thick description and relentless curiosity which leads the ethnographer (and their stories) down the labyrinthine passages and hitherto obscured nooks of social life satisfies the desire to not just record or analyse people and their actions, but to *know* them, to make those strangers not just familiar, but *understood*. In this chapter I discuss the methodological reasoning, imperative ethical concerns, and practical considerations which combine in this study to strongly support an ethnographic approach to researching gender in early childhood, but the truth of it? I never seriously entertained any other method.

## **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I discussed my reasoning in engaging with new feminist materialist theory to explore gender in early childhood. In order to apply the agential-realist onto-epistemology offered by Barad, I argue in this chapter that producing ethnographic data is the most appropriate approach to research design. I discuss the methodological development of the research design and explore the use of ethnographic methods in its implementation, its ethical implications and considerations, and explain how I, as the effective ‘research instrument’, negotiated the demands of ethnography and the field.

In chapters one and two I explained my selection of four research questions with reference to existing research in the field and knowledge gaps relating to UK research with nursery age children, an understanding of how gender and sexuality ‘travels’ between the institution and the family home, and the application of new materialist theory to gender in the early years. In chapter two I discussed theories of subjectivity, gender, and sexuality which guided my thinking about the research, formulating an epistemological and ontological framework for inquiry. In this section, I address the methodological issues

raised by these preceding chapters, explaining how my research questions and theoretical approach impacted the research design and implementation of this study. To refresh the memory, my research questions (and their sub-questions) are as follows:

- How is gender produced in the social spaces and relations of early childhood?

*How do notions of gender emerge materially, discursively, spatially, and temporally within the specific locality of Hillside Nursery?*

- How do human and non-human bodies become gendered in early childhood?

*How does gender become naturalised to particular bodies? When and where do boy-bodies and girl-bodies, material objects and discursive narratives become 'masculine' and 'feminine'? What happens when binary (heteronormative) gendering is diverted/refused/failed?*

- How do young children experience gender and sexuality?

*What are the emotional effects of gendered/gendering experiences on individual children? What potential subjectivations are opened up and/or foreclosed to them?*

- How can understandings of these productions, becomings, and experiences be usefully applied to early years pedagogical practice and policy?

*How can young children be better supported in relation to gender, and how can their experiences within preschool education be improved?*

## **Chapter Structure**

The chapter begins with a discussion of methodology explaining how the theoretical assumptions underlying this study are manifested in the research. Here I argue that the longitudinal ethnographic approach that I originally developed with the aim of conducting a discursive analysis is also well-suited to producing the level of detail and complexity required to conduct a new materialist analysis. I address how agential-realism creates a challenging position for myself as researcher, not only when conducting empirical research but also within this text as 'author' of that research, and the ethical implications of that position in Baradian terms. I explore the use of feminist ethnography in

early childhood research and consider how this approach differs from traditional anthropological ethnography and is influenced by feminist critiques and reassessments of the method. I look at how others have used ethnographic data to think about intra-activity and how the studies referenced have informed my own approach.

In the next section, I briefly discuss my MSc research which acted as pilot study for this project and explain how that learning process informed its design and implementation. I then go on to detail the reasoning and, to some extent, circumstantial events which led to the selection of Hillside Nursery as research site, and the afternoon class attendees as participants. I describe the negotiations with gatekeepers which allowed me access and the consent procedure for children, staff, and parents, all of which needed to be continually renewed and renegotiated in the field. Finally, I explain, justify, and critique the various data production and analysis procedures which I followed throughout the project.

The penultimate section addresses the limitations of the study and critically evaluates my implementation of this research design. I consider how the research might have been approached differently and other methods that might have been employed. I think about the ethical implications of the study, and raise situations where my ethical practice as researcher was challenging or problematic. Here, I attempt to reach a self-awareness and reflexivity, informed by an 'ethics of mattering' necessary for agential-realist research, concerning my own actions as researcher to establish credibility for the study and the conclusions I have drawn from the data, as well as detailing the endeavours I undertook to ensure transparency for the purposes of ethics and academic rigour.

Finally, I summarise and reflect on my research methodology and design as a whole in preparation for the data-led chapters which follow.

## **Developing the Research Methodology and Design**

As I have already mentioned several times above, this study was originally devised with the intention to take a social constructionist perspective on circulating gender discourses in the nursery. To this end, I set out to produce a 'classic' ethnography comprising of observational field notes in an attempt to

capture those circulations in fine detail (I also intended to produce visual and audio data that subsequently had to be abandoned, as I discuss below). Therefore it would be disingenuous of me to present this methodology as if it were a harmonious and linear transformation of theory into practice; it was not. Instead, at the end of a year of furious data-production – all with a poststructuralist theoretical framework in mind – I completely altered my theoretical stance to new materialism. Suddenly a host of unanswered questions seemed to leap at me from my notebooks and I longed to see all my experiences played back to me in my mind's eye to allow me to account for the materiality that at the time (or so I thought) had passed me by. Yet it was there. It had to be, as it was my untheorised observations of material-discursive intra-activity that had led me in the first instance to seek out theoretical pastures new. Sure enough, the ethnographic notes I had generated during the research were more than sufficient to put into practice the Baradian analysis I was learning about. While the data I produced during fieldwork primarily focused on the social interactions between children, like Larson and Phillips (2013), on re-reading with a Baradian eye I found that materiality was constantly clamouring to be acknowledged.

Fortunately for me, ethnographically produced qualitative data is highly flexible and can accommodate a wide-ranging fluidity of attention to observe and pursue the agency of phenomena through multiple and simultaneous sites of emergence, capturing the “full richness of experience” (Greene and Hill, 2005: 13). This meant that I could attend to social and material intra-actions as they happened, but also, through the longitudinal approach that I took, I could observe the iterative becomings of emergent phenomena as the school year passed. Due to this late shift in my theoretical alignment, my ethnographic data transformed during the process of data analysis, retrospectively becoming a new materialist ethnography before my eyes, though the words remained the same. I discuss the matter of this transformation further below, within the section ‘Thinking with Theory’.

Close ethnographic observation of young children has been a productive method for researchers to attend to the gender practices in nurseries and preschools; for example, Blaise (2005b), Renold and Mellor (2012); Holford et al. (2013), and Lloyd and Duveen (1992). Through the direct experience of

these researchers being with their child participants as they play, talk, and learn, these studies are able to trace the disparate pathways through which gender emerges with detail and nuance, and less reliance on any interpretations that teachers and parents are motivated to employ regarding their narratives. Due to these strengths, ethnographic methods lends itself well to intra-active analysis as the researcher is able to gather a significant degree of complexity within data which captures the messiness of everyday experience, as well as attend to a variety of different material-discursive agential flows in the production of phenomena.

There were other potential avenues that could have been explored: some researchers have accomplished intra-active analysis through interview data (like Mazzei, 2013) however this becomes unfeasible when the majority of your participants are barely verbal, like the children participating in this study. Young children's limited abilities to verbalise their experiences and thoughts, or their memory of past events, presents a challenge to all qualitative research conducted with young children. Some researchers have compensated for this by focusing more on interviewing the adults in their environment, like teachers (Gunn, 2011) or mothers (Bower, 1998). Although this research can be extremely useful in developing understandings of early childhood, direct observation of children themselves is absent from or limited within these studies.

However, ethnography is not without its challenges; while the problem of relying on the narratives of others to relate the experiences of young children is addressed, a further significant problem is raised: the reliability of the researcher as early childhood ethnographer, presuming to relate their experiences accurately (Connolly, 2008; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Viruru & Cannella, 2001). Ethnographers take responsibility for relating the narratives of other people's lives, and our representations are traditionally assumed to be 'better' or less biased due not only to our research training, but to our status as complete subject while participants are objectified through 'ethnographic authority' (Clifford, 1983).

This challenge is compounded within agential-realism, which foregrounds the role of researcher-as-active-participant within an apparatus of observation that is simultaneously entangled with the production of phenomena (Barad,

2007). This brings the responsibility of the ethnographer as research instrument to be described, critiqued, and analysed within the study, as any other apparatus under study would be. (Coffey, 1999) It is therefore crucial that the ethnographer responds to Lather's warning, "too often, we who do empirical research in the name of emancipatory politics fail to connect how we do research to our theoretical and political commitments" (1988:576). A significant part of this chapter contributes to the ongoing reflexive discussion of my 'ethnographic self' in an attempt to fulfil this need.

Postcolonial feminist ethnography advocates constant reflexivity within research as an ethical imperative of immersion in other people's 'real lives' (Skeggs, 1994; 2001). The unpredictability and transience of researching 'in the field' demands that the ethically conscious researcher continuously reevaluates and responds to changes in the environment or relationships under study, and endeavours to maintain a self-awareness regarding how their actions or, even, mere presence may be impacting situations, participants, or other actors. Additionally, they ought also to be aware of how their participant's voices and actions may be affecting *them* (Huisman, 2008; Stacey, 1988). I discuss my own attempts at reflexivity and reciprocity below.

These concerns were particularly applicable to my study as I decided to visit the homes of children to better understand their background and families; although this data is not used here, its gathering was a significant element of my fieldwork that gave me a great deal of practical and emotional toil. Gabb (2008; 2010), overseeing a methodologically innovative large-scale research project on families which saw researchers enter the homes of participants, describes the anxieties and ethical paranoia which plagued those on the research team; fears which, she argues, if taken too far can compromise the quality of the data produced. This is a problem which I have become extremely familiar with; I juggled two major anxieties throughout all my research, both in the home and at nursery: one was my heartfelt desire to ensure that I upheld my duty of care to the children and adults participating in my study, which I enthusiastically undertook on a daily basis; the other was my duty to appease the regulations of ethical committee, which led to a constant lack of confidence in my own decisions, where the most minor of errors ("did I misplace that consent form?") became nightmare-inducing.

Writing and analysing my ethnographic data brought its own methodological and ethical challenges; working with Barad created a tension within my work between realising an agential-realist analysis which decentres the subject and attempting to document the interests and perspectives of those that I politically considered as human subjects. Here, I discuss this tension and my attempt to address it in chapter seven.

These issues and dilemmas are addressed in the following sections and I have tried to include as many examples as possible of the challenges I faced as ethnographer during the study. First I will discuss the pilot study for the project before going on to introduce the school and locality where I conducted the fieldwork. I then move on to the methodological challenges and assumptions of the study

## **Pilot Study**

In order to gain experience of researching in a nursery, and to identify some of the key themes to explore in this study, I performed a four week ethnographic pilot study during my MSc in Social Science Research Methods with 3-4 year olds in a local private nursery. During that study I gained confidence in working with young children (something I had no prior experience with) and negotiating the demands of ethnographic research. The data I produced also gave me confidence that my research topic was not only worthwhile but deeply important, as I observed gender performances pervading the children's play and talk.

The pilot study took place in an elite private nursery with a predominantly middle-class intake of the children of professionals working in the high-value local area. I spent 4 weeks in the nursery conducting participant observation and producing field notes and an expanded research diary. I also interviewed one of the senior nursery workers who had expressed deep interest in my research and held informed opinions about gender in early education. I thought that her views could give me an extra perspective on my data and I also wanted to try my hand at interviewing for the first time, considering that I intended to triangulate the data from my PhD study with interviews of some kind (the decision to conduct semi-structured interviews during home visits came later).

I also experimented with activity-based research with some of the children but with little success: I arranged a specific time to observe a group of

participating children and the dressing-up box in the hope that I could record conversation between the children and target my fieldnote writing to the structured activity. This was an abject failure methodologically, as a totally chaotic scene emerged before my eyes. Tracking the children's conversations and movements with any accuracy was impossible, children who were not participating in the study crossed over into the space with abandon, and though I had expected the children to engage in dramatic play once costumed, the interest that the children had in the activity seemed focused on the putting-on and quick removal of outfits, rather than developing characters based upon them. Additionally, with all the rapid costume changes, I was primarily engaged in helping the children to dress and undress, rather than taking notes. I learnt two things from this episode: that visual methods of video-taping and photography were of significant use in early years research as eyes that could attend to activity whilst I was engaged in making it happen. Also, that unfamiliar structured activities were impossible to manage in a nursery without descending to draconian methods, which I had no intention of doing.

Undaunted, I made a second attempt to gather data from a structured activity. I wanted to prompt some of the older, more verbally able children to discuss gender but knew I would have to spark their interest to persuade them to focus for any prolonged period of time. I came up with the idea of printing off big colourful pictures of a Disney prince and princess, and a selection of world flash cards with simple words written on them that might be applied in gendered ways (for example, 'pretty', 'strong', and 'brave'), and asked for volunteers to come and talk about the pictures with me. Two of the older girls were interested and sat with me for a while (audio recording) while I talked them through the words (elaborating on meaning whenever necessary) and asked them to tell me which picture they thought the words matched with. The girls understood the task and enjoyed talking about what the prince and princess might do, but found it difficult to articulate ideas beyond very basic gender understandings (for example, the princess was 'pretty' and that was nice, and she was pretty because she had a dress on). Though the girls were attentive for a short period of time, our discussion soon led them to want to go and play dress-up as princesses and their concentration wavered leaving me with little useful data. I had to conclude that interviewing of any sort was going to be

extremely arduous with this age group if it failed with even the most talkative girls in the nursery.

The data and analysis which emerged from this pilot study indicated that heteronormativity was indeed omnipresent in early childhood education settings, visible as it was in the children's play, talk, dress, and object-interactions. In Lyttleton-Smith (2010) I note the importance of appearance and 'correct gendering' regarding the clothes and accessories the children wore, and describing how the children used the toys and other objects in the nursery to develop and regulate gendered narratives. These children also showed an awareness that gender was not an absolute law, and many children actively challenged gender stereotypes in subtle and overt ways. I experienced enthusiastic 'gender-bending' in the nursery, watching as two young boys enjoyed a game of hairdressing with the salon play set, giggling as they stroked each other's hair and struggled with inexperienced fingers to fix hair slides within it.

The findings from this pilot study suggested several directions to pursue in my PhD research design: the richness and flexibility of my ethnographic data confirmed to me that ethnography was not only viable as a research method with this age group but, given my failed attempts to gain audio data, was probably my only option for qualitative written data. It highlighted to me the usefulness of visual methods in early years research, however as I discuss below, this was not possible for me to use in my PhD study. Finally, it showed me that attempting to implement new structured activities with children of this age was not as helpful as simply following their regular routines of play and learning and attending to the emergence of gender within these activities. This in itself led me to realise that my next study would have to be as longitudinal as possible in order to capture enough data on gender without specifically arranging research activities to prompt its production.

In terms of the sample group, researching in a private, elite nursery made me think deeply about class and gender in the early years. Many of the children in the pilot study were, in hindsight, academically advantaged, comfortable with holding conversations with adults, and unfailingly polite and well-behaved. It was my perception of these children's privileged lives which made me interested in performing my next study in a state-run nursery in a poorer area;

curious about the contrast between the gender experiences of children from different classed backgrounds I wanted to include the stories of children who were only receiving their 15 hours of free state childcare a week and who, in terms of their family income, more closely resembled the average child in South Wales. That is how I settled on Hillside Nursery as a research site.

## **Research Site and Participants**

### **About Hillside Nursery**

Wales as a region continues to be affected by post-industrialist decline, with high unemployment and low progression opportunities for those working in a predominantly service-based economy. In the summer of 2011 (when I began my fieldwork at Hillside) the unemployment level for Wales stood at 8.4%, the highest in the UK when I began my research (National Assembly for Wales, 2011), and in searching for my fieldwork site it was important for me to find an area which represented these economic conditions. Hillside is a sprawling estate on the outskirts of a large town, the school and attached nursery unit hosting an intake sourced primarily from families living in the surrounding council houses and budget homes. As an example of house prices in the area, one family I visited at home had been trying to sell their local flat for many months at the price of £60,000. The local area is counted in the top 10% most deprived areas in Wales with over 60% of its children living in workless households and approximately 30% of all households considered to be in income poverty<sup>20</sup>. Wales also ranks its local areas by 'community safety', relating to crime statistics, and the area rates so poorly here that even to approximate its ranking could potentially identify the locality. The wider locality is moderately ethnically diverse; approximately 6% of the population are from non-white ethnicity, though this is not reflected in Hillside Nursery where a full third of the children in the afternoon class are non-white. It is also an area filled with young families, having one of the highest numbers of under-5s in the

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<sup>20</sup> Sources and exact figures of all statistics quoted in this section are concealed for the purposes of anonymity. All are based on government-mandated sources and/or measures.

county, at 8% of the population. The nursery itself is attached to a small primary school built to provide for the estate and takes 3 and 4 year old children for the free 15 hours of preschool provision currently provided by the government. For most children this is their only nursery, but a handful of children whose parents both work also attend other private nurseries and childcare. The children were accepted at 3 years old, and most would progress to the reception class of the primary school (in the classrooms immediately adjacent to the nursery, sharing a playground) in their 4<sup>th</sup> year of age. A couple of the children in the class would be moving to less local faith schools, however the majority would remain at Hillside.

The choice of Hillside Nursery as field site for this study was a combination of design and chance. Having established during my pilot study that I wanted to research with children from disadvantaged backgrounds I began to consider a range of potential locations. I initially hoped to perform a comparative study, and was interested in finding two sites: one in a middle-class and one in a working-class area. I later decided against this idea after consultation with my supervisors who recommend that I would produce more in-depth ethnographic data by focusing on just one nursery, and I decided that this should be located in a poorer area.

Ultimately, it was a family friend who suggested Hillside Nursery as her child had attended it; as I explained the difficulties I had in identifying a suitable site and she suggested Hillside as one which met my criteria. She had an ongoing acquaintance with some of the teachers there, so I got in touch, explaining my study and how I had heard about the school. I was deeply nervous about approaching schools for research, concerned about the suspicion I had heard that schools sometimes harboured towards researchers, and worrying that they might not take me seriously I mentioned my friend's connection to the school, hoping that this might well-dispose them towards me. This approach was successful and it was with relief and trepidation that I attended a meeting at the school in the spring of 2011 to establish whether the research could be supported. The contact teacher asked me a few questions about myself and the research, and it was clear that the most important thing to the school was that I would behave ethically and appreciate the necessity for confidentiality.

Evidently the teacher was satisfied with my responses as the research was approved.

### **Consent and Participation**

I designed consent forms for both teachers and children's parents, both of which may be seen in Appendix I. I included consent for audio and video recording, as I was uncertain at that point as to whether I would end up using them (I attempted video recording once and came face to face with insurmountable regulation of this in the school, leading me to abandon this method. Similarly to the pilot study, the few times I attempted audio recording the children were so distracted by the fact that they were being recorded that I obtained no useful data whatsoever – our relationship was too informal for them to 'behave' because they were on tape). All the teachers in the nursery signed the consent forms and these were sent home with parents. I received the majority of forms back, though I was disappointed that about half the parents of ethnic minority children in the class decided not to consent. I had been keen to explore the effects of ethnicity and religion in the study and this lack of participation troubled me, however I have endeavoured to account for the interaction of race with gender when it arises with the small number of children whose parents consented.

With regards to gaining consent from the children themselves, I took guidance from Flewitt (2005) and opted to employ 'provisional consent'. This approach is sensitive to the fact that claiming 'informed consent' with very young children is arguably impossible given their abilities to comprehend the potential consequences of their choice. I did inform the children of the purpose of my presence: when I first entered the nursery I was introduced to the class as someone who would be working with the teachers in the nursery, but wasn't a teacher. I also explained to the children that I was writing a book about Hillside Nursery and 'what it is like to be boys and girls'. A couple of children asked to read my book but I explained that not only had I not written it yet but that it was also to be a 'grown-up book' and they would probably find it very boring. From that point on I treated the children's consent as an ongoing concern, refreshing each child's consent (almost) every time I spent time with them. I established consent on a case-by-case basis using the following criteria: if a child asked me

to play with them then the free invitation acted as consent. If I approached a child or group of children who were already playing, I would always ask, "Can I play?" in the manner that children were accustomed to from their peers. In the vast majority of cases, the answer was always yes, though I was occasionally told (with varying degrees of sympathy or kindness) that I could not. In the latter case I always withdrew without any further questioning. When I simply wanted to talk to a child I would gauge their willingness to talk to me by the enthusiasm of their response; if it seemed like they didn't want to talk to me then I would leave them alone. Whilst this was a rather haphazard and subjective method of gaining consent, it gave me confidence that I was responding to the children's contextual needs and desires in a reflexive manner, conscious of my own intrusion into their lives. In actual fact I very rarely felt anything less than enthusiastically welcomed by the children, who were generally eager to play with and talk to me. Finally, whenever the children saw me writing in my notebook and asked me questions about it, I would remind them that I was writing a book about them in order to refresh their memory about the purpose of my presence in the nursery. After a few months, they remembered this information, stopped asking questions, and started issuing demands to write in my notebook (almost always granted except in the midst of the most crucial note-taking) and also to read my notebook (also granted but always an unsuccessful endeavour. It seems unlikely that a fully literate adult could possibly read the scribbles of my field notes, let alone a three year old who was yet to learn the alphabet).

Working with and around children whose parents had not consented posed a dilemma in research: although my research time in the nursery was limited I hoped that my presence would have a positive effect in terms of providing additional pastoral care and learning assistance. This meant that I spent a lot of time reading to and otherwise helping the children in activities which did not produce relevant data for the study. I did not want children whose parents had not consented to miss out on the additional support I could offer, however I knew that spending time with those children would often take me away from situations that I could be writing about. Ultimately the decision came down to a matter of conscience and I resolved to offer my time to the children indiscriminately. In reality, my time was not spent equally between those

participating and those who were not; this was inevitable as the process of being involved in situations where I was producing data led me to engage more personally with the children I was writing about. Though I did become friendly and familiar with a couple of the non-participating children, my involvement with them never reached the constancy of that which I enjoyed with many of those participating.

### **Home Visits**

By the time I started in the nursery, at the end of my first year of PhD study, I realised that research regarding early childhood beyond education and childcare facilities was comparatively sparse. I felt that lack keenly as I attempted to better understand and theorise gender in early childhood: for the most part, we know about gender and early years institutions, rather than holding any holistic knowledge about children's lives.

My supervisors and I had an ongoing discussion about how I could incorporate familial research into my study and we eventually decided that the most realistic solution was for me to visit the homes of a small number of children so that I could write ethnographically about that part of their lives. I was also keen to speak to their parents in order to understand the values and ethics which impacted the way they raised their children. I wanted to know their stories as well, because I knew this would complicate the history of each child's life, making generalisation or a 'tabula rasa' view of their characters difficult to sustain.

I had consent to research with approximately 20 children in the nursery<sup>21</sup> and aspiring to visit the homes of all my participants was clearly going to be unmanageable within the time and resource constraints of my study. I eventually decided to request home visits for just three children who were selected not only for the amounts of relevant data I had produced with them, but also due to how strong my relationships were with them, hoping that their parents would hold goodwill towards me and be predisposed to allow me into their homes.

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<sup>21</sup> This figure changed periodically throughout the year as the class population shifted

As I mention above, these home visits were very significant and challenging for me to undertake, and it pains me not to use the data I produced through them in this present analysis. This is particularly regrettable as it would have provided me with an opportunity to explore the intersectionality of class, ethnicity, and family relations with experiences of gender. Unfortunately, for reasons stated in chapter one, omitting it was the only practical choice. Nevertheless, I felt it appropriate here to briefly describe this aspect of data generation, critical as it was in the research journey. Instead, I look forward to writing about this data in future papers where I am able to attend fully to the features of this data and return to my early motivation to consider the intra-action of class, gender and ethnicity.

### **Access and Attendance in the Nursery**

In the meeting with the gatekeeper teacher described above, she explained that the nursery day was divided into two three hour sessions. As the nursery only provided care for the free 15 hours allotted by the government at this time, children could either attend the morning or the afternoon session, not both. Although children would occasionally switch sessions, normally the children would either attend all the afternoon, or all the morning sessions. This meant that the class numbers were relatively consistent, ranging between 22 and 27 during the school year (a couple of children left when their parents moved house, while others new to the area, or having just become old enough, arrived). The gatekeeper teacher asked which session I would like to attend and I explained that I was interested in researching with the most ethnically diverse group possible. She recommended the afternoon class for this purpose, also informing me that it was the class with more children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The afternoon session ran from 12.00pm to 3pm and included a snack time (a 20 minute slot when the children would sit down together at tables and eat a healthy snack) carpet time (where the children sat together on a particular carpet to engage in a class activity like singing, being read to, or watching a television show on the projector), and various types of group and individual assessment procedures, where children in a similar age group were taken aside to complete basic mathematical, literacy, or other assorted group tasks. In

between these times, the children would have free play time either in the classroom or in the adjacent playground (at certain permitted times only), and it was during free play time where I produced the vast majority of my data, which after the above sessions are deducted resulted in approximately two hours of data production each day.

I attended the nursery afternoon session for one year, starting in July 2011 and finishing in July 2012. Although I knew that almost an entirely new class would be starting in the September of 2011, after consultation with the teachers I decided to begin my field work before the end of the summer. From September I usually attended the nursery for between 3-5 afternoons per week and in total I spent approximately 150 hours in the nursery over that year.

In July I already knew that I wanted to collect semi-longitudinal data, staying with the same children for a full school year to observe the changes in their experiences over time. Therefore although I gained consent to research with the previous year's nursery class I made the decision to use that initial period to acclimatise to the environment and routine of the nursery, get to know the teachers, and learn more about working with children before I had to focus on data production. I found that time immensely valuable, as it meant I knew what to expect when I returned after the summer, and could concentrate more on developing my relationship with the children and producing field notes during the day. In addition to my time in the nursery, the three home visits I conducted that are not featured here took place in the spring-summer of 2012, each lasting approximately two hours.

## **Data Production**

I produced three key kinds of data during the fieldwork: field notes, a research diary, and audio transcriptions from semi-structured interviews.

In between playing with and talking to the children I scribbled field notes in various notebooks throughout the nursery day. When I got home after nursery, I would type these notes up on the computer into a research diary, adding as much detail as I could remember and any analytic notes that occurred to me as I did so. I would also use this time as a period of reflection to continuously develop my methodology, relationships with the children, and activity focus in the nursery. For example, I might notice that I hadn't produced data with a

particular child recently, and remind myself to seek them out over the next few days, or perhaps that a relationship between two particular children was interesting and I should pay particular attention to them when playing together. My research diary became the over-arching story of the research, and it forms the source for the ethnographic extracts included throughout this thesis. Where I have taken extracts from this research diary, they have been edited only for anonymity and grammatical purposes – I have not altered their content from the original version. I do not, however, claim that this has resulted in great accuracy in my recording of events – my field notes are biased, subjective creations of a frantically scribbling pen. The credibility I claim for them rests on my open statement of my political position on the matters I seek to explore within them, and my frank, reflexive account of my experiences as a researcher, writing myself within them as a visible presence

Additionally, during the home visits I conducted semi-structured interviews with children's mothers, producing approximately five hours of audio tape which I transcribed personally. I wrote no field notes during these visits, feeling that bringing out my notebook would be intrusive and a little rude. Instead I wrote detailed descriptions of each visit immediately afterwards, including my thoughts and reflections of it within the text.

### **Performance, Positioning, and Participant Observation**

When we talk about conducting ethnographic studies we are often referring to participant observation, the most commonly applied ethnographic method of data production which has been described as its 'core technique' (Emerson et al., 2007: 353). This immersion in the field allows greater familiarity and trust to develop between the researcher and participants, often enabling greater perspective into their lives through permission to observe experiences or hear stories and conversations which may otherwise have been shielded from the researcher

To a great extent, my method was typical of participant observation. I worked, played, and talked with the children. I endeavoured to act as 'adult

friend'<sup>22</sup>, never pretending to be a child and always being available to help with reading and working (I had a policy of never refusing one of my daily reading requests unless I was already engaged with another child). However, I would happily jump, run, and shout with the children in the classroom and the playground - sometimes breaking unknown rules which I was soon made aware of by teachers - and was primarily engaged in active play during my fieldwork. Although my approach was not to take 'the least adult' role, employed by Mandell (1988) or Davies (1982), I did approach the children on their own terms, asking before joining games (though I was usually invited if I was hanging around) and maintaining vigilant reflexivity in conversations, being careful not to push them on to topics which they did not seem willing to discuss. I did not intervene in disputes, even though I was often requested to by the children, and instead asked them to talk to one of the teachers if another child had upset them. The exception to this was when physical violence had, or was about to occur, and I was the only adult in the vicinity: at this point I would separate the children and call over a teacher to handle the problem. This was a responsibility I could not ignore: similarly to Gallagher (2008a), Fine and Sandstrom advise that "the [power] difference will remain and its elimination may be ethically inadvisable", for reasons of responsibility in research, and 'policing', the adult duty to ensure child safety, should not be ignored (1988:26).

There were ethical, methodological, and personal reasons for this approach. Ethically, I knew that my study could offer more than just data and analysis. I could also share my time, knowledge, and affection with my participants, some of whom were in desperate need of additional adult support. The teachers in Hillside Nursery were so overwhelmed with paperwork and other tasks that it was hard for them to spend extended periods of the time with individual children. This, coupled with the fact that they seemed to trust me to act as a teaching assistant and did not consider groups of children around me to need any other kind of supervision, meant that there was usually no other adult in the vicinity for children to ask for help or generally interact with.

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<sup>22</sup> I use this term cautiously due to the power differentials involved, however the degree to which my relationship with the children extended beyond research necessity makes it the most accurate term.

The time I took to read and talk to the children was time I was happy to give in the hope that I was enriching the lives of the children while producing the data which they inspired, but that was not the only way in which I intentionally intervened in their daily lives. There was also many times where I actively attempted to disrupt the gender stereotypes which arose in the children's talk and play. For example, I challenged the idea that blue was for boys, as one girl explained to me, by pointing out that both she and I were wearing blue at the time. There are methodological strengths and weaknesses to this approach: on the one hand, it could be critiqued on the grounds that I compromised the quality of my data through spending too much time personally engaging with the children. Indeed I often looked at the few short, messy paragraphs in my notebook at the end of the afternoon (which I would expand as I typed them up into my research diary) and wonder what I had missed as I spent 15 minutes reading a story or ten minutes sitting and hugging a crying child. Additionally, many might question my repeated questioning of gender stereotypes as they arose, wondering how I might be skewing the data produced. However it was very important to me in terms of my ethical approach that I afforded the children my time and attention. Part of this approach was an honest engagement with them, and as I would challenge stereotypes in 'real life' I did so during my fieldwork.

Note-taking in my field notebook was significantly complicated by my commitment to be personally involved with the children, as detailed above. Writing field notes was a practice that was significantly complicated by this positioning: participant observation relies on the continuous production of field notes to record events as they happen, to be processed with greater detail after the event. Finding the time and space to write with any legibility or level of detail within a nursery itself is an extremely difficult task, however as one of my weaknesses as an ethnographer is a terrible memory it was a priority of mine to get as much down on the page as possible during the two and a half hours I was present in the nursery day

During situations that were unfolding, I was often as engaged as the children in the scenario or conversation, making it impossible to withdraw and take notes without disappointing either myself or the children. On occasions where I would attempt to write without interacting with the children – purely as observer

– the children would constantly interrupt me, asking questions or trying to get me involved in games. I would try to explain gently but firmly that I was writing in my book (a concept they understood as important and linked to ‘big school’ and ‘work’) which would either have no effect whatsoever or would result in further questions which, while appreciating the seriousness of my work, were still counterproductive to it (‘Can I sit on your lap? I’ll be good’, ‘Can I watch?’, ‘Can I write as well?’, ‘What are you writing about?’ etc.). My genuine affection for them made it difficult for me to refuse them attention for long.

There is a trade-off made here between greater detail and clarity of ethnographic field notes or deep personal engagement with young participants; a dilemma which may not arise with adults or even older children to whom the researcher can explain that they just need a few minutes of time. In my situation, I felt that my personal engagement and connection with the children enhanced the quality of my data through their trust and openness with me, and the access they allowed me (usually actively desiring my presence rather than simply tolerating it) to quieter, intimate play. In this way, I could produce more rich and complex data about their emotions and experiences, giving strength and integrity to the analysis.

Ethically, my priorities and concerns centred around the trust the children held in me due to my friendly and approachable manner. Participant observation methods can be problematic for researchers as there is a risk, particularly with vulnerable participants, that this close relationship creates a reliance on the researcher as friend, confidant, or adviser; a relationship that in many cases will end suddenly in timescales determined solely by the researcher and the demands of their study. Stacey (1988) drew attention to these risks of “exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment” of participants in feminist ethnography which threaten to compromise the ethics underlying its application, questioning the right of researchers working within the tradition to assume it a shortcut to ethical practice. It is certainly not enough to sit on the laurels of political ideals; as Wheatley (1994a) argues in her (delayed) response to Stacey, simply calling ethnography ‘feminist’ does not erase or tackle fully all dilemmas raised by its practice. Indeed, the reflexivity offered by feminist ethnography provides support for researchers wishing to consider their own

place in these ethical quandaries and critique their own practice (see also Stacey, 1994 and Wheatley, 1994b).

I certainly found that this was a chronic issue for me working with such young children, many of whom were from difficult backgrounds who lacked stability at home and craved reliable adults to form connections with. To partially address it, I tried to frequently remind the children whenever we talked about the future or 'big school' that I would only be there in nursery. Sometimes they asked me questions about this (Where would I go? Would I still be in nursery?) however I never observed distress concerning the subject. No matter how close I was to some children, they seemed to accept the transience of school-related adults with equanimity. As the summer when I was to leave the nursery rolled on, I gradually began to withdraw from extended personal interactions with the children, whilst simultaneously making renewed efforts to aid some of the more reliant children grow in confidence (which they were, of course, doing without my help).

The children also had other emotional needs apart from affection and friendships: the matter of taking it upon myself to discipline children was often problematic. I decided early on a policy that I had used in the masters pilot study of only intervening in potentially fraught situations when a child was about to be physically injured, whether through accident or aggression from other children. However, similarly to Epstein's (1998) experiences, the children frequently wanted and, indeed, demanded my intervention in disputes and arguments, and I was often approached by a tearful red-faced child pleading for me to reclaim a toy or dressing up outfit for them, a consequence of my position as 'adult friend'.

In such instances, my first course of action was to search for the nearest available teacher and ask if they could sort out the problem so that I could avoid being an authority figure. This was not always possible, so inevitably I ended up playing this role (and in any case I have always found it hard to keep my mouth shut when injustice is done!)

### **Too Close?**

*7th October, 2011*

*I sit on the small sofa and Zadie comes over to sit on my lap. She seems a bit sad and I ask if she's okay. She smiles up at me, says yes and then, to my surprise, gives me an affectionate peck on the lips. She smiles again and then gets up to play with Maya. Whilst there was nothing strange about the kiss I immediately feel great concern about Zadie's apparent overstepping of the nursery boundaries. I know that Zadie has a very difficult home situation and she often comes to nursery seeming despondent. Apparently grateful for the attention from myself she has become very fond of me and very frequently wants hugs and to sit on my lap, so the affectionate kiss wasn't out of place in our personal relationship however it most clearly is in terms of my professionalism as a researcher and as, effectively, a nursery assistant. I immediately get up and go to speak to Mrs D about it. Explaining what happened, Mrs D seems a bit surprised but says not to worry about it and thanks me for telling her. The incident makes me feel sad and confused: I have come to feel very affectionate towards Zadie who is articulate, generous, funny, and full of character. I worry about what is going on at home as I know that social services are involved with her family.*

This extract from my research diary simultaneously illustrates the most delightful and most challenging elements of ethnographic research with young children. On the one hand, getting to know Zadie was an absolute pleasure, and she seemed to feel the same way about me. But on the other hand I constantly worried that she was too emotionally attached to me in a way that could be damaging when we were separated. I also felt a keen sense of terror the moment after she kissed me, knowing that she had just broken every rule about professional adult-child conduct and it had happened so fast that I had been unable to prevent it (and would it have been emotionally damaging for her if I had forcibly pulled away from her affection?), yet I still blamed myself for this for being too friendly with her. In the next extract, my emotional attachment to Zadie is writ large within my data:

*10<sup>th</sup> November, 2011*

*The class is called to the carpet and I go to sit on the floor with the children as usual. Zadie is desperate for me to sit by her but there are a lot of children in today and not much room. Daisy also likes to sit on my lap and I watch a struggle start between the two girls as they both try to squeeze into the tiny space next to me. In order to end the conflict I take the rare decision to sit on a chair like a teacher. The girls settle down after this but Zadie sits looking at me with a look of utter betrayal on her face. Her expression strikes me as peculiarly adult and it unsettles me. She looks so hurt that after a couple of minutes I relent and squeeze into the space just behind her. She turns and grins at me before grabbing my hand and holding it tightly in hers. Once again my emotions and thoughts about Zadie are troubled: I worry about her becoming too attached to me, while I also worry that I might be too attached to her.*

As I write these words it is over two years after the above incident and despite my abysmal memory I can still recall that sad look of betrayal on Zadie's face. The memory brings tears to my eyes, as Zadie left nursery abruptly just a few weeks later as her family were moved to a council house in a different area and my grief at this and the fact that I did not know beforehand to say goodbye is still present. The situation is a peculiar reversal of the usual expectations of ethnographic research, where the researcher's withdrawal may be troubling for the participant. Instead, it was Zadie's withdrawal before I was ready that deeply affected me and I can only hope that it was not as traumatic for her.

This emotional engagement not only affected the way that I related to children as I researched with them at the nursery and wrote about them in my fieldnotes, but was also to become a significant influence over my analytic process. In the next section I discuss this extension of my relationship with the children and its difficult conflict with the Baradian analysis I have enacted here.

## Thinking with Theory: A diffractive analysis of ethnographic data

*Reading insights through one another diffractively is about experimenting with different patterns of relationality, opening things up, turning them over and over again, to see how the patterns shift. This is... about the material intra-implication of putting “oneself” at risk, troubling “oneself,” one’s ideas, one’s dreams, all the different ways of touching and being in touch, and sensing the differences and entanglements from within.*

*(Kleinmann & Barad, 2012: 77)*

As I note above, my progression to postgraduate study was led primarily by theoretical interests. Having become fascinated by gender theory in the years following undergraduate study, I pursued the study of childhood as I felt that the social beginnings of gender differentiation had been under-addressed in the feminist and queer literature I had thus far read. Deeply immersed in performativity theory, I questioned how gender performance became part of our lives as children and, crucially, whether there was anything to be done in terms of helping children negotiate the demands of gender and sexuality which I remembered as being so trying in my own youth. I had no experience in working with children and I wasn’t even sure that I liked them (in actual fact, as the preceding discussion illustrates, I found that researching with young children would be one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had); therefore it could be said that my research began as an entirely theoretically-driven project.

Fuelled by social constructionist views, I diligently observed and wrote about the interactions between the children and the circulation of gender discourses in the nursery. However, as I discuss above, the process of data analysis was to turn my experience on its head: I couldn’t escape the feeling that some part of the story was eluding me, like shadows at the edge of vision which dissolve upon discovery, and I began to see the significance of material objects and intra-actions in my notes.

In this way, my data does not have theory imposed upon it, as it may originally have done so had I stuck rigidly to my social constructionist stance;

rather it led me to question if what I 'knew' about the world was true, and illuminated a new theoretical approach which was more faithful to the world as I experienced it. As I arranged the diary entries thematically and began imposing basic content coding I noticed that the human body was becoming a significant theme: its abilities, limitations, and interpretations were mingled with gendered and gendering processes. As I used the data to question what it meant to a boy to be physically unable to kick a ball straight, or wonder how girls' relationships to their bodies shifted and were negotiated when bedecked in princess dresses, it occurred to me that being rigidly adherent to the social aspects of the children's lives would leave my analysis considerably lacking. Thinking about human bodies led me to thinking about non-human bodies, and it was at this point that I turned to new materialist theory to help me explore these emerging themes.

Though I did not produce data within a new materialist mindset, I was ultimately to read it as such and this demanded a shifted ethnographic eye that sought out different features to those which I had thought critical to a poststructuralist ethnography. Primarily, where relations between people and discourse had previously been my predominant focus, working with new materialism entailed the exploration of "relations within assemblages" (Fox and Allred, 2014:4). Assemblages in data are formed of discursive and material bodies, which, when they meet, agentially enact possible becomings for those bodies, transforming them. This prompted me to identify the trajectories of material objects and the children's human bodies within my data, paying close attention to their part in producing gendering phenomena. It meant that while previously I had viewed such objects as my field notebook as incidental to the situations that I recorded, a dumb tool brought to life by my pen, suddenly it became a critical material body that I was not simply using to record data but was actually part of a data-producing assemblage that enacted relations between myself, the children, the teachers, and the other objects in the nursery. This assemblage produced me as an ethnographer, the children as research participants, and the nursery as a field of study. It could enact distance between myself and the children's bodies – a tangible barrier in which the notebook 'in use' was key – and it could bring us closer when it was ruptured and children took command of the notebook. In perceiving myself as part of this

'data production machine' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) within my data, the traditional privileging of the ethnographer as knowing and absent agential presence collapsed and I myself became much less powerful and, hence, more open to critique, prompting a constant self-awareness of my own actions and attentiveness within the field and later in the analysis stage. Relations of power had always been vital to me and foregrounded within my analysis, however reading my ethnographic notes with a new materialist eye produced new connections and circulations that incorporated objects as well as subjects.

I found the new demands made of me as a researcher by intra-active analysis difficult at times. Indeed I thoroughly experienced the 'troubling of oneself' that Barad describes above as I shifted my analytic process from a humanist to a posthumanist approach that conflicted not only with my prior theoretical engagements but also with the reality of my life as a researcher and beyond. My longitudinal engagement with the children at Hillside meant I saw them as much more than mere participants. Spending such a long period of time with the same children, particularly those whose homes I visited, and being so involved in their play and learning meant that they became known to me within my everyday life as rounded people who I cared about beyond their usefulness to me as a data source and my ethical duty of care towards them. This was troubling when attempting a Baradian analysis that demanded I restrain from interpreting the children as pre-existing humanist subjects, and from telling their stories and narratives in a representationalist sense, as, similarly to the experience of Larson and Phillips (2013) this restraint conflicted so roundly with the stories and narratives I had constructed around them in a personal sense. Ultimately it took many rewritings of my analysis for me to keep this instinct towards representationalism at bay and maintain a diffractive analysis.

*What is at issue is response-ability – the ability to respond. The range of possible responses that are invited, the kinds of responses that are disinvited or ruled out as fitting responses, are constrained and conditioned by the questions asked, where questions are not simply innocent queries, but particular practices of engagement.*

*(Kleinmann & Barad, 2012: 81)*

My research questions, which were revised upon my discovery of new materialism, are deliberately rather open to interpretation. I did not nail down clear expectations for my data analysis but instead proceeded in an exploratory fashion that I hoped would enable me to ‘respond’ to the data in an ongoing intra-active sense. As Barad describes in the above quote, the questions we ask of the world serve as configurings of it – its boundaries and exclusions constraining what may emerge. The singular interpretation that I can offer through this study is constraint enough on this data without hard-nosed questions of specificity determining what might become from it. My exploratory research questions were intended to, as much as is possible, open out the data’s possible becomings rather than set exclusionary boundaries around them, in an attempt to do justice to their emergent properties. That said, the very fact that I have set down *an interpretation* of events within these words creates such boundaries and my response-ability for these must be accounted for. As Barad articulates, “doing justice is a profound yearning, a *crucially important if inevitably unachievable activity*, an always already inadequate attempt to respond to the ethical cry of the world” (2012: 81. My italics). In the next section I discuss the act of data analysis and thesis writing as agential cuts, which speaks to feminist interrogations of the researcher-self within ethnography.

### **No Anchors: Agential Cuts and the Ethnographic Self in Writing**

*There are no anchors here, not in the sense of fixity. No fixed ground or place or even time, space, or matter. Rather, agential cuts are perhaps more akin to touchstones, as in something solid and tangible in their particularity, rather than anything as immobile/immobilizing as an anchor.*

*(Barad, 2012: 80)*

The writing up of research in any form, including this one, is the creation of an apparatus of observation that constructs the world in its mattering. In constructing this apparatus I have performed innumerable agential cuts over the past four years: my presence in the nursery, the writing of my fieldnotes and the subsequent production of my research diary, my reading and re-reading and note-taking and analytic drafts and more analytic drafts and formal writing and

revisions and here, to where you are presently reading these words. A Baradian agential-cut “enacts a local resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy” (Barad, 2003: 815); they materialise matter as a “dynamic articulation/configuration of the world” (2007: 151). This thesis materialises gender in early childhood as something ‘solid and tangible’ and, as I recorded in the previous chapter, I am accountable for this materialisation as part of the intra-activity (the looking-hearing-touching-feeling-writing-typing) that produces it. The reader, through engaging with this apparatus of observation, is subsequently accountable for the meanings taken from it, which will inevitably be rather (more or less) different from my own. Hence this lack of ‘fixity’ that Barad refers to above; this text-apparatus is a fluid materialisation with which you and I are entangled in intra-activity that produces ‘gender’.

### **Response-ability and the Ethnographic Self**

What are the methodological implications of this? I must account for my own presence within this apparatus, part of the research instrument which produces the configuration it materialises. If undertaken in good faith, this accounting for myself can offer an additional layer of integrity and depth to the research (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001; Skeggs, 2001). I have been honest about the trajectory of my own theoretical development and it should be clear by this point that I am personally committed to a liberation of heteronormative rigidity for both men and women, boys and girls. I have, in my personal and academic life, found binary gender and, indeed, binary sexuality as a straitjacket that I have seldom fitted comfortably and have never remained within the same configuration for long. I currently enjoy the privileges of a heteronormative family unit with a longstanding female-male romantic partnership, a baby son, and an unremarkable ‘femme’ appearance. Yet I strain away from identifying as female, straight, or mother - their fixity troubles me and denies the temporal matterings of my personal history where I was not those things. These tensions that I find in my personal relationship with gender are undoubtedly visible in this text as I simultaneously strive to find challenges to heteronormativity but also to understand the drive towards it that has become the reality of my life. This life of mine cuts with my research and materialises it in particular ways; through sharing some aspects of it I offer myself as responsible for those cuts, though

given my lack of distance from my own prejudices I am not best positioned to determine the exact nature of those materialisations. I shall leave that particular task to the critical reader.

### **Structuring the Thesis**

I am given to understand that the structuring of theses is a laborious task for any PhD researcher, yet I can scarcely imagine anyone's has been through as many iterations as my own. As I did not discover new materialism until the start of my third year I spent a considerable period of time attempting to cohere this new perspective with what I had already produced with a poststructuralist eye. This entailed countless failed organisations of thesis chapter topics and structures before abandoning all I had written before and beginning each chapter anew. Then, as I learnt more and more about Barad, I found that my early understandings were so paltry as to be useless, and so rewriting began again. Through these iterations, no structure seemed to accommodate the analysis I was producing; I was discontent with the onto-epistemological boundaries that this artificial separation of topics and subjects enforced by thesis-writing convention produced on my work and the materialisations of gender that resulted. From these struggles I have concluded that there is no entirely satisfactory way for this particular study to be organised as a thesis that enacts agential-realism not only in theory but in writing practice. Therefore the structure that you see before you is partial and only one agential-cut of many possible that are not necessarily better or worse and that I hope to further explore with this data in the future.

The analytic chapter structure as it currently stands sets each one an element of intra-active gendering entanglement to be focused on: space, non-human bodies, and human bodies. Interweaved and attended to throughout are the iterations of temporality produced through these intra-actions. I ultimately settled on this artificial division as I hoped it would produce the thesis as most practically applicable in 'real life' use – whether by parents or practitioners. Perhaps by separating these different elements points of intervention and change become more easily identifiable. In the spirit of this hoped-for application, chapter seven concludes with a partial-return to the humanist subject and attempts to bridge the gap of cognitive dissonance that will surely

emerge in the minds of those not accustomed to new materialist thought, as it has in me. Finally, in my concluding chapter I synthesise these chapters to bring space, non-human bodies, and human bodies together once again in entanglement to locate the findings of this exploration.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The restrictions of PhD study alongside practical problems and circumstance during the research resulted in a number of methodological limitations to the study which should be considered in relation to its interpretation.

One of the key strengths of ethnographic work – the ability of the researcher to become deeply familiar with a particular group of people, by its nature limits the number of participants one can research with. Due to a lack of universal consent and the general transience of the nursery class population, this study was produced with a core group of 17 children, alongside five teachers who sporadically featured in my notes and three mothers who I spoke to during the home visits. This small number of participants raises questions about how generalisable the data and analysis can be. Certainly in all ethnography wider representation and stratified sample participants are a necessary sacrifice for the deep level of knowledge gained of a particular small community of people.

Research that seeks to engage with a diffractive analysis by nature requires rich qualitative data that provides opportunity to account for the various elements within intra-activity, making ethnography an ideal methodological approach to accommodate it (Niemimaa, 2014). For agential-realist approaches it makes little sense to ask whether findings are 'generalisable'; rather we can ask whether they are *ethical* in their accountability and, hence, whether they are *valid*. This validity can be located in the exploration in real time (rather than through reminiscence) of a fieldwork setting and a meticulous recording through various mediums of events as experienced through the researcher-instrument. The immersion of ethnography is perhaps then the ideal method to practice ethical, accountable materialisations of phenomena. It is to this end that I am grateful that I spent such a long period of time with my participants, giving me multiple opportunities to write about events unfolding in the nursery rather than drawing conclusions from singular observations, which itself increases the reliability of my interpretations (Davies, 1998).

A further limitation that was enforced upon me through circumstance was the abandonment of collecting visual or audio data during the fieldwork (excluding the semi-structured interviews I conducted during the home visits). Having realised how useful such data could be during my pilot study I was keen to incorporate this method of data generation into this research, and obtained consent to do so from parents. Ultimately, the children featured here were not sufficiently verbal enough to interview in even the most informal way. I attempted it on a couple of occasions but collected nothing of value, and since the presence of the audio recorder was constraining to both my activities and my engagement with the children, who were hugely distracted by it whenever I got it out of my bag, I felt it was doing more harm than good. Of equal concern was the fact that I did not have consent to audio-record with all the children in the class, and as the children were so transient around the different areas, managing who was and who wasn't recorded would be a difficult task. However, this was when I was still working within a poststructuralist framework and felt that I needed *words* as audio data. Having become immersed in new materialist research I now regret not having been more creative with my attempts at audio data production as I feel my analysis could have benefited from it.

In relation to visual data the school set rigid restrictions around this data production for child protection reasons. If I wished to record children's activities – even those for whom I had consent – I had to use one of the school's video cameras and the footage would then belong to the school. Moreover, the children featuring in it would have to be separated out from the rest of the class to avoid any other children being recorded which would mean setting up an artificial play space and pressing the children into unexpected activities. This was not something that I wished to do, as I was keen to observe the children in their regular routines rather than set up quasi-experimental conditions. Therefore, I also had to omit this form of data production.

Finally, I regret the absence of the data from my home visits where I observed the children outside of nursery, both in their homes and in other parts of the local area, like the local playground. I hoped that this would enable me to become even more familiar with their lives and explore other gender related experiences, extending the horizons of the ethnography, however as I refer to in

chapter one, incorporating the analysis of this semi-structured interview and ethnographic data with the rest of the study would have been deeply problematic and must be saved for later writing.

# Chapter 5: Mapping the Nursery: The Spacetime mattering of Gender

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## Introduction

*. . . The pattern is torturing. You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.*  
(Charlotte Gilman, 'The Yellow Wall-Paper', 1892: 653)

In *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, Gilman's captive 'hysteric' is held in a monstrous room which simultaneously produces, shapes, and presses on her madness, and is materially rendered as madness itself by her scratching, clawing, and ripping of that 'unreliable' yellow paper, with its 'strangled heads and bulbous eyes'. Now commonly read as terrifying allegory for the patriarchal oppression of women's creativity and sexuality (see, for example, Feldstein, 1989; Golden, 1992; Kasmer, 1990), Gilman's short story also captures a productive relationship between subjectivity, the material body, and the substance of place and material objects. The room itself forms a body, not merely an extension of the subject's own, but a living, shifting mass, channelling (patriarchal) intent and purpose; initially at odds to the narrator's own. Her mental disturbance, identified as hysteria by her doctor (another branch of domination working on her body), confronts a torturous materiality which it both creates and is created by. The pair, woman and room, goad each other into iteratively deeper levels of insanity and the actual moments of that reciprocal shaping - the rippling of patterns and gnawing of bedposts - become mysterious and hidden, outside of the space-time experienced by the reader, and apparently that of the narrator herself who cannot distinguish between the material marks that she has inflicted and those which existed before she arrived.

Gilman's fictionalised account of our productive relationship with materiality dramatises our daily reciprocal shapings with places and spaces; encounters so frequent that their contribution to our individual subjectivity is often overlooked in the face of wider discursive formations. Barad's proposal of the 'mutual entailment' of entangled discourse and matter offers a way of comprehending these (re)configurings of both ourselves and our spatial, temporally emergent environments. Her work prompts a reading of *The Yellow Wall-Paper* which troubles the boundaries of the emergent hysteria in the narrator's account: the room is her madness; her madness is the room. Hysteria is performed through and within both bodies, their mutual entailment in its production forming a shared experience of the phenomena through which they are each marked and scarred.

In *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, the narrator and the room of her entrapment are produced as bounded subject and object through a particular entanglement producing a phenomena understood as 'hysteria'. A topological enfolding of this hysteria continues to escalate and expand the phenomenon, each agential cut (reassessments of the hysteria) finding the boundaries between the narrator-subject and room-object shifting to produce their decreasing clarity in the story as the hysteria increases in power. The situation comes to a climax when neither narrator or reader can distinguish the boundaries between the two, and the story ends as the intra-actions of this entanglement result in the (probable, but unconfirmed) murder of an intruder into their relationship: the narrator's husband. This final act punctuates the emergence of her hysteria and the story ends with the total dissolution of her subjectivity beyond her communal engagement with the room, as she ceaselessly retraces its contours.

*Events and things do not occupy particular positions in space and time; rather, space, time, and matter are iteratively produced and performed.*

*(Barad, 2007: 393)*

Instead of hysteria, here I am examining the reciprocal shaping of gender within some of the structures through which the children's bodies become entangled with other human and non-human bodies. Where Gilman's story becomes useful as a thinking point is in the temporal 'spacetime-mattering' of

madness that does not pre-exist the narrator and the room's relations but emerges agentially as a material-discursive structuring force for those relations. These relations produces boundaries of inclusion and exclusion through which hysteria is observed by three figures (the doctor, the narrator's husband, and Gilman as storyteller) in a series of agential cuts that identify it as a phenomena and locate the subject/object distinctions which themselves become increasingly elusive to the two key bodies of woman and room. Through the process of observing and writing this work enacts agential cuts on the nursery to identify the enactment of gender and delineate subject and object relations between material-discursive bodies. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, these relations are never fixed and continued to shift even as I hastily scribbled notes about what I had seen.

## **Chapter Structure**

Forms of gendering that (re)configured the nursery classroom emerged in relation to many different places and spaces that feature in the children's lives, and here I look at three examples: two demarcated areas of the classroom, the home corner and the 'small world', and a structure in the playground that creates its own micro-locality, the scramble wall. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of how I came to be interested in temporality within my data – notable as this interest sparked the shift of my theoretical framework to new materialism. I then go on to describe the home corner and small world in terms of their features and how they changed over time, including diagrams of the spaces to aid the reader. Here I think about tidiness/messiness, location and visibility, and toys, activity content/quantity and arrangements. Using data generated in each space I then explore how the temporal emergence of gender continuously took place through the intra-activity of these spaces in entanglement with human bodies. Time and its force (violence, even) in dragging us through our iterations as subjects is a key facet of my analysis here, as I try to capture the continual transitions of gendering intra-activity. I then turn to the scramble wall and think through the differential gendering subjectivations that are made possible through the climbing-sitting-hiding entanglements of human bodies with the structure. I conclude by thinking through how gender emerged in the spacetime-mattering of the nursery.

## **Material Change and the Emergence of Gender**

From the earliest stages of designing the methodology for this project I was insistent that I should attend the nursery over as long a period that could reasonably be managed within the constraints of my study. My original, discursively-rooted intent was to observe the changes in the subjective experiences of the children attending the nursery as they grew older in the nursery. However, the semi-longitudinal aspect of the project also allowed me the unexpected observation of the nursery itself, as material space and collection of objects, changing and adapting concurrently with its occupants.

These changes did not become apparent to me until late in my data collection period, when I was 'winding up' my time in the nursery and gradually stepping back from the lives of the children with whom my own had entwined. The process of distancing myself, both mentally and physically, from the children (for the protection of all concerned from the sudden jolt of my absence come September) enabled me to look with fresh eyes on the things that had become obscure to me, focused so closely as I was on the humanity performed around and within them.

The production of gender in the nursery was taking place not only through the individuals in the space, but also through that very space itself and the apparatuses contained within it. The room and playground were dynamic and changing, and contained innumerable prompts and demands for its occupants to produce gendered and sexualised selves, unstable in their temporality and interpretation. This productive capacity bears comparison with Walkerdine's analysis of developmental pedagogy in the classroom, where she argues, "the apparatuses of the pedagogy are no mere application but a site of production in their own right" (Walkerdine, 1984: 162). Classrooms are arranged and objects presented to their pupils according to Piaget's pedagogical theory; their 'successful' use is taken as evidence that children require these arrangements and objects because they are developmental subjects. However Walkerdine demonstrates that the combination of Piagetian teaching and surroundings produces, at least in part, the phenomena which they are thought to support. Therefore we must ask how other apparatuses in early childhood classrooms are producing the sexualised and gendered subjects whom they appear to

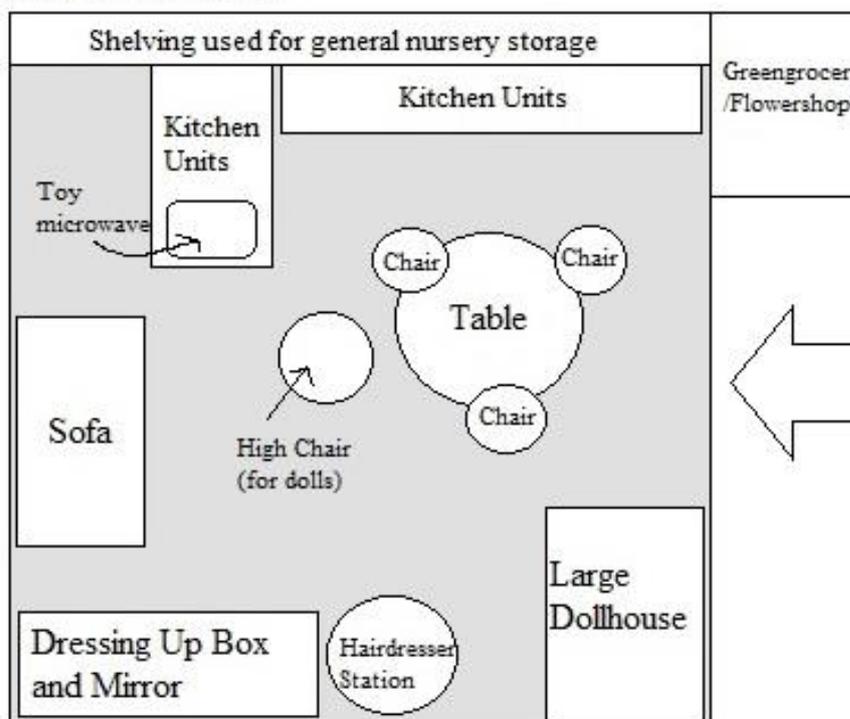
simply adapt to or accommodate. In the following I draw on notions of intra-active production to explore this question in relation to two specific sites in the classroom.

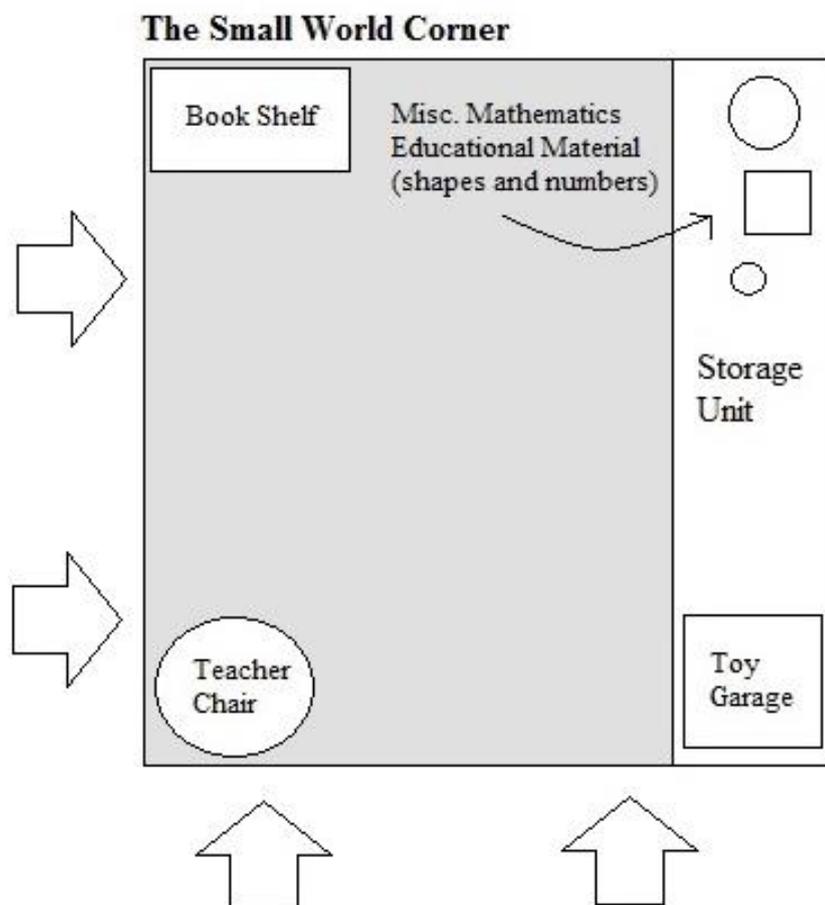
## Gendered/Gendering Spaces: The Home Corner and the Small World

In this section I describe the material features of two spaces in the nursery: the home corner and the small world and introduce the effects of temporality by sharing two sets of observations of these areas from my fieldnotes, set nine months apart. I then consider how gender emerged agentially through their material-discursive temporal (re)configurings; how their physical features entangled with the types of play which took place within and through the spaces. Finally I present several data extracts showing children's encounters with those spaces and analyse how gender is produced through the mutual-entailment of their intra-activity.

### Worlds Apart

#### The Home Corner





*Figure 2. The home corner and the small world floor plans. Note: arrows indicate the lines of sight available into the areas from the main classroom space.*

The home corner and the small world were two of the most-utilised areas in the classroom. At any point during free play time (which usually accounted for the majority of the nursery session) at least half of the class could generally be found in one of these areas. As is clear from figure 2, the two areas were significantly different in terms of their spatial and material features.

The home corner, as the name suggests, was themed around homemaking, caring, and dress-up play. Its contents and layout were broadly similar to the descriptions of such spaces around the world (see, for example, Taylor & Richardson, 2005): the space was filled with furniture and toys, and was always cluttered and usually messy, with dolls, cutlery, and dressing up outfits strewn around the floor and the surfaces covered in accoutrements. It was also used as a storage area for nursery books and toys that were not being used and there was a large, high shelf out of the children's reach dominating one wall above the kitchen units holding these items. Located in a secluded corner, with

three permanent walls enclosing it, visibility from the rest of the nursery was significantly limited and, indeed, the home corner was very rarely directly monitored by teachers.

On the other side of the classroom, the small world differed greatly from the home corner, not only in contents but in layout and visibility. A small shelf filled with storybooks was placed in one corner; a large 'teacher' chair was in the other (usually facing towards the small world) and was frequently occupied by a teacher monitoring the classroom activity and talking to children. The only other large object in the space was a long, low shelf on one wall which had curtains running underneath it to conceal a number of large storage boxes which contained giant Lego bricks, an assortment of Matchbox and plastic cars, a Brio train set with trains and a large selection of wooden blocks for building with. The shelf itself wasn't used for general storage but the toy garage was kept there when not in use, along with a small selection of foam numbers and a few other maths-related items. The expansive open space which this sparse furnishing provided was a stark contrast to the home corner's clutter. Unlike the seclusion of the home corner, the small world was highly visible in the classroom; teachers could observe children playing in it from anywhere. The uncluttered, sparse layout allowed games to spread out and take up space: whether it was the Brio train set with its track spiralling all around the carpet, the giant Lego bricks becoming towers higher than the children's heads, or the street map carpet being rolled out for the cars to race around.

### **Time and Change**

As I have explained, the initial realisation that I needed to further consider how spatiality, temporality and gender were related in the nursery came after my fieldwork was completed. It is not included in my fieldnotes, as its significance was not clear to me whilst I was gathering data, and it emerged to me through my observations of the home corner and the small world. Over the school year the home corner became perceptively 'messier'; more cluttered and overflowing than it had been when I entered the nursery. Faced with the impossibility of keeping this space tidy, both children and teachers gradually accepted a state of continuous chaos. It is not that things did not still have their 'places', more that those places became more visible as objects migrated from

hidden storage to public view. Clothes were not hung as neatly and often not at all, being simply shoved into corners by the dressing up box. Kitchen accessories that started out living in cupboards rested acceptably on surfaces overnight. Dolls were thrown haphazardly onto the sofa rather than lined up neatly in size order. The unmanageability of the space was established while the small world remained static, looking identical throughout the school year.

Meanwhile, other changes were occurring in these spaces. Extract one illustrates how use of the two contrasting spaces changed throughout the year (with the stereotypically masculine toys listed being located in the small world, except for the dinosaurs and insects which were nearby, and the stereotypically feminine in the home corner).

*29<sup>th</sup> September, 2011*

*So far I am unable to determine any gender preference for the nursery toys, though it must be mentioned that many of the toys in the nursery are gender neutral. Stereotypically masculine toys include the cars, trains, garage, and the plastic dinosaurs and insects. Stereotypically feminine toys include princess dresses, two dollhouses, and the home corner and its contents. There seems to be no gender divide over use of the gendered toys in the nursery despite their common stereotyped gender associations.*

*(Nine months later...)*

*9<sup>th</sup> July, 2012*

*As I enter the nursery today I head straight over to the small world where about a dozen boys are playing with fire engines and using the giant Lego bricks to make fire stations. There are no girls here at all, and the contrast strikes me to when I first entered the nursery a year ago and there was no gender division in the home corner or small world areas. I stay with the boys for a moment as every older boy in the nursery is present there, and as I do so, a few girls, including Daisy and Clare come over to greet me. Once the girls are in the small world they take a brief interest in the building, however their*

*interest doesn't last and they don't participate in the fire station narrative that the boys are all working within. They soon dissipate but the boys all remain present and focused. Meanwhile the girls are engaged in an assortment of activities including drawing and the sandpit, however most girls are in the home corner, playing with the kitchen things and dolls.*

As the children aged and became familiar with the objects and space of the nursery, their use of its materials changed. They became more interested in, and reliant upon narratives embedded in discourse which carried implicit and explicit gendered uses of materials. These narratives acted not only as structuring elements to incorporate into play, but also as knowledge-base 'entry requirements' to enable them to play cooperatively with related play materials. For example, in extract one, knowledge of and interest in narratives of rescue, heroism, danger and peril were required in order for the children to co-construct an overarching narrative relating to fire-fighters, their vehicles, and their stations. The girls lacked either knowledge of or interest in that narrative and thus were excluded from playing with the boys or generally in the small world which the narrative is dominating, despite no direct social exclusion being apparent to me. Similarly, though not to the same degree, the boys increasingly found the home corner play narratives about families either boring or inaccessible. Their exclusion from the home corner was not as extreme as the girls from the small world; boys continued to engage in co-constructing home corner narratives but over the year most gradually withdrew from it except in cases where an area was repurposed to support their own narratives (in one instance of this, two boys turned a toy microwave into a television and pretended to play video games on it).

The increasing disorder of the home corner, in contrast to the static small world, was related to how the children occupied those spaces, and, tantamount to this, the toys associated with stereotyped gender play were increasingly popular with correspondingly gendered children. This meant that children were experiencing the classroom differently depending on their gender subjectivations and gender was emerging in distinct ways within those spaces. This led me to question: what is the nature of the relationship between the home corner and the small world as material apparatuses and the increasing

gender division in their use, and how are the intra-actions occurring through these spaces gendering and/or gendered? I discuss these questions below by using a number of material features in turn as points of departure.

### **Tidyness/Messiness**

The arrangement of 'things' was an integral element of the home corner, partly due to the sheer number of items in the corner: there was not enough hidden storage to contain them. Much had to be left on display and, therefore, neatly arranged. However a further effect of this was that there was an implicit need for the home corner to look neat and attractive, as everything had to be arranged in a certain way for it to be acceptably 'tidied'. If it was not, the children were scolded and made to complete the task 'properly'. When the children tidied up at the end of the day (with varied and unpredictable success) it was very difficult for them to get the home corner neatly arranged due to the plethora of objects crammed into the small space. Some days a teacher would help the children to tidy it, expressing a despairing desire that they might finally 'sort out' its sprawling mass. Some days they did not, and the space remained jumbled and cluttered until the next nursery session.

The small world was rigorously tidied at the end of the day so that no clutter would be left in sight – all objects that might be out during the day had a dedicated storage box and as long as each set of toys were divided between the boxes under the shelving unit, no further arrangement of them was required. Cars, trains, blocks and track were all tossed haphazardly into the crates and pushed out of sight, and the job was done. It was important for the small world to be kept tidy as at the end of the day it was used for some of the children to sit on while they were waiting to be picked up. This gave the small world a utilitarian feel, defined by its clear, empty carpet and practical hidden storage.

Literature on the inclination towards tidyness/messiness in young children suggests that expectations from adults for neatness and cleanliness in girls is higher than in boys (Chick et al., 2002). While this might be seen as contradicting the gradually increasing messiness of the girl-dominated home corner, there was an ease and simplicity of tidying in the small world created by the organised availability of the hidden storage boxes when compared to the lengthy arrangements of dolls and careful hanging of clothes in the home

corner. This enabled those playing in the small world (increasingly boys) to spend less time tidying up compared to those playing in the home corner (increasingly girls). This produced an extra burden on girls to spend more time tidying up as the school year went on.

### **Location and Visibility**

The location of each area befits their theme; the small world was effectively a public space. It was visible from most areas of the classroom and also had a permanent 'monitoring' station: the teacher's chair. This chair was not always occupied but when it was it rendered the small world open to even more intense scrutiny. When a teacher sat in the chair the classroom noise was frequently punctuated by scoldings and directive remarks (though a teacher's presence also made them available for cuddles and stories when requested). Furthermore the small world was located right next to the small staff room/kitchenette; this meant that teachers were almost always nearby. Its lack of furniture created a spacious open area which enhanced this visibility – there was nothing to hide behind. Finally, the public nature of the small world was assured by its additional functional use as a 'home time carpet', where the younger children sat to wait for their parents. As boys increasingly used this space more than girls, this additional potential for regulation speaks to discourses of young boys being more boisterous in their play, 'behaving badly', and generally requiring heavier monitoring than girls in early years classrooms (Brophy, 1995; Connell, 1996; Goodenough, 1987<sup>23</sup>)

In contrast the home corner was distinguished by its relative privacy; visible only from one side (the right-hand opening illustrated by the arrow in fig.2) it could not be monitored from half of the classroom and there were no teacher stations nearby. The variety of furniture contained within it further hindered visibility and permitted secrecy and shelter from both teachers and other children. Its only non-play use was as a long-term storage facility for items that

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<sup>23</sup> NB. The research by Goodenough (1987) is problematic in that it makes a number of 'commonsense' generalisations about gender and behaviour. It is included here regardless as such generalisations remain present in perceptions of young boys in schooling.

were not in regular use, the high shelves (out of reach from the children but within their view) full of books and toys further cluttering the space.

The different locations and monitoring potential of the two spaces seemed to prompt contrasting styles of play from their occupants. There are obvious parallels here between the properties of these spaces and their 'real world' counterparts (public, visible, 'worldly' space and private, personal home environments). The enclave of the home corner ensured that one was much less likely to be disturbed by other children or regulated by teachers than in other areas of the classroom. Its material layout and positioning protected long, complex imagination play where groups of children could cluster out of sight and earshot from the rest of the classroom. These properties also enabled it to be used as an effective withdrawal space by individual children (Skånfors et al., 2009). However the small world area enabled occupants to be constantly monitored; playing in this area meant accepting this surveillance. It also suggested that those who wished to play in the area needed to be monitored, the implication being that play in the small world is likely to be more disruptive and/or potentially violent than that in the home corner. As I discuss below, one connotation of this was that violent intra-actions tended to occur more in the home corner, echoing the commonality of domestic violence in the home that occurs in the 'real world' (ONS, 2014).

A further repercussion of the small world's public nature was that activities conducted in the space could be watched and celebrated. On one particular occasion I helped a small group of boys and girls build a very tall tower out of the Lego bricks; this activity attracted a great deal of attention from the rest of the classroom, until eventually over half the class and three teachers were watching us add the final bricks, congratulating us on our achievement. Activities and achievements in visible spaces were necessarily acknowledged by greater numbers of people than those undertaken in private space. As increasing numbers of boys used the small world and the girls migrated to the home corner, boys' activities and their achievements became more prominent in the classroom, while girls' play gradually became less visible and, therefore, less acknowledged and praised unless they deliberately sought this out.

### **Toy/Activity Content/ Quantity and Arrangement of Objects in Play**

The aforementioned Lego brick tower displayed a common physical feature of the toys available in the small world corner: construction. The bricks, the train track, the carpet that was rolled out to accommodate cars and fire engines, all these toys prompt their users to construct and build, to connect elements and create structures which could become 'bigger and better'. Returning to the above extract, the boys were both co-operating and competing with each other to build bigger and better fire stations, with superiority designated by complexity and size. There is an inherent achievement narrative made available by the physical design of these products and the children did not necessarily need to engage with gendered narratives to explore this achievement play. Yet, increasingly, they did (and here the effects of discourse must be considered) and it is impossible to ignore the heavy marketing direction towards gender use of toys when thinking about this division (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Kline, 1993; Johnson & Young, 2002) and the relative cultural accessibility of potential narratives involving heroism and/or physical capability (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Leaper et al., 2002; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Ruble et al., 1981). Over the year the boys became more familiar with potential narratives that could frame their play with these objects, and drew on knowledge gained from cultural and social sources to co-construct complex storylines to frame their fire engine or car play. In contrast, the girls increasingly did not engage with these storylines in the small world, either collectively or individually, and this meant that toys which offered this prominent mode of achievement-based play became inaccessible to them. The material possibility of construction therefore became both gendered and gendering.

In the home corner, the material toys and activities offered a very different way to play. There were no play objects where their material structures offered constructive possibilities. Rather its contents suggested intimate 'role play' narratives where children could occupy carer, provider, or romance positions. Where in the small world the disruption of large organised constructions caused a great deal of anger and distress and cooperation was common to ensure that those constructions were protected, the home corner could comfortably host multiple play narratives overlapping (Trawick-Smith, 1998). Arguments in the home corner erupted over the possession of particular objects, not over the

damaging or changing of structures as in the small world. As the girls increasingly played in the home corner, their play necessitated adapting to this intimate, private, role-play based games which the material objects not only enabled but prompted. Much research discusses the predilection of young girls for role-play, often arguing that girls are either socialised into a preference for such play or are naturally inclined towards nurturing and caring play (Browne, 2004; Rogers & Evans. 2007), however little investigation has been performed into how arrangements of classrooms may engage with producing such gendering distinctions.

I found the sofa in the home corner to be a place often utilised by the quieter, more socially withdrawn children. The following extract shows a typical use of the sofa by Ethan, one of the quietest boys in the nursery's older cohort.

*23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2011*

*Ethan is lying on the sofa in the home corner and Megan is sitting next to him on the floor. Thomas approaches them with the crocodile puppet that the children often use to scare/attack other children in monster games. Usually an enthusiastic participant in such games, this time Megan pushes Thomas away saying that Ethan is sick and is waiting for the doctor. Over the next ten minutes many children move in and around the home corner pursuing various activities, but Ethan remains on the sofa the whole time, passive, silent and smiling.*

The presence of a comfortable sofa in a space prompts rest, relaxation, and stillness. Its provision in the home corner showed that as well as existing as a play area, the home corner was a space which one could enter to enjoy these particular states (it was the only sofa in the classroom). In this extract we see Thomas attempting to breach Ethan's intended use of the sofa, but Megan enforces and protects its passivity and restfulness. Tucked away in the depths of the home corner, positioned (almost) as far from visibility as was possible, the sofa's soft, comfortable cushions and low seats offered withdrawal to the children who used it. Its presence offered the intimate sphere of the home corner safety and quiet comfort, and also suggested that those playing the home corner (increasingly girls) would have need of a place to be quiet and still.

This speaks to perceptions that girls tend to be quieter within classroom spaces (Gallas, 1998; Collins & Johnston-Wilder, 2005).

The observations and literature reviewed above suggest that the spatial arrangements and material-discursive characteristics of the home corner and small world were actively engaged in gendering intra-activity with the embodied subjectivities that inhabited the space. In the next section I share some data produced in these areas to explore how their material-discursive (re)configurings during children's play enacted gender.

### **Building Work and Silly Things: Gendering in the Small World**

*28<sup>th</sup> March, 2012*

*Jack, George, Ethan and Adam are all building together with the giant Lego bricks. Sally tries to join in but Jack gives her a few bricks and tells her to go and build in the corner. I ask him why she can't build with them and he says it's because she won't build it right (though I wonder if the real reason is that they are a group of boys and a single girl would seem intrusive – if this is the reason then I doubt that Jack is conscious of it). Jack is in charge of the building project and directs the other boys, telling them off when he thinks they aren't building correctly. Once the tower has got quite high, Daisy, without asking, grabs a doll and puts it on top of the tower. Ethan looks up for a moment, then stops building and grabs a doll himself, perching it on top to join Daisy's and then they start making the dolls walk around on the tower. Jack stands up to protest, "Everyone stop! Stop doing silly things! This is writing table so stop, ok? Ok? I said, ok?" Jack then has a bit of a tantrum and tells everyone to clear off his tower, then he and George start drawing on top of it with paper and pencils from the real drawing table.*

This extract is taken from late in the school year when the increasing gender division in the use of spaces in the classroom was at its peak. Though Jack often acted as the leader in groups of children, his behaviour here is unusually

exclusionary when he sends Sally away to the corner as he tends to be considerate and generous with others. Sally was generally quiet and her passive acceptance of Jack's decision is characteristic, as is the irreverent reappropriation of the tower by Daisy, a younger girl with blithe disregard for the demands of other children and a sense of absurd humour. Her intervention in Jack's autocratic building site inspires Ethan to rebel as well, a surprising turn of events as he is similar in character to Sally and is normally acquiescent to the authority of other boys.

A purely discursive analysis of this extract could propose that Jack is drawing on his masculine social privilege to dominate the group and assert control over play. He is one of the most popular children at the nursery, a position which affords him this power and, given that the other socially desirable are also those who perform heteronormative gender most consistently, seems indelibly linked to his coherent masculinity. Daisy's intervention could be read as a creative attempt to redefine the gender boundaries which Jack has set-up, a strategy which is successful as Ethan decides to 'switch sides' and join Daisy's game. Jack's anger and characterisation of the game as 'silly' asserts this insertion of the feminine as trivial and inappropriate, and he and George seek to gain back control of their game by spreading out their writing materials: an activity which represents serious work.

A reading which considers spatiality along with these competing discourses has much to add to the above analysis. The visibility of the small world space and its accessibility to the rest of the classroom produces that same visibility for activities taking place in it, and the rules of the nursery restrict the removal of the Lego bricks from the small world. Therefore, if Jack and his playmates wish to use the Lego bricks, that play is somewhat vulnerable to intrusion, as Sally and Daisy demonstrate. Daisy's doll does not just carry discursive weight; its position as she dances it on top of the tower is preventing the boys from building any higher. As the leader of the group Jack attempts to shield their activity from this intrusion and counteract the visibility of the space; in order to accomplish this he draws on his social status and the power it affords him. Therefore it is the public visibility and accessibility of the agential space that prompts Jack to assert domination over other children if the game is to be 'successful' according to his plans. Such intrusion is much less likely to occur in

the home corner where the privacy of activities is supported by the secluded space.

An intra-active analysis can locate the phenomena of heteronormative masculinity as being an effect of the discursive knowledge and agency of Jack, Daisy and Sally, apprehending the material qualities of the play space. Building the tower in this space produces visibility and, therefore, vulnerability, as well as the possibility for achievement recognition that occurs in the small world. Where the production of masculinity here could have been read as a purely discursive phenomenon, agential-realist theory presents the phenomenon as occurring subjectively and materially through the spatiality of the small world. This phenomenon not only produces Jack as a boundaried, masculine subject but also produces the small world as a boundaried, masculine space and produces knowledge about gender itself in the process through an agential cut which can be represented by my field note observations.

### **The Teapot Rebellion: Gendering in the Home Corner**

*29<sup>th</sup> February, 2012*

*After carpet time I hear a commotion in the home corner and go over to investigate. The first children I encounter are Jack and Ethan, who are dressed up in the wolf and lion costumes respectively, growling and roaring with hands raised up like claws. The units of the home corner have been lined up a short distance from the back wall and behind these, the targets of the boys' performance, are Maya, Daisy, Caitlin and Chloe, crouching, peering over the top at Jack and Ethan, laughing and shouting hysterically. The boys stalk around the units, coming closer and closer, while the girls become increasingly hysterical until eventually they begin to fight back. The sofa sits near to where they are hiding and is filled with baby-dolls which the girls start to throw at Jack and Ethan like missiles: a funny sight! The Daisy starts grabbing the nearby plastic kitchenware and utensils, hurling first some cutlery and then a cup. She finds a red teapot and, emboldened by her new weapon, moves to the front of the group to threaten the boys*

*away, brandishing the teapot fiercely. Jack and Ethan do indeed back away in mock fear but Daisy, perhaps overwhelmed by her success, soon throws the teapot at them and her weapon is lost. Caitlin, following Daisy's plan, grabs a wooden spatula and replaces Daisy at the front of the group, while Maya continues to throw dolls and Chloe puts her hands to her face, screaming in terror and laughing with delight in equal measures. Just as potential weapons are running low, and the boys are closer than ever to the group, still growling intently and reaching out to scam the girls, a teacher shouts across the classroom, irritated by the loud noise emanating from the home corner, and the chastened children disperse as another teacher announces it is time to go outside to play.*

In contrast to the small world, the home corner does offer privacy and seclusion; however due to these very qualities it also repeatedly became a locus of violence in the nursery. This extract presents one of many examples where fighting and other physically aggressive intra-actions occurred in the space. The game is a continuation of the 'monster' narrative which informed much of the children's physically active play, including chasing, capturing, and wrestling. It was rare for girls to be the monster in such games (though Megan sometimes took on the role) and these games were usually instigated by one of several boys who would start roaring at groups of other children and bring their hands up to their shoulders to act as claws. This action was rarely ignored and the children (along with others who had recognised the start of the game and wished to take part) would run screaming and laughing, searching for somewhere to hide. The 'victims' of the monster tended to be mostly female, although at least one or two boys would often be included as well. The introduction of the animal costumes featured in this extract was relatively recent and their presence had reinvigorated the monster game by offering the chance to further develop the characters.

The unregulated flexibility of the space in this extract produces the home corner as both refuge and battlefield, while its homely contents transition from intimate play objects to defensive weapons. As they do so, the girls hiding behind the units turn from victims to resistance fighters and gain power through

the reappropriation possibilities of the space and objects. Intra-active analysis offers a way to navigate these changes and examine how passive and active femininities are produced by the girls in the space.

The employment of the wolf and lion costumes by Jack and Ethan creates the monsters more aggressively and threatening than mere motions and noises might have managed: the sharp (felt) teeth and vicious eyes help to project the fearsomeness they desire. Though the girls initially flee to the units in order to protect themselves against the boys, when three of the girls realise the potential of the space and objects surrounding them the units quickly become a fortress which they actively defend. Though Chloe continues to position herself as a helpless victim, the others take active measures to protect themselves. The disarray of clutter in the home corner enables this defence; the dolls and utensils are materially substantial but lightweight and are unlikely to cause injury and these qualities combined with their proximity provide the girls with suitable ammunition to resist their victimhood and ward off the monstrous boys, Jack and Ethan.

The layout and positioning of the home corner space is a significant factor in enabling this scenario to play out. The enclave it provides not only offers protection of the girls from the boys but also protects the entire group from teacher intervention. Thus the game escalates into a violence that would normally be quashed by teacher regulation. If this escalation had not occurred the game would likely have been regulated or stopped before the girls were able to alter their subject position, leaving the boys triumphant and the threat of their terrorising remaining an undercurrent with which they might continue to threaten other children. Thus the game progresses to the point where the girls are matched equally with the boys and are able to challenge the passive status initially afforded to them.

The ability of the home corner to act as a flexible space is key to this episode, which, even if teacher regulation was not an issue, could never have taken place in the small world. The latter has no fortress to defend and its contents are too heavy to use as safe missiles (neither party made any move to actually hurt the other). Its increased visibility would have drawn the attention of other children, perhaps making the game too expansive and unwieldy to progress in the manner it did. Therefore the home corner is unique in providing

space for violent play to develop in this instance, and this violence emerges as much from the space as it does the subjects within it.

In the next section I introduce a flexible structure in the playground that acted as both object (to play *with*) and space (to play *through*) for the children: the scramble wall. The data I produced featuring the scramble wall shows it as actively entangled with child bodies and non-human bodies (tools) in the intra-active enactment of gender.

## **The Scramble Wall: Challenge and Sanctuary in the Playground**

*Children's cultural practices are made and remade in the borderlands which playgrounds constitute... issues of identity are [brought] to the fore; gender, 'race', ethnicity, language, sexuality and physical ability are all germane to the process of creating a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) in which children construct cultural practices.*

*(Marsh and Richards, 2013: 12)*

The changing nature of some objects and places in the nursery, and the relationship of discursive narratives to their existence and use became apparent to me as I stood watching a group of children play on the scramble wall in the playground in February, eight months after I had first entered the nursery:

*23<sup>rd</sup> February, 2012*

*As I watch the children I realise that in the nursery class the girls are far more interested in this activity than the boys. However, when the reception class comes out to play in the same playground, the boys are more interested than the girls (though mixed-sex groups are still common). Nursery boys using the scramble wall will tend to be engaged in a narrative about their play and are using it to be builders or firemen, often declaring that they are engaged in a 'rescue' or hammering at the climbing bolts with hammers to 'fix' it, however narratives concerning the scramble wall are rare for the girls who play on it most of the time. Is this because the object provides a challenging physical activity and achievement for the girls that*

*does not require knowledge or use of masculinised narratives (unlike, for example, using tools to be builders or playing football)? I also notice that the girls climbing the scramble wall when I am watching will usually draw my attention to their achievement and want me to come and pay attention to them while they do it, whereas a boy has never done this as far as I recall. Is this because they rarely experience praise for their physical prowess? The girls will also frequently ask for help in climbing the scramble wall – even if they have climbed it successfully countless times before and are confident in their ability – and I have never been asked for this by a boy. Are they accustomed to adults offering to help them in physically demanding situations, whereas boys are used to being expected to be successful on their own? I try and counter this by encouraging the girls who ask me to help to do it on their own, reminding them that they have done it many times before and that they are very good at it. This approach is almost always unsuccessful and the girls will repeatedly ask until I relent and hold their foot for them or help them reach a climbing peg.*

After noting these observations and questions in my research diary I kept a closer eye on the scramble wall and its users, not only those from the nursery but also the reception class children (aged four and five) whenever they were playing outside at the same time, which happened once or twice a week. I noted that the main users of the scramble wall were, consistently, younger girls and older boys. The older boys didn't draw on narratives to inform their play like the younger boys; instead they favoured contests of climbing skill and speed, sitting at the top and crowing at others attempting to reach them. Additionally, it was more common to see younger boys using it than older girls. Though I became quite familiar with some of the reception class children, they never called for my attention to their achievement unlike the younger girls.



*Figure 3.  
A scramble wall  
similar to the one  
at Hillside, which  
had two wooden  
walls and a den  
with benches  
underneath.  
(Height ≠ 5ft)*

### **Girls, Boys, and Exercise Play**

In their extensive review of available literature on the subject, Pellegrini and Smith (1998) describe three categories of physical play in the early years: rhythmic stereotypies, common in infancy; exercise play, most prominent in the preschool years; and 'rough and tumble' (R&T) play, which increases throughout preschool and peaks during primary school. The scramble wall invites exercise and R&T play but in the nursery and reception classes it is used only for the former; this fits the data reviewed by Pellegrini and Smith who find that exercise play is more common than the physical fighting and wrestling of R&T in this age group. The data they review suggests that boys engage more in exercise play than girls, but they also caution that the majority of studies conflate exercise and R&T play: the latter category is dominated by male participants and Pellegrini and Smith warn that this is probably skewing the results they examine. However, despite this common methodological flaw in relevant research studies their review suggests that my observations of the female-dominated scramble wall are unusual.

Despite having no conscious preconceptions about the scramble wall as a gendered or gendering object, when reviewing the above notes after nursery that day I became concerned that perhaps the very fact that girls would try to draw my attention to their climbing made it seem to me that they used it more frequently than was actually the case. If this concern was founded, the attention-seeking was still a matter of note, but I knew I had to be cautious and took care to observe the scramble wall from a distance whenever I was

unengaged in the playground, yet over time the female bias in my observations remained consistent. I was also somewhat reassured by Eaton and Enns (1986) who found that researcher gender had no significant effect on findings when observing physical exertion in childhood play.

### **Intra-active Gendering and the Scramble Wall**

If, as previous research suggests, the nursery girls' greater use of the scramble wall was unusual, and that the narrative-free manner of their play contrasted with that of the nursery boys, what dynamics of intra-activity lie behind these observations? What was the nature of the relationship between the scramble wall as a material apparatus and the narratives which were constructed around it? How were the entangled configurations featuring the scramble wall gendered and/or gendering?

I begin, again, with the material properties of the object: the very structure and presence of the wall offers a challenge, both mental and physical. Apprehending it in situ, the scramble wall's structure entangled with notions of bravery and ability: "Do you have the courage to climb me?"; "Do you have the strength and agility to overcome me?" It was hierarchical in nature, not only in the most literal, structural sense but also in the fact that only three small children maximum could sit safely atop the peak, forcing other children who wished to sit there to either wait patiently or complain at the incumbents. There was also a danger implicit in its positioning over a cushioning mat, the presence of which suggested the danger of falling through incompetency or inexperience. It offered the opportunity to exert physical strength and gain a recognisable physical achievement, and encouraged 'daredevil' behaviours due to its difficulty and implied peril. While these demands were taken up by older boys enthusiastic to meet them, the greater use of the scramble wall by younger girls implies a conflict between gendering narratives that produce boy bodies as more active and physically capable and the desires of young girls to exert these properties with their own bodies. In the next section I consider how the differential access to and deployment of discursive narratives by younger boys and girls suggests how the girls were able to become entangled with the scramble wall in ways that subverted stereotyped gender expectations on

physical activity, and enabled them to relish the physical challenge of the scramble wall more than the boys of the nursery class.

### **Gendering Playground-Based Activity**

There is nothing inherently gendered about hula-hooping or skipping rope however a wealth of cultural narratives including literature, television programmes, and the design and marketing of these products produce these activities as feminine, intended for use by feminine subjects, and these narratives are visible in girls' apparent preference for these activities (Blatchford et al., 2003). This practically, if not technically, excludes boys, who potentially face ridicule or exclusion by their peers if they attempt to play with these objects (Fagot, 1977a). Similarly to slides and roundabouts, the scramble wall in its design prompts physical activity without discursive contextualisation: these objects have not assumed the same gendered significance in UK culture. The absence of obvious cultural gendering makes the scramble wall accessible to children of either gender, as no other child (or adult) is likely to point and laugh as one traverses the bolts. Nevertheless, the outside walls primarily offer opportunity to extend and test attributes and ability traditionally valued for the masculine subject over the feminine: strength, speed, agility, courage, competition and power.

For younger boys the scramble wall's size and solid features offer the opportunity to expand and develop play narratives like 'fire-fighters' or 'builders'. Often, though not always, when younger boys climbed or otherwise played with the scramble wall they were engaged with narratives such as these; boys climbing the wall might declare that they were 'rescuing' someone, or, as in extract four, boys would draw on the wall's features to enhance co-constructed material-discursive play.

*19<sup>th</sup> October, 2011*

*George and Jack are running around in the playground holding the toy carpenter tools and a toy green traffic cone. They use the plastic hammer and drill to 'work on' the scramble wall bolts and the roof of the Wendy house. They tell me they are builders as they march past me purposefully. I ask if I can be a builder as well and Jack says 'no, you're too big'. I then ask if*

*girls are allowed to be builders and he replies 'no, only big boys'. I ask 'what if a girl is big and she wants to build?' and he says again that it is only big boys who are builders. I press on: 'what if she wants to?' but he has no new answer.*

In contrast to this, while the girls would occasionally climb the wall to 'escape from a monster', on the whole they would just climb without creating contextualising narratives. Their activity was focused solely on achievement: reaching the top of the wall. When they did so, they would sit happily for a few moments, sometimes advising other children who were attempting the climb, before deciding to climb down and pursue another activity they had observed from the high peak.

Whilst the boys found it appealing to construct narratives which included the scramble wall, these narratives were not necessary in order for children to enjoy tackling the challenge presented by the object, and it is this potential for the wall to sit outside of discourse which, I would argue, made it so appealing for the younger girls. Its discursively ungendered material structure enabled the girls to test their strength, speed, and tenacity without embarrassment or the need to be competent in masculinised narratives like firefighting or building, football or wrestling.

Despite this, my observations show how gendered/gendering discourses still impacted the children's scramble wall play. The fact that the girls, despite their physical competency, would most frequently demand adult attention when climbing the scramble wall (whether to help them climb or recognise their achievement) whilst the boys were usually indifferent, suggests a comparative lack of confidence in their abilities. Alternatively, perhaps the girls were simply accustomed to adults paying close attention to their physical play, attempting to help them and offering effusive praise for their achievements, while the boys did not expect any help or praise for displaying what heteronormative discourse marks as their 'natural inclination' towards strength, tenacity, and agility.

The possible futures created by the scramble wall intrigue me, though due to the time limitations of my fieldwork I am unable to address them here: what might have changed as the children graduated to reception class which resulted in girls losing interest in the scramble wall, and boys gaining interest? Did the girls begin to adapt their subjectivity to heteronormative discourses which

dismiss physical strength and agility from desirable femininity? Was there a concern from the boys to start proving their physical strength and agility with increasing competitiveness? The boundaries of gender created through intra-activity with the scramble wall may have marked a critical transition point in nursery gendering processes, where the children were produced as physical, active subjects, included in particular gender boundaries, but excluded from others that the scramble wall embodied.

These findings regarding the scramble wall contradict developmental literature that finds boys engage more than girls in playground physical activity. All too often these reported differences in activity preference elect to attribute them solely to biological or developmental factors (Barbu et al., 2011; Harper & Sanders, 1978), though occasionally socialisation is also considered as a factor that encourages boys to be more physically boisterous than girls (Fagot, 1977a; Thorne, 1995). Very little attention is given in research to how these gender differences might be produced through material-discursive entanglements that provide boys with more opportunities to explore playground physical activity through narrative resources that are less accessible to girls. My observations relating to the scramble wall suggest what might happen when the gendering of these narrative resources is not prerequisite to physical activity, as is the case with the scramble wall, the result being that girls are able to become active and boisterous. While the girls' desire for adult attention while climbing could suggest a lack of confidence while doing so, this can perhaps be attributed to inexperience due to the usual lack of opportunity to enact physical capability. Alternatively, this desire could be viewed as a cry to be recognised in a physically capable enactment where other opportunities to do so are sparse, and the context of 'asking for help' may appear to be the best strategy to gain this attention without being boastful or domineering.

What comes to matter in intra-activity with the scramble wall are possibilities for becoming girl bodies and boy bodies in ways that display physical capability and, for girls, produce an unusual attentiveness to and admiration for those physical capabilities. This latter opportunity is particularly important for young girls whose bodies are usually assessed in terms of physical appearance, rather than strength or agility. In the next section I discuss how, by thinking with agential-realism, the analysis I present in this thesis continues to focus on intra-

activity as enacting such possible becomings. Here I trouble notions of causality where we might look for biological, developmental, or social causes for observed phenomena, as much of the above research does, and instead focus on what is made possible where bodies collide in spacetimemattering.

## **Gendering Spacetimematterings**

Crucial to this discussion is the production of temporality through intra-activity, as illustrated in the discussion of the home corner and small world areas; in the increasing chaos of the home corner both teachers and boys gradually withdraw from intervention in its emergence as intra-active assemblage. This withdrawal occurs simultaneously with the increasingly exclusive use of the space by girls, aligning their bodies with its disordered messiness and privacy, compared to the rigid order of the public small world.

Barad applies the concept of continuous topological 'enfolding' of phenomena in spacetimemattering: the iterative potential of intra-acting agencies to reproduce their resulting phenomena whilst external circumstances and pressures change. Violence does not occur in the small world where it is anticipated, but instead emerges in the home corner where trust is implied and it can continue unregulated; this speaks to the wider social phenomenon of the home as locus for domestic violence. Jack wants to use the boys' building to draw on, not as a stage for the doll, so he uses his social power to ensure his success, evading the regulation of the small world space. These observations demonstrate the responsiveness of intra-activity to attempts at behavioural regulation through pedagogy, a dynamism which Barad highlights within spacetimemattering:

*Iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which temporality and spatiality are produced and iteratively reconfigured in the materialization of phenomena and the (re)making of material-discursive boundaries and their constitutive exclusions.*

*(Barad, 2007: 179)*

In the above quote Barad expands from Butler's understanding of the iterative performance of subjectivity to emphasise that iterative mattering does

not take place *within* time, rather, temporality itself is produced as a feature of intra-activity. In a world outside Barad's field of quantum physics we speak, as I do in this chapter, of time as objectively 'progressing' yet in a relativist agential-realist approach it can be thought of as emergent through the materialisation of phenomena. In this way, like the violent furrows of the yellow wall-papered room, space and time agentially 'come to matter' in producing phenomena and must be accounted for. This somewhat counter-intuitive shift becomes important when thinking through the challenge to humanist causality that Barad offers: for agential-realism, "the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming" (2007: 181). In other words, emergences are not products of events in a linear past but are possible becomings-in-materialisation created by the collusions of past, present, and future configurings of the world, and those pasts, presents, and futures are accountable for those becomings.

How can these theoretical shifts alter the way we think about gender emerging through nursery spaces? This means stepping away from the notions of biological, developmental, and social causality that I have referenced above as having gendering effects *over time*, and instead thinking of gendering temporalities materialising through the exclusionary boundaries created by the (re)configuring of gendering space and bodies. Remember, in *The Yellow Wall-Paper* we cannot assume that 'hysteria' was initiated by or present in either the narrator or the room, but it was observably produced through their intra-activity that closed opportunities to enact other potential becomings. It is this reworking of causality that changes the focus of analysis from 'input' to 'output': what possible gendering temporalities are produced in the intra-activity of girl bodies and boy bodies with classroom spaces and objects?

This shift entreats us to rethink data while suppressing an analytic inclination to seek causes, instead focusing on what is made possible through intra-activity. For example, in the 'Teapot Rebellion' extract, new ways of 'becoming girl' emerge through the space and bodies of the home corner as powerful resistance, the domestic utensils meeting the material-discursive vulnerability of the girls' bodies in unexpected ways. Where in other temporalities these utensils become signifiers of adult femininity, enacting positions of homemaking competence and caring abilities, in the enfolding of spacetimematter captured through the agential-cut of this data extract they successfully enact a resistant

violence on the invading boys and the girls are able to maintain their position of safety. This shift dislocates notions of inherent properties of material bodies (where in social discourse kitchen utensils link to heteronormative femininity by way of domestic caretaking tasks) and asks *how they come to be* in intra-activity. In approaching the world this way, as the girls featured in this extract do, we begin to open up new possibilities for becoming, rather than closing off opportunities through causal expectation and anticipation.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored a series of data extracts/agential-cuts to explore how intra-activity can expand our understandings of how gender emerges in nursery space and structures. In doing so I have considered how the active, agential bodies and discourses of the nursery, both human and non-human are entangled in a mutual entailment of gender production, and made visible the obscured mechanisms by which that production emerges.

In the consequences of non- or late-intervention into the production of hysteria produce a tragic conclusion. The narrator's husband seems to finally realise that her imprisonment is becoming dangerous and decides to intervene, but he is felled at the door by an undisclosed force. Whether the reader chooses to interpret the husband's collapse as temporal (a faint from shock) or permanent (a murder by the disturbed narrator), the result of the escalating phenomenon is clear: if entanglements established in intra-activity are unacknowledged in their mutual-entailment, disrupting that productive relationship becomes increasingly challenging, perhaps impossible. It is crucial that we end the blindness to material-discursive contexts demonstrated by many of the developmental literature referenced in this chapter, and begin to recognise the spacetime-mattering of gender in early years classrooms. If we do so, then options to disrupt how gender emerges become more obvious and possible. The question then becomes how attempts to intervene in classroom intra-activity can be successful in opening new gendering becomings for boys and girls that enable opportunities to occupy non-heteronormative subjectivations. I suggest several ideas on this matter in my concluding chapter. In the next chapter, I apply this method of thinking through

spacetime matters, rather than traditional causality, in a consideration of non-human bodies in nursery intra-activity.

# Chapter 6: Non-Human Bodies: Mapping Entangled Objects and Gendering Enactments

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## Introduction

As potential temporary possessions, all play objects in the nursery were able to occupy positions of power in enacting possible becomings as the children played and negotiated through them. In this chapter I discuss how play objects were engaged in circulations of power through intra-activity. The extracts shared throughout this analysis perform agential-cuts that produce these objects and the children entangled with them as gendered and gendering, in ways that enacted relations of power between children (and, sometimes, myself). The analysis of those extracts interrogates how these possible becomings materialised through intra-activity.

## Chapter Structure

I open this chapter by thinking through the role of play objects in enacting nursery power relations using data extracts produced in the small world corner. These extracts feature mixed-gender groups and individual children playing with transportation toys where the possibilities of objects 'carrying' power becomes rather neatly manifested in the vehicle's material forms as they produce and are produced as objects through intra-activity.

The discussion then moves to princess dresses as a powerful example of play objects that directly appealed to understandings of gender to produce desirability: rarity and prestige radiated from the fibres of their glossy, iridescent fabrics creating an intense desirability through evoking narratives that sought to appeal to young girls. Below I argue that the desire for 'princessness' related to a femininity that the dresses themselves demanded and, when achievement of princessness failed, punished through their scarcity and luminous appeal.

Following my discussion of princressing I share extracts concerning the wild animal costumes provided in the dressing-up box alongside the princess dresses that took part in utterly contrasting play narratives that enabled the production of violence and conflict. It is important that such emergences are not automatically considered to be negative or troublesome; here I consider how through 'wild animalising' children were able to challenge and rebel against gender norms, finding freedom in the displacement of the 'domesticated' human subject.

I extend the discussion of displaced subjectivity to the concluding section of this chapter, looking at how dolls in the nursery acted as 'imitation subjects' that the children could engage with. These engagements enabled children to explore aspects of gendering while reducing the personal risk entailed through expressing their thoughts or feelings on the matter in direct relation to themselves or other human subjects.

As I discussed in chapter two, research relating to objects in the nursery often characterises their power as discursively implanted and pre-exist their relations with children, carrying that implanted meaning in social interactions featuring them. Applying an agential-realist analysis in relation to nursery objects entails considering how they emerge 'as object' through intra-activity. In other words, I must interrogate the (re)configurings of the world that produce them as objects and the children as subjects. In doing so, the agential gendering possibilities created by their entanglements with human bodies is explored and potential points of change and/or intervention are identified.

### **Trains, Planes, and Automobiles: Vehicles for Power**

Vehicular play objects simultaneously worked as literal and metaphorical 'carriers' in the nursery. The hundreds of tiny wheels that skidded around the small world corner, whether on carpet-fibre road or wooden track, were not just supporting the bodies of fire engines and freight trains: they also frequently enacted a mobile effective power that circulated around the material-discursive space of the small world and the children who played within and around it. This power was tied into the domination of physical space in the small world which, as discussed in chapter five, became increasingly gendered throughout the year. The intra-activity featuring vehicular toys discussed in this section

demonstrates many of the different ways that play objects could perform gendering power relations in the nursery.

Daily conflicts and negotiations took place in the small world, with small victories, defeats, and compromises made, but eventually the girls drifted away from the space and its associated power struggles, leaving the boys to undertake them only with each other. The extracts featured are both taken from early in the school year before this gender segregation had taken hold, and two girls are in the small world corner playing with the vehicles in both extracts. The gendering of the small world corner to a masculinised space appeared to be linked to changes in the nursery class's shared understandings of gender roles over the course of the school year. Both girls playing here, Daisy and Caitlin, are two of the youngest in the nursery and while they start the year interested in small world play, by the summer they are rarely found there:

*11<sup>th</sup> November, 2011*

*Daisy, Caitlin, Jack, George and Ethan are all playing with the cars and garage. The girls are trying to playing cooperatively, constructing a joint scenario with the fire engine, but they frequently conflict over the boys' actions with the garage. Meanwhile, Ethan is flying a car through the air and says, "Help me George, I'm going to fall!" in a high-pitched tone. George ignores him and he repeats similar words several times before abandoning the attempt to play together. Instead, George is playing with the pick-up truck, sending it to rescue 'broken down' cars. He intersperses this game with a story he is telling me about how his next-door neighbour's car broke down recently. He seems to have been very interested in this event and describes how a breakdown service came out to fix the car. Daisy attempts to take the pick-up truck every time George puts it down, eventually grabbing it from right in front of him. Annoyed, he tells Daisy that he was playing with it. When she ignores him he asks me to get it back, which I do by saying to Daisy that it's not nice to take things that other children are playing with and she reluctantly gives it back to him.*

In this extract the garage becomes a contested space with five children attempting to access it at once, producing conflict but also cooperation. Daisy and Caitlin choose to construct a joint narrative which – agreement over its details notwithstanding – allows them to avoid conflict with each other over use of the space and its contents. Jack and George play separately but around each other – they are very good friends so perhaps their close relationship enables them to do so without conflict between themselves, their mutual affection producing easy and unconscious compromise in their occupation of the space, leaving only the girls to contend with. Ethan sits outside both pairs but repeatedly attempts to join with George in a cooperative exploration of disaster and prevention that locates Ethan (through his flying car) as vulnerable and George (through his pick-up truck) as powerful potential rescuer. George's play is also enacting this narrative and the subjectivations it offers where he assumes a similar capacity to rescue to the breakdown service that saved his neighbour's car, however he refuses to respond to Ethan's cries for help.

Ethan's vulnerability, which evokes the feminised role of 'damsel in distress', is further exaggerated by the high-pitched tones that he adopts to entreat George to come to his rescue, and his refusal to do so amounts to an exclusion of the feminine from his narrative. Through their separation from the girls and exclusion of Ethan, Jack and George ring-fence their space and the objects they possess along gendered/gendering lines; that is, until Daisy decides that she wants the pick-up truck (an unusual and therefore desirable vehicle) and its contested status produces conflict between her and George. Daisy successfully invades George's material-discursive space through grabbing the truck – itself seeming to embody the powerfully agential and discursively masculinised subjectivation of rescuer – and refuses to recognise his claim to it. Daisy's actions could be interpreted as an attempt to snatch at the masculinised subject possibilities offered by the truck, wishing them for her own and shifting the possibilities of her own gendering entanglements within the small world.

When entreated by George to step into my authoritative 'adult' role I end the conflict according to the rules of polite conduct and, in doing so, put a forcible end to the pursuit of Daisy's desires. As the small world became a gendered space, the girls were removed from these types of conflict over the objects of

the small world while the boys were further immersed in them, themselves increasingly distanced from those within the home corner. This gendered territorialising of nursery space and objects has significant implications, shutting down opportunities - like that which Daisy grasps – to explore subjectivations freely through play, instead limiting those becomings available to children according to a heteronormative division of gendered interests.

When agentially-cut through participation, observation, and analysis, the entangled vehicle-human bodies of the small world emerge as distinct possessed-objects and possessive-subjects in ways that produce gendering effects. Through the movement of the vehicular objects around subjects gender-delineated spaces and engagements are produced that in one temporal iteration challenges heteronormative boundaries (as Daisy invades George's play) but, in others, reproduces them (the absence of girls in the small world area). It seems that objects can, through differential agential-cuts, become entangled in empowerment and disempowerment, sometimes (apparently) simultaneously in time that becomes distinct through the shifting of attention and (re)configuring of boundaries that observation entails. This flexibility is explored further in the next section which focuses on princess dress play in the nursery.

## **Girls, Dresses, and Becoming Princesses**

### **Entanglements with Clothing**

Mazzei (2013) draws on the notion of 'viscous porosity' introduced by Tuana (2008) in order to conceptualise the relationship between human bodies and transformative clothing, in that instance a student (named 'Sera') and a suit. She gains insight from Tuana's suggestion that all boundaries between objects, bodies, discourses, and concepts are permeable, separated by membranes rather than solid lines, and that "once the molecular interaction occurs, there is no divide between nature/culture, natural/artificial... there are important migrations between and across these divides that can be occluded by efforts to posit a dualism" (2008: 202). In the case of Sera and the suit, whose 'wearing entanglement' melded the human and non-human in the co-production of professionalism and confidence, Mazzei observes that this blurring of separable

beings demonstrates the usefulness of ‘thinking diffractively’ with Barad: seeing the entanglement of human bodies and clothing in productive intra-activity thwarts the limitations of thinking of human bodies as bounded by skin, and prompts us to consider how we become subject in- and outside the material body. Developing this analytic theme, Taylor observes that “clothes as materialities become with us as we become with them in an open, contingent unfolding of mattering” (2013: 699) – it is not simply that clothing makes us something else but that our entanglement with clothing opens up possibilities to produce meaning and experiences for both ourselves and that clothing.

Here I apply similar methods of thinking about the relationship between human bodies and clothing as I consider the production of ‘princessness’ through the entanglement of girls and certain popular outfits made available in the nursery dressing-up box located in the home corner. Thinking with a selection of data extracts spanning the entire school year, I seek out those porous intra-actions of girl bodies and dress bodies that together enact hyper-feminised princess-subjectivities in material-discursive entanglements. I consider the mutual production and location of desire that drives these intra-actions; the desire that works through the dresses that demand to be worn and works to restrict and suggest particular movements and positionings of bodies, and the desire sparked by the eye-catching romantic promise of their satin and sparkles.

These girl/dress entanglements articulate an inherently temporal and relational subjectivation (Juelskjaer, 2013) that I refer to in this section as *princessness*. However this position is not a singular or completely transformative subjectivation that immerses and then passes over on the separation of the human and non-human bodies that make up that articulation. Rather it forms one point of a subject of “multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity...a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated” (Braidotti, 2013: 49). When girl bodies and dresses become entangled in princessness that subjectivation can only be articulated or understood in relation to all other material and discursive entanglements in which they are simultaneously, previously, or potentially involved. To break this down even further, the experiences, body, and character of each girl, and of each dress matters for the particular princessness

produced in each intra-action. When Mazzei thinks through the intra-action of Sera and the suit and what it produces she meticulously rakes through not only her and Sera's experiences of professionalism, confidence, and clothing, but also the recent history of suits and female bodies – thinking about the Thatcherite 'power dressing' of the 1980s – in order to locate Sera's specific subjectivation when interpellated by the suit. Such analysis of connection and multiplicity enables a cartographic understanding of subjective enactments that, while intensely complex in its relationality, offers a realistic chance of comprehending the conditions of producing gender as experienced by material-discursive subjects. In this section I think through the possible becomings enacted through girls' bodies entangled with princess dresses and trace the material-discursive accountability for those enactments, including my own responsibility as observer/ethnographer.

### **Attraction and Girl Bodies**

Dressing-up took up a large space in the home corner; not just the dress-up box itself but the various outfits and accessories that inevitably found their way out of it, sprawling across the floor and over the nearby sofa. The selection of dressing up outfits available in the home corner held some evidence of efforts towards diversity, including a bright red car outfit, a hi-vis waistcoat reminiscent of that which a policeman or construction worker might wear, and, later in the year, some animal costumes that I discuss below. However, the selection was dominated by luxuriant chiffon skirts in pastel hues, shimmering satin cloaks, and sparkling puff sleeved bodices; perfect materials for creating princesses and fairies, and catching the eye rather more than the muted brown and grey fake furs, or the primary red of the car costume. No transference of imagination was required to turn the dresses into coveted objects as their material construction reflected an image of romanticised femininity that was designed specifically for girl bodies and excluded boy bodies (with bodices concealing-while-enhancing imaginary busts and skirts flaring below the waist to create the illusion of womanly hips), therefore their gendered/gendering attraction was an inherent aspect of their material-discursive composition.

These dresses and accessories appeared as critical objects both in the foreground and background of the children's activities, interlacing with many scenarios in the home corner and beyond, but were particularly prominent in the daily lives of the girls in the nursery. Sourcing and changing into princess dresses was frequently the first order of free play time for many of the girls, who would then go about domestic play in the kitchen area, enact a family-based narrative with friends, or move elsewhere in the nursery to participate in other pursuits such as drawing or playing with blocks. The wearing of a princess dress was not, therefore, necessitated by particular discursively-linked activities; it enacted a transformation that carried meaning beyond narrative. That given, there were activities, narratives, and bodily experiences that some girls strongly associated with the princess dresses, as is evident in the following extracts.



*Figure 4: A princess dress representative of the selection in the nursery*

### **Desiring Princessness**

*12th December, 2011*

*Maya, Alexa and Chloe are all dressed up as princesses. Seeing this, Zadie hurries over to look for a princess dress as well but there isn't one left for her. She looks despondent and Mrs T., who has been helping the girls put their dresses on, offers her a racing car costume instead. Zadie looks at it suspiciously and refuses to put it on, insisting that she wants a dress. After much rummaging in the dress-up corner, while Zadie becomes increasingly dismayed, Mrs T. manages to find a gold cloak that is reminiscent of royalty and Zadie is satisfied. She puts it on and joins the other girls who are beginning to 'cook dinner' in the home corner kitchen.*

Becoming princessed was generally a social-material activity, undertaken with one or more friends. It was rare, though not unheard of, that a girl would seek assistance from me to put on a princess dress in order to play by herself (when it happened it primarily occurred with those girls who generally tended more towards solitary play, like Clare). Thus princessing was not only a relational subjectivation in terms of an individual's multiple internal differentiation, but also it was relational to the intra-active entanglement of other connected subjectivities; we need, therefore, to consider princessness as a shared experience that always operated through a web of subjective human and non-human entanglements that cannot be prised apart whilst retaining coherence in analysis.

In the above extract from December, Zadie's urgency belies the magnetism of princessing, apparently enacting an intense desire when she spies Maya, Alexa, and Chloe. This compelling attraction heightens as sharing in princessness is initially denied to Zadie through the lack of dresses considered suitable for producing the desired effects that her friends are already enjoying. The absence of the 'right dress' acts as a barrier to Zadie's social engagement with her friends' domestic performance in the play kitchen, but she does eventually compromise when the gold cloak appears; it seems to be 'close enough' to princessness to enable her to join the other girls.

What are the different effects caused by princess dresses and car costumes that produce such a clear divide for Zadie? Dismissing the red car costume as



Figure 5: A similar dressing up outfit to the car costume

an alternative, and Zadie's reiteration that she wants a *dress* (not simply to 'dress up') has a hetero-gendering effect, affirming a desire for bodily transformation directed solely at the sparkling elegant princessness that the dresses offer. The car costume was an oversized bright red block of felt, turning the wearer's body into a soft cube with a car 'face' on

the front and wheels attached to the sides. The face was humorous, with a big cheeky 'grin' effect created by a stylised car bumper, while the shape and size of the outfit hid the proportions of the body and made one clumsy and ungainly. When entangled with the human body it created an effect entirely opposed to princessness: where the dresses emphasised the curves of the body, the car outfit obscured them; where the dresses evoked elegance and grace (indeed, required it to manage the physical construction of the long skirts and tight bodices), the car outfit produced an awkward clunkiness in children who could not remember where their 'corners' were; where the dresses sparked an air of magic and romance (as demonstrated in the next extract) the car outfit provoked laughter and amusement. Aside from its appearance, there are two other factors to consider about the car outfit: there was only one of them in the dressing up box (compared to four or five princess dresses) and none of the other girls was wearing one. The car outfit was othered by its minority status within the dressing-up repertoire and its stark opposition to the qualities conveyed by the dresses favoured by Zadie's friends. For her to wear it – to become entangled with it - would be for her to perform this otherness upon her own body, opening channels of subjectivation that significantly differed from her friends. It was therefore an option of high social risk and she is quick to dismiss this risk, preferring instead to compromise on the full princessing effect by at least evoking some of its desirable properties with the shimmery gold cloak. Better to be half a princess than no princess at all. In the next section I think through related notions of desire and the dresses, exploring how socially powerful becomings came to matter through princessing intra-activity.

### **Performing Discursive-Material Princessness**

What discursive practices came to matter in the wearing of princess dresses? What subject positions were being created and taken up through transforming princessing activities? The girls' own articulations of their personal associations with becoming princess demonstrate some of the performative channels that their intra-actions with princess dresses opened or expanded access to, and here I include two extracts as illustration. In these extracts the collusion of my own associations in collective entanglements of princessing also

becomes tangible through my social engagement with the children as they dress up.

*10th October, 2011*

*In the home corner Clare asks me to dress her in the Snow White costume which I do (though she doesn't know who Snow White is). Maya and Zadie then come over and also put on princess dresses (pink fairy and Cinderella). I say to Zadie that she is a lovely fairy and then Maya says that she's a fairy too and happily tells me that she's going to fly away. I ask where she's going to fly to and she says 'the prince'. I ask Clare if she wants to find a prince as well and she shakes her head.*

Here Maya demonstrates the viscous porosity of her outfit and its potential interpretations through blurring the products of their entanglement – she is a fairy who flies yet also seeks a prince, assuming the rights of royalty to claim such a target. Both these stated pursuits are steeped in mythology and imagery typical of Disney-style romance narratives and products (which are themselves directly present in this extract in the Snow White and Cinderella dresses – there is also a dress worn by Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* available, sealing Disney's position as key inspiration for princessness in this space). Maya's words evoke a freedom to exercise an agency that is closely tied with her outfit: as a fairy she can 'fly away', and as a fairy-princess she can seek out her desired prince. Joining with the dress therefore creates opportunities for Maya to occupy new subject positions defined by princessness – the powerful dress offers support and legitimacy to these positions and her desire to enter them.

The opening up of these positions also takes place in intra-action with a critical aspect of Maya's material body: her black skin. Until very recently, princessness (and, indeed, 'fairyhood') in Western popular culture has failed to incorporate black women to any satisfactory degree (while Disney's attempts to represent ethnic minorities in the past have been heavily critiqued for their explicit privileging of whiteness, see Cheu, 2013; Hurley, 2005). In 2009, Disney released *The Princess and the Frog* introducing a new African-American princess character, Tiana, a move that is not lost on Maya who at another point in the year declares to me that Princess Tiana would be her preferred fancy

dress outfit. Maya's body/dress entanglement contravenes the traditional racial boundary-making of princessness and produces a transformation to a position of active, agential desire in a fantasy-romance narrative, and has the effect of further shifting local knowledges of what princessness can be in Hillside, expanding its reach and accessibility.

This extract also shows a distinct difference between Maya and Clare's entanglements with princess dresses – both girls (and Zadie as well) show the desire to be princessed that day, but Clare's desire seems detached from discursive connections that Maya and I bring to our experience of the bodies that they create with the dresses. She is unaware of her dress's evocation of Disney's Snow White character – a link which I make easily - and then later refutes interest in Maya's own directive to fly away to find 'the prince'. In this way, Clare's entanglement appears freer of discursive context, perhaps allowing her to produce her own interpretations of her material meshing with the dress. After she puts on the dress, my notes show that Clare moved out of the home corner to a nearby table where wooden jigsaw puzzles had been placed for the children's use. She chose a fireman puzzle and concentrated her attention on it, eschewing the other home corner related activities that girls most frequently engaged in when wearing princess dresses. This denies the domestic and romantic princessness that the dress offers, while still enjoying aspects of the embodiment that it offers: the beauty of the dress itself and its beautifying effect on the body, and the opportunity to escape or exceed the mundaneness of 'normal clothes'.

*7th November, 2011*

*Caitlin and Alexa ask me to help them put on the two Snow White dresses that are in the dress-up corner. I do so, then ask them what they are going to do as princesses. Alexa replies that princesses do the cooking, go shopping and make cakes. Together they then choose one of the baby-dolls and put it in the trolley (which is already full of plastic food) to 'go shopping'. The game soon expands with Chloe, Maya, Zadie, Alexa and Daisy all putting on princess dresses and merging with the doll play game. Transferring to the trains/cars carpet, the girls bring a range of dolls, blankets, food and plates and start*

*camping ('going camping' is a game which has been cropping up occasionally in the nursery as a few children went camping with their families in the summer).*

When Caitlin and Alexa wear the Snow White dresses, the three of us, the dresses, the home corner toys, and various culturally feminised discourses begin to engage in a performance of princessed subjectivities that transforms the girls into the domestic and caregiving experts of Alexa's description. This material-discursive enactment of a specific princesshood conflates the drudgeries of homemaking tasks with the beauty and glamour that the elaborate sparkling dresses produce on the girls' bodies. Becoming 'princess' is not necessary to perform the activities that the girls engage in – kitchen play, shopping at the imitation grocer, and caring for the dolls are all frequent narratives that emerge in the play of both boys (at this point in the year) and girls, regardless of their clothing. It seems, rather, that the dresses lend an extra dimension – even *frisson* - to the games, and to the subject positions that the girls move through and between as princessed bodies.

That I deem the dresses incongruous or even inappropriate is, however, based on my understanding of 'princessness' which may be somewhat different to that of the nursery girls. For me, princessness is a rigid subjectivation associated with passivity, wealth, privilege, and intensive beautification of the body - attributes which sit in contrast to domestic and caring tasks (which in my understanding princesses are entirely exempt from). The girls may have quite different frameworks of understanding to inform their notions of princessness: I see it as a highly unusual or rare adult female subjectivation that is ever present and totalising (in as much as it establishes the birthed- or married-permanence of royalty). For the girls, the possibilities of princessness appear to be much more flexible and temporal; not excluding or restricting becomings but enabling greater range and subjective-multiplicity in play. They are playing with these potential becomings as much as they are dolls or plastic food.

Wearing the princess dresses creates many possibilities for girls when engaging in domestic and caring play. In line with my own expectations of princessing, they perform beautification on the body, alluding to romance and wealth in ways that convey high social status; this facet of performance also enables aging potential, since in reality romance and wealth are associated with

older subjectivations. However, princessing also offers the girls becomings that do not feature in my own understanding: with a strong social aspect to the practice, wearing princess dresses produces a visual uniformity within a group of girls who may be wearing a range of disparate clothing items underneath. It therefore produces sameness and a feeling of acceptance into a peer group. Simultaneously, it creates difference – from other, non-princesses (and therefore socially inferior?) girls, and from boys, emphasising their current and future material and discursive differentiations. As Maya demonstrates above, they can create freedom to pursue flights of fancy – literal or metaphorical – that are presented to the children as highly desirable cultural narratives but remain impossibly out of reach for them in present reality. Finally, princessing produces personal attention; not only is assistance required from either other children or, more commonly, adults in order to put on princess dresses, but this assistance and the increased visibility of the now-glittering girl almost invariably produces comments concerning the girl's prettiness and loveliness (such as my comment to Zadie in the above October extract). These possibilities often have little to do with the cultural narratives that I immediately associate with princessness, instead enabling the iterative performance of multiple desirable subjectivations for the nursery girls.

### **Unprincessing?**

The princess dresses were worn for a variety of activities, but had to be removed for children to play outside under nursery rules that they did not have to be reminded of. Sometimes a girl would be wearing a princess dress in the home corner when some transient activity passing from the interior to the exterior of the nursery would provoke a sudden and desperate plea: "Will you take my dress off?" However the majority of the time the dresses were only removed under instruction, at the end or interruption of free play time. These interruptions performed a sudden rupture that redefined the subject/object distinction between girls and dresses; does this entail that princessness was indelibly and exclusively linked to the dresses themselves?

If the physical binding of girl bodies and particular elaborate dresses created princessness then material separation of entangled bodies and dresses could be seen to dissipate that princessness, allowing the girl to pursue other

potential becomings unrelated to it and the dress to become entangled with another girl tempted by its possibilities, or to be deflated to slack subject-shaped fabric like the other materials back in the dress-up box. However while princessness was carried and renewed by the binding of dress and girl, the unprincessing of the girls bodies was not complete after removal of the dresses; princessness clung to them as their everyday clothing and styling evoked its properties and heterosexualised promise. The enactment of princessness did not begin nor end with the putting on and taking off of the dresses themselves; rather many related subjectivations were also actualised in the more visually mundane clothing that the girls wore before, underneath, after, and between the princess dresses. While I have referred several times to the restriction and control over the body's freedom of movement while entangled with elaborate princess dresses – and, indeed, their hyper-femininity makes them an easy target for feminist outrage - this was a temporally located and freely chosen material restriction and control that the girls sought out to explore particular becomings and then discarded as it suited their purposes. What became apparent to me during my time at the nursery was that many elements of princessing were taking place without the involvement of the dress-up box contents, less dramatically but more insidiously, and with agencies that did not necessarily involve the desires or interests of the girls themselves.

*29th March, 2012*

*We return to the playground... and the children are given a snack of chocolate biscuits, sitting in a circle on the tarmac. Megan is wearing a grey school dress, the skirt of which is very short on her, despite her average height and the fact that otherwise the dress fits well. As she sits on the floor with her legs splayed out at almost a 90° angle, happily eating her biscuit she suddenly notices that her skirt is so short that her underwear is on show. Looking around her she awkwardly pushes it down between her legs and tries to keep eating, but the skirt is so short that she can't hide her knickers though she repeatedly tries. Eventually she curls her legs demurely underneath her to remedy the problem. I feel both anger and sadness as I watch her.*

In this extract the ubiquitous grey supermarket school dress style proves itself to be as productive a force in enacting hyper-feminine subjectivities as the ostentatious princess dresses; while the particular gendering performances that Megan and her school dress create here are arguably far more rigid and controlling. The material structure of the dress intra-acts with discursive concepts that have clearly entered Megan's consciousness: that her underwear should not be on public view and this prerogative trumps her personal comfort or enjoyment. Their entanglement meets Megan's desire to enjoy her biscuit in a position that she finds comfortable and has settled into unselfconsciously at the point that she looks around herself and apparently becomes aware of the potential for social judgement and consequent shame that the situation creates. The meeting has an immediate effect on her behaviour and shifts Megan from an experience of relaxation and indulgence, in their place physically enacting that social judgement before it has come to pass.

This entanglement that produces demureness and passivity of girl bodies relies on the inherent hyper-feminisation of a dress, but in this instance frills and flounces are not the issue. As I note in the extract, this is a well-fitted plain dress, worn by a girl of average height, which ended a few inches above the knee. Its styling pronounces it as not only suitable but actively directed towards everyday wear at school; in other words, this is an item of clothing which is expected to have a mundane yet intimate relationship with its wearer. This makes its agential potential extremely powerful in producing the subject position of that wearer, as it appears necessary and unremarkable, diffusing a critical gaze through its dull, apparent practicality. Yet, as Megan demonstrates, this dress is anything but practical for her purposes when thought through in relation to the discourses that she is exposed to, restricting her movements in order to meet their conflicting expectations. The short skirt of the dress might look 'dainty' or 'cute' in and of itself but as an item of clothing, an object that shapes and transforms the body of its wearer, it also imposes these characteristics on that body and they directly conflict with an appreciation of independence or agency. If critiques of princessness might be the promotion and glamorisation of passivity and beauty to young girls, as embodied by the princess dresses, then these subjectivations are equally promoted in their daily clothing but come

without the elements of choice, freedom, and escapism that the girls bring to their entanglements with princess dresses.

*28th March, 2012*

*Lauren and Chloe come over, greeting me with silly faces and excitement. They are wearing school summer dresses (the first time this year that it has been warm enough to do so) and I comment that they look very pretty before I can stop myself, instantly regretting making such an appearance-focused comment.*

Megan's problems with her short skirt demonstrated the restrictions that certain clothing can impose on girl bodies; here my vocalised response to Lauren and Chloe's dresses is a key feature in an intra-action that illustrates the attraction that such clothing can hold. Although my comment is caused by the light and billowing check-printed dresses, I transfer the focus of my admiration from the dresses themselves (I could have said, "*Your dresses are very pretty*") to Lauren and Chloe as subjects ("*You look very pretty*"), acknowledging and emphasising the transformative effect of their clothing to enact 'prettier' and therefore more desirable subjects. In a manner which replicates the mundaneness of Megan's short-skirted dress, I am so familiar with the idea that pretty clothing makes pretty girls, and the desirability of that entanglement for both girls and their admirers, I do not stop to think about the meaning or implications of my comment before I make it. While I may, therefore, despair at some of the messages I perceive to be promoted through the fetishisation of princessness for young girls (messages which, as discussed above, may not necessarily be shared by the girls themselves) here I show myself to be complicit in a hidden and subtle princessing of girl bodies that pervades their daily existence without the explicit consent that they bring to their entanglements with princess dresses or the possibility of deliberately unprincessing themselves at their convenience.

### **Wild Animalising: Enactments and Rejections of Aggression**

While the princess dresses and their accoutrements were the cornerstone of the dress-up box and always the most popular choices for the girls, in the

February of the school year a new set of outfit options were introduced to the home corner: wild animal costumes. These costumes opened up new potential subject enactments for the children that could explore aggression and dominance; in the previous chapter the ‘teapot rebellion’ extract showed some of the boys engaged in that exploration and the material-social dynamics that it produced. However, as I discuss in the next chapter, many of the boys in the nursery were already confident exercising aggression and dominance in play through the popular ‘monster’ game, which, crucially, required no material props to perform. What the wild animal costumes offered to the nursery - particularly the lion and the wolf - was new opportunities for children who did not tend to engage in the monster role to enact aggressive roles in play with the support of the costumes to transform their material bodies.

### **Legitimised Violence**

Before the wild animal costumes were introduced, the children’s entanglements with other ‘dangerous’ animal objects that could transform the body, like a large, plush crocodile hand puppet, illustrated the desire for aggressive subjectivations to be articulated in play.

*5<sup>th</sup> December, 2011*

*The crocodile puppet is a dominant feature in today’s group play. The puppet is popular with a variety of children, primarily boys, though Megan and Lindsey also favour it. So far today Ethan, Megan and Joshua have all taken turns chasing me with the crocodile, making monster noises and making the puppet’s mouth bite me. When Megan is in charge of it the most fearsome battle of all takes place, ending with me wrestling with Megan’s crocodile on the carpet. I try to withstand the attack as long as possible but after a few minutes it becomes clear that Megan has no intention of ending the game so eventually I stand up and tell her I’ve had enough. She reluctantly stops though it is clear that she hopes to begin the game again.*

The crocodile puppet fitted over the hand (so that the fingers and thumb could open and close the felt-toothed jaws) and covered much of a child’s arm up to the elbow. The design of the puppet – its wide open mouth and sharp

teeth – invited vocalisation and oral attacks which the children were keen to engage in. Even though the puppet only covered a part of an arm, its intra-action with the child-body and ‘animal attack’ narrative seemed to act as a locus of agency that the wearer could channel their entire subjectivity into, producing a powerful, aggressive subjectivation that, importantly, was legitimised by its fantastical element that could protect children from possible scolding or from being accused of wrong doing. It therefore opened up possible becomings through which domination and the imposition of fear and terror could be explored safely.

On the other hand, this intra-action also produced a space for others who choose to respond to it to become frightened and overwhelmed, enacting victimhood and vulnerability in the safety of fantasy play. It is this role which I take in the extract (though I veer between ‘fighting back’ and acting terrified), at first happy to indulge the children’s fun, however the game takes an interesting turn as I tire of rolling about on the floor with the Megan-crocodile entanglement. For a moment, the power struggle enacted in play becomes real, with my attempts to end the game resisted by the Megan-crocodile, which continues to attack and laugh loudly, until I decide to draw on my adult status and greater strength and height to end the game by altering our material relational positions. Even after I do so, Megan and the crocodile do not disentangle immediately, and they make a few half-hearted snaps at me before my disinterest in enacting victimhood again makes it clear that the game will go no further.

The enthusiasm generated by this raucous intra-action demonstrates the powerful allure of wild animalising in the nursery, and for Megan, as one of only two girls in the nursery who regularly embraces aggressive becomings in play (the other being Lindsey) the fantasy narrative that could be produced with the crocodile perhaps provided an important sense of legitimisation to an otherwise unusual – even socially unacceptable – subjectivation for her gender. This allure certainly continued for Megan throughout the school year, as she was keen to embrace the wild animal costumes when they were introduced a few months later.

*8<sup>th</sup> February, 2012*

*There are new animal costumes in the dressing up corner – a wolf, a lion, and an elephant, bought to integrate with the children’s fortnight of learning about the jungle and wild animals. They are used by a mix of girls and boys but while a range of boys – both confident and quiet – use the animal costumes, the only girl who frequently wears the costumes is Megan and she very much prefers the lion and the wolf. Daisy sometimes wears the elephant but tires of it quickly, whereas Megan delights in approaching other children (and myself) to try and scare them. Today Megan dresses as the lion and tries to steal the ‘washing’ that Caitlin is doing in the toy washing machine. Caitlin gets irritated and, stamping her feet, snatches away the washing from Megan. The latter then repeatedly attempts the theft but is thwarted by Caitlin every time until they end up arguing.*

With large head-shaped hoods and plush cloaks to cover the torso, the wild animal costumes offer greater bodily coverage than the crocodile puppet and created more complete and temporally sustained body transformations when entangled with the children. In the ‘teapot rebellion’ extract I discussed the enactment of power and fearfulness that I observed Jack and Ethan enjoying, the successful performance of which relied as much on the complicit social responses of other children to their intra-activity as it did on the boys’ actions or the possible becomings through entanglement with the costumes. When Maya, Daisy, Caitlin, and Chloe barricaded themselves behind the kitchen units to fight off Jack and Ethan, their visceral enjoyment of panic and vulnerability expanded the range and agential force of the intra-action, creating an extended group material-discursive narrative within which each child was able to move through and between multiple relational aggressor/victim subjectivations. In this instance, however, Caitlin does not take the opportunity to become victim, refusing the aggressive power of the Megan-lion entanglement. In turn, Megan-lion ignores her refusal, tantamount as it is to denying the power that the lion costume bestows on her body, and continues to assert that power through interrupting Caitlin’s own domestic play narrative.

This incident could have turned out quite differently had Megan not been wearing the lion costume. Megan's entanglement with this costume produces a fantasy context that mitigates a portion of the potential offence caused by her aggressive actions in a similar way to the manner that the crocodile puppet gave her licence to physically attack an adult after being told to stop. Like princessness, wild animalising with objects (as opposed to 'monstering' with the unadorned body, as discussed in the next chapter) created freedom to explore otherwise-elusive aspects of material-discursive existence, but Megan was the only girl to become involved in this possibility with any frequency (Daisy's entanglement with the elephant costume never involved aggression, her 'wildness' somewhat tamed by the gleeful laughter that dominated it). Furthermore, Megan very rarely wore princess dresses or otherwise engaged in princessing activities, and was also the only girl to regularly engage in unaccessorised monstering. Her apparent attraction towards the aggressive power of wild animalising sits in contrast to the compromised body she inhabits in her short dress while sitting on the playground tarmac, and suggests its critical importance in creating spaces for this particular girl to escape the material-discursive restrictions that are both imposed on her (through everyday clothing) and offered to her as desirable voluntary subjectivations (through princessness), instead seeking out channels for an agency of domination to emerge through aggressive, physically exuberant performances.

### **Enacting Dominance**

Megan's wild animalising in the above extracts displayed clear narrative direction that she doggedly pursued despite the social resistance of others around her. This clarity of purpose and whole-hearted dominance was not a universal feature of wild animalising.

*12<sup>th</sup> February, 2012*

*The children experiment with encountering fearful situations through the monster and wild animal games. The exertions of power that the instigating child experiences are usually satisfyingly successful for them, as a monster game very rarely falls flat. This afternoon, Ethan has put on the wolf costume and engaged an unusually large number of children in the*

*game. About six children (mixed gender but predominantly younger boys and girls) come running into the home corner and hide behind the kitchen units, squealing. But Ethan is not a very scary wolf and apart from a rather quiet growl and his clawing fingers held by his face he seems unsure of how to develop his persona. He stands a metre or so away from the children on the other side of the units, and when children run past him – either to join in or escape – he lets them pass without challenge.*

Ethan, a quiet, shy boy who frequently occupied the more vulnerable or physically-passive roles in narrative-based play (such as ‘patient’, to lay on the sofa and be tended to by a ‘doctor’), inhabits the wolf costume quite differently to how Megan inhabits the lion. Unaccustomed to exerting aggressive power, Ethan seems overwhelmed by his success and the number of children who have happily responded to his wild animalising. While in the teapot rebellion extract, which takes place a couple of weeks later, Ethan and Jack co-operate together to slowly advance on their willing victims, becoming increasingly growly, standing alone the Ethan-wolf creates power-relations which secure his dominance but does not exploit these relations through creating further terror or otherwise attempting to influence the direction of the attack narrative. Compared to the confident coherence of the Megan-lion or Megan-crocodile entanglements where the possible becomings created by the wild animal objects were enthusiastically occupied and agentially progressed through aggressive subjectivations, the Ethan-wolf entanglement seems tenuous and superficial, sustained only by the material covering and fixed pose of Ethan’s body. In fact, once Ethan-wolf makes his character known through his wearing of the costume and minimal physical actions, it appears that it is the other children moving into victim subjectivations who actually develop this game and his character, bestowing Ethan-wolf with more power and dominance than he does himself.

This enthusiastic acceptance prompts a question of the degree to which discursive understandings of acceptable gender subjectivities are supporting or quashing the possible becomings of children when wild animalising. Both Megan-lion and Megan-crocodile meet resistance when attacking, despite the

fullness of their characterisations, yet Ethan-wolf need only allude to his potential for aggression for a widespread and infectious response to emerge in the social group. These extracts also illustrate the inadequacy of locating agency as a possession of persons or objects, showing instead how the power-relations and possible subjectivations opened up within material-discursive arrangements and entanglements are so often co-created through a range of human and non-human bodies. This prompts a rethinking of gendering intervention that focuses on individual bodies or discourses to attempt shifts to equality and instead demands approaches that can shift the dynamics of classrooms as material-discursive assemblages that produce opportunities for gendering becomings. Furthermore, it is possible to consider these arrangements and entanglements outside of oppressive/resistive relations where conflicting agencies seek to overpower each other, instead tracing the progress of highly flexible and multi-faceted agential channels that are always inherently productive and changeable. Here, wild animalising intra-activity produces iterative hetero-gendering agencies that both rely upon and further sediment gendered experiences and understandings through their relational capacities: in other words, what appears to be an individual attempt to subvert or alter gendered subjectivations inherently relies on the material-discursive responses of others to establish the course those attempts will take.

### **Fake Plastic Subjects: Doing Gender with Dolls**

Thus far in this chapter I have considered some of the ways that objects can transform emerging material-discursive subjectivities through the adaptation of the child body, and how the local production of these subjectivities both relies upon and co-produces the subjectivations of others in a multi-faceted relational intra-activity. In this section I move away from thinking about this production through aesthetic bodily adaptation and focus on the performative relations between living- and plastic-human bodies. In the extracts shared here, these relations enact subjectivations through agential cuts that my attention-through-data creates, establish the boundaries of recognised gendered subjects and produce objects – in these cases, the plastic baby dolls - as ‘imitation subjects’. These imitation subjects could undertake certain aspects of gendering identity work in the nursery, enabling the children to consider gender experiences

removed from direct relations with another recognised subject; a freedom from restraint and morality that led to some interesting engagements.

The potential of dolls to act as 'proxy-humans' and enable young children to explore and work through experiences and emotions is well-documented throughout early childhood literature and practice, particularly in relation to 'persona' or 'empathy' dolls (Etienne et al., 2008; de Melendez & Beck, 2013; Whitney, 1999). This work tends to focus on the expression of difficult or problematic emotions rather than the everyday emotion-work being performed by ordinary 'dramatic play dolls' and in a new materialist analysis of gender this work and the dolls' potential in non-assessed play activity deserves reconsideration. Osgood (2015) proposes a micro-analysis of doll play that captures performative mattering at work where human bodies meet doll bodies, where opportunities to 'play with gender' are produced, and here I attempt to track how doll-bodies as imitation subjects created avenues of expression and emotion that were otherwise foreclosed.

### **Doll Play**

The home corner housed approximately ten plastic baby dolls, almost all of which were anatomically detailed with male or female genitals. The dolls were mostly white - though there were a couple of black dolls - and of varying sizes. Many of them spent most of their time unclothed and strewn chaotically around the home corner sofa area (see map in previous chapter). Sometimes, when the home corner managed to remain relatively tidy by the end of the day and therefore more time could be allowed for clearing up, efforts would be made by children or, more often, adults to arrange the dolls in neat forward-facing rows on the sofa. At other times they were simply thrown into a heap to wait for the next morning, bare limbs askew.

The dolls were commonly involved in a range of home corner activities but children rarely engaged with the dolls alone; instead they would usually act as just one element of an extensive material-discursive entanglement that would play out particular aspects of caring and homemaking domesticity. For example, a doll would be placed in a toy pushchair, covered in a blanket, taken 'shopping' to the play store (where a procured bag could be filled with plastic food), then taken to another part of the nursery to accompany the child's other

activities which may or may not continue the domesticity narrative; dolls would often sit next to a table full of jigsaw puzzles or pens and paper while children worked with these objects, their blankets occasionally attended to or their possession reiterated in the face of a possible doll-abduction (another child attempting to requisition the doll).

### **Imitation Subjects**

When considering their intra-active entanglements with children, a new materialist analysis cannot escape the fact that the dolls possessed a critical quality that distinguished them from almost all other objects in the nursery: their physical form as a non-human body was a life-like imitation of the gendered human body. The material 'carrier' of their gender was their plastic genitalia, made prominent by the dolls' frequent lack of clothing, making gender and sexuality a key aspect of intra-actions with them (as Daisy shows in two extracts below). The three-dimensional reflection of their own girl and boy, black and white, naked and clothed bodies that the dolls offered the children was temporally distanced through their younger age and smaller size, but remained relatable as a potential projection of human subjectivity (and, indeed, the children treated the dolls like diminutive subjects: talking to them, considering their feelings, and disciplining them for imagined transgressions). Barad describes how subjects and objects do not pre-exist their relations but are produced through their intra-activity; the dolls' form as human-reflective objects complicates the emergence of these subject/object relations. I observed this complication as an increased emotional value that the children experienced in their intra-actions with the dolls where powerful dis/identifications often related to gender consistently appear in my field notes, and is a common feature of the extracts shared here.

### **“I don't like babies... I like boys”: Acting on Anger with Dolls**

Through material-discursive relations with these dolls, the children articulated their understandings of gendering and, sometimes, their emotional responses to those understandings that revealed undercurrents of tension and conflict regarding their own gendered subjectivities. Themes of acceptability

and recognition of 'correct' or 'incorrect' genders continuously arose when I wrote about the children's intra-activity with the dolls.

*1st March, 2012*

*I walk over into the home corner where Adam is pottering about in the kitchen . . . Adam asks where the lion mask is. We rummage through the dressing-up stuff to look for it and as we do Adam comes across two baby-dolls. He picks them up and exclaims, "Babies!" then he smashes them together in his hands, violently. He throws them onto the floor and walks over them, deliberately stamping hard on their bodies, saying, "Stamp, stamp".*

*Jennie: Poor babies*

*Adam: I don't like babies*

*Jennie: Why not?*

*Adam: I like boys*

*Jennie: But babies are sometimes boys too*

*Adam: No they're not*

*Jennie: You're a boy and you were a baby once*

*Adam: No I wasn't*

*Jennie: You were, all boys and girls were babies once*

*Adam looks highly sceptical of this but then a teacher calls him outside so we don't continue the conversation.*

This extract demonstrates a critical aspect of the children's engagements with the baby dolls, showing the power of their gendered plastic bodies to act as proxy humans that could prompt and absorb emotions relating to childhood and gender. Adam's spontaneous encounter with the bodies of the baby dolls enacts a visceral emotional response in him that quickly escalates to violence against those bodies. The conflation of human and proxy-human bodies within our conversation acts to imbue the dolls with emotion as I sympathise with the 'poor babies', legitimising a perception of the dolls as imitation subjects. The fact that the situation reaches such violence so quickly could perhaps be traced to Adam's original expressed desire for the lion mask: as discussed in the previous section, desires to wild-animalise the body were invariably linked to

expressions of aggression and dominance. When he finds the baby dolls before the lion mask, their material object status and link to discourses of vulnerability provide a different but, perhaps, equally satisfying channel for this aggression and dominance to emerge in his actions.

This conflation of real and proxy human bodies raises a blurring of the subject/object distinction that material-discursive intra-activity produces: Adam physically enacts the doll's object status through his amoral violent throwing and stamping, and yet throughout the entire encounter both Adam and I speak as if the dolls were not just proxy-human bodies, but actual subjects – 'babies', not dolls. This blurring opens up a temporal space where torrid emotions relating to social experiences of gender can be safely explored as Adam creates a gendered opposition between babies and his favoured 'boys'. It is unfortunate that we did not get to continue the conversation as I would have liked to establish whether Adam was primarily concerned with age or gender in his dislike of the babies (did he see babies as inherently feminine?), but regardless of these possible meanings the hetero-gendering effect created by his words sets up masculinity as oppositional or essentially different to babies, reproducing social expectations that allocate agency and power to masculinity, and the feminised characteristics of helplessness and passivity to infants. This enables Adam to occupy that powerful, agential subjectivation of 'boy', and the solidification and importance of this position to him supports his denial of my claims that babies could be boys, and boys were all babies.

Such aggressive intra-actions with the dolls were rare in the nursery; it was much more common for both boys and girls to take care-giving roles in relation to the dolls, treating them kindly and gently as if they were emotional human subjects. The dolls were often temporarily 'adopted' by a child, clothed, fed, sat in chairs or pushchairs, rocked, stroked, spoken to and sometimes listened to by children feigning two-way conversation. Throughout many of these activities, the matter of the dolls' gender frequently emerged as a critical aspect of play.

*30th May, 2012*

*Outside in the playground all the baby dolls have been undressed and are lying jumbled in the water table in order to be cleaned. The sight is darkly comical and more than a little surreal; their haphazard positions in the pit of the table bring to*

*mind a doll genocide! The table has been filled with soapy water, a number of shaped and coloured sponges have been thrown in with them, and the waterproof tabards are stationed nearby. The idea is apparently that the children will do the cleaning based around a narrative of 'bathing the babies'. When the class is sent outside to play, Katie heads straight for the bath of dolls, grabs a tabard, and gets stuck into the cleaning task. She selects her sponge carefully, scanning the options before selecting a purple one in the shape of a flower. She picks up a doll and examines it, before throwing it to the other side of the table (it is a boy doll). She picks up another, this time a girl, and starts cleaning. I ask her why she wouldn't clean the other one and she replies, without hesitation, "Because it's a boy and this sponge is for girls". I press her further, asking why that sponge is for girls and she says, after a little thought, "Mm, because it's a shape and a pretty colour". However all the sponges in the bath are shaped and coloured, so I hold them up one by one, asking Katie whether they are boy or girl sponges. They are all confirmed as being for girls until I finally come across a plain, round sponge (the classic pale yellow sponge colour) and this time she says, "That's a boys one." The distinction seems very clear to her: girls should have bright colours and pretty shapes while boys should have plain colours and basic shapes. When several other girls gather around to take part in the cleaning, Katie immediately directs them to the correct gender doll for their sponges, which is always a girl as no-one picks up the plain sponge.*

The range of available sponges prompts Katie to make an informed decision about which one to use based on its own features. Her immediate response to my question about discarding the boy doll that she picks up first shows that gender has already been factored into her internal decision making about the sponge. Katie has already established in her mind that the purple flower sponge is 'for girls', though it is unclear which 'girls' it is for: girl human subjects (herself) or girl non-human objects (the doll).

Where precisely is the 'girlness' that Katie identifies emerging in this extract? Does Katie impose discursive understandings of gender on a sponge which has no inherent girlness, locally constructing knowledge of what 'girl' can or should be, or is Katie recognising the girlness of a sponge whose material body carries hetero-gendering discursive references that she knows she must identify and respond to in order to perform her own gendered subjectivation of girlness? Are the 'girl sponges' the driving force behind Katie choosing and directing others to choose girl dolls to clean; a 'thing power' exercised by the sponges over the humans nearby (Bennett, 2004)? Or is a desire within Katie to make the activity feminine in line with her own girl subjectivation leading her to gender the sponges and attend only to the dolls that share/reflect her girlness?

In Barad's framework that positions subject and object relations as temporally emergent, a particular iteration of girlness is here simultaneously produced through Katie, the other girls, the sponge, indeed *all* the various material-discursive components of the apparatus that forms this particular situation. Katie, the dolls, and the sponge are all entangled in a temporal moment where gender is a critical matter for all involved (with both discursive and material connotations of mattering) and where gendering is intra-actively (re)produced through the unfolding of the situation. It is both impossible and unnecessary to locate a single 'origin' for girlness in this extract and to answer the questions of the previous paragraph; mapping the emergent gendering relations between girls, dolls, and sponges shifts the focus to *what* is happening rather than *why* it may be happening. This shift opens up new ways of seeing gendering activity that do not rely on the preconception and forced interpretation of the latter.

It is interesting to note that the girls are not told to go and clean the dolls; the spatial-temporal assemblage of the baby-bathing area creates a transitory setting where the location of the dolls in the water play table and the presence of the sponges and tabards suggests the cleaning activity without the intervention of teachers. The girls – first Katie and then others – shift into caregiving roles through the set-up of this material-discursive apparatus that they willingly enter into as participants, interpellated by an assemblage that appears to hold a specifically gendered appeal (boys are, apparently, not drawn into this apparatus in the same way as none join the girls in the activity; given

that this extract was produced during the late spring period, this aligns with the increasing gender segregation over the school year between certain activities that I discussed in the previous chapter).

Katie creates a criteria for the sponges being 'for girls' upon my question, apparently not having reflected on her own recognition of it until that point. The girliness of the sponge is obvious and inflexible to her; she does not critically evaluate the sponge to reach this conclusion until prompted yet the classification is instantly apparent to her, as are its gendering implications for her intra-action with it. Katie's recognition of the sponge's girliness shows a powerful (be)coming together of materiality and discourse to co-create hetero-gender, which is then proliferated socially by Katie's guidance to the other girls. This hetero-gendering possibility emerges when the other girls enter the spatial-temporal assemblage of the baby-bathing area and encounter Katie, the sponges, and the dolls. It is Katie's gender matching of the sponge bodies and the doll bodies (and the other girls' acceptance of this matching process) that carries the possibility through to its conclusive social proliferation as 'truth/knowledge'.

In the above case, the dolls' nakedness and visible genitals enabled Katie and the other girls to select bodies based on a basic binary criterion relating only to one aspect of their material form and the associated knowledge the girls possessed regarding their own genitals and those of others. Visible genitals were not always available for the children to establish doll genders; other criteria could be drawn upon to create a socially coherent gender identity for dolls when they were clothed in neutral outfits or covered with blankets.

*30th May, 2012*

*Clare, Maya, and I are sitting at the puzzle table. Clare has pulled up a pushchair with two dolls in it next to her seat, and ensures they are sufficiently covered by a blanket before turning her attention to a puzzle. Maya doesn't seem to be watching her, focused on her own puzzle, but then suddenly looks up at Clare and asks, "Can I see the babies?" Clare looks suspicious as to Maya's motives, so I reassure her that I won't let Maya take them and she relents, pulling back the blanket to show her. One doll is small and Caucasian, the other is slightly*

*larger and matches Maya's African skin tone. Maya points to the black doll and asks Clare if it is a boy or a girl. Clare slightly misunderstands and replies, "A boy and a girl". I ask Clare which is which and she indicates the black baby-doll, saying, "This one's the boy". I ask how she knows and she says, after a brief hesitation, "Because it's larger".*

This extract opens with a clear demonstration of the level of humanity afforded to the dolls during play; an affirmation of their imitation subject status. Clare has brought two of them with her to the puzzle table as if their care were a genuine responsibility to which she must attend, and that she enacts through her careful adjustment of their blanket, while Maya recognises and, hence, legitimises this humanity by referring to them as 'babies', rather than dolls. This humanising of the dolls matters because they, uniquely among all objects in the nursery, were produced as emoting, sensitive bodies by the children (therefore carrying the qualities of subjecthood). These productions created opportunities for the children to perform identity work (such as thinking about the meanings of gender) at a distance from themselves and others, reducing the potential for personal vulnerability and subsequent social harm.

In this extract, Clare, Maya, and I use the dolls' bodies to think and talk about gender, however the exchange also creates subtle meanings related to race. Maya's exclusive interest in the gender of the doll with the same skin colour as herself highlights their shared racial identity in this exchange, while her question appears designed to establish whether there might be further common ground between her and the doll (as illustrated by the previous extract, the girls would always show greater interest in designated 'girl' dolls). Clare's replies – to Maya and to my interpretation of her meaning I then offer - produces a flurry of gendered and racialised meanings in just a few words: the gender binary is perfectly reproduced through her allocation of boy and girl (rather than two boys or two girls). This means that one of the dolls, as a boy, must be distanced – 'othered' – from herself if she is to perform a coherent girl identity. The concept of othering as a distinction of power differentials (Okolie, 2003:2) has been frequently applied in theories of racism (Fanon, 1967; Crenshaw, 1995) and also in gender and sexuality theory (de Beauvoir, 1993). Clare's selection of the doll that is racially different to herself marks both its gender and

race as points of difference. As Maya shares the same skin colour as the doll, Clare's choice has the iterative effect of othering Maya - she shares a significant material characteristic with a doll that, through her gendering words, Clare has allocated as less favoured than a white (female) doll, that shares her own skin tone.

The end of the extract is ambiguous if Clare's intent is to be sought: the hesitation that I describe in her reply to my final question could be interpreted either as genuine uncertainty over the reasons for her choice, or perhaps a deliberate desire to conceal a motivation that she knew to be socially unacceptable (if, indeed, the doll's skin colour had consciously prompted her decision<sup>24</sup>). Regardless of this ambiguity, the effect of her words remains the same: her linking of gender and physical size positions boys as larger and, therefore, stronger and more powerful than girls, while the actual primary cause of size differentiation between children – age – is ignored.

In the extracts shared within this section, the children featured have shown or expressed a preference for dolls which share their own gender and, in the last extract, their skin colour. This preference amounts to an 'othering' of dolls who are allocated the opposite gender – whether explicitly, like Adam ("I like boys"), or implicitly, like Katie (whose sponges are only ever for girls) and Clare (who decides that the doll that is physically least like her must be a boy). As imitation subjects, with imitation genitals and gender, the dolls suffer the blunt edge of gendering produced in the nursery by the sharp binary division emphasised between boys and girls in its material-discursive space, without emotional or disciplinary consequence for the children exploring the feelings this division arouses within them.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I shared data extracts that showed dresses as a coveted symbol of social inclusivity, clothes that were due to be 'washed' stolen in a

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<sup>24</sup> Though this seems an unlikely level of awareness for a four year old, it is not unreasonable to expect a young child growing up in a multi-cultural community such as Hillside to make comments or ask questions about skin colour, and then, in turn, to be educated about racism and its social unacceptability

deliberate attempt to create conflict, and dolls nervously protected from possible theft. In many cases, the materiality of the play objects enacted social power that was not simply exploited or, even, created by the children and the value they opted to place on such objects but was instead a desirability enacted through the entanglement of human and non-human bodies. Objects could work to channel or transmit emotions to or between children, and sometimes appeared to be engaged with by the children specifically for this capacity: sometimes children seemed to desire an object purely for the possible relations of power it was enacting rather than for its specific material or discursive properties or its narrative possibilities. Gender was frequently a key factor in the coveting and possession of these objects: Sometimes their desirability drew directly on binary gender roles to create or enhance their attraction, while at other times objects enabled particular power dynamics during intra-activity that produced gendering through play.

The intra-actions featuring dolls are where I find the application of Barad's agential-realism most intriguing; the transience and temporal uncertainty underlying subject/object distinctions that she identifies prompts considerations of their emergence as such that are freed from expectation or the enforcement of social patterns. When the dolls became entangled in play-assemblages with children and other objects they evoked the presence of a further human body with flexible subject boundaries, rather than being perceived by the children as, what I would term, a 'true object': a material body without emotion or will to consider. These blurred subject/object relations opened up the potential for the children to reflect and act on their understandings of gender by encouraging the projection of the child's own emotions and knowledge onto the dolls (who, as they were not truly sentient subjects, were in no position to argue or resist).

In agential-realist theory subject and object are temporally emergent, lacking pre-existence or stability and becoming themselves through continual iterations of their material-discursive relations; in doll-play the emergence of the object is dislodged and the children respond to the dolls as a recognisable subject. It is this attempt at recognisability in their responses – their actions and words that seek to create the dolls in their own image of what gendered bodies should be, think, and feel – that has the effect of magnifying the particular gender knowledge being expressed.

Because subjects can be spoken to, the dolls prompt verbal articulation where otherwise there would be silence. Because humans should be dressed in clothes, the dolls prompt a material production of gender through the covering of their bare 'skin'. Because human subjects both possess and can cause deep emotion, the dolls can prompt sympathy, anger, violence, and love. Because human subjects are understood to always belong to a gender group and young children understand this grouping to be very important, these productions of imitation subjects are deeply gendered, and, also, deeply *gendering* as they publicly enact a particular child's gender knowledge. In the next chapter I consider how these features of emergent subjectivity work to produce gendered bodies of human subjects, including an section that relates my analysis to the lived emotional effects of desirable gender embodiments on subjective experience.

# Chapter 7: Becoming Gendered Bodies

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## Introduction

*Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices.*

*Barad (In: Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2009)*

Throughout my data analysis chapters I have worked within a structure that brings my focus ever closer to individual human experience whilst attempting to avoid the trappings of the humanist approach that continuously tempts from the side-lines of my work. The relational analysis that I have instead pursued has gradually ‘zoomed in’ to position their lives within the complex material-discursive structures that they are constituted through and of. Beginning in chapter four, I examined the wider spatial and temporal networks which the children formed a part of and which provided a framework through which their gender experiences were formed: the institutions of the nursery and home. In chapter five I moved on to consider the more localised intra-activity that took place involving objects that were also constituted through and of that framework: although the extracts always involved subject-object relations, I kept my focus on the emergent properties of the objects themselves and the role which they took in those intra-actions. Finally, in this chapter, my analytic lens reaches the field of the individual human. In a poststructuralist analysis, this focus would be referred to as ‘the subject’, however through the new materialist locating of the subject as emergent only through iterative intra-activity – rather than as a pre-existing agent – this description becomes divergent from relational understandings. Instead, this chapter is concerned with how the children continuously *became subject* through material-discursive intra-activity,

achieving or failing to move through shifting subjectivations (a temporally bounded relational state of subjectivity).

If, through this theoretical alignment, it is inappropriate to consider 'the subject' as an analytic unit, what then am I to take as the unifying topic of this chapter? The material-discursive anchor of emergent subjectivity, that which provides the basis for constructing linear narratives regarding our lives, is the human body. Though it, also, continuously shifts and changes (and is perfectly iterative in nature due to its constant reproduction of itself on a cellular level) it also forms a clear (though entirely permeable) boundary to delineate the individual from the collective social experience. It both constitutes human experience, prescribing particular shapes and abilities that fall outside any notion of humanist free will, which may or may not be pursued or altered, and is constituted by it as the subjectivations we experience work to shape it in return. It is a symbiotic material-discursive construction of the self and the nature of this reciprocal relationship is perhaps nowhere more vital in our lives than our experiences of gender and sexuality. In her 2009 interview with Dolphijn and van der Tuin, Barad discussed how 'boundary articulations and exclusions' are produced in the reconfiguring of material-discursive bodies, and in this chapter I consider how children's bodies both constituted and were constituted by their experiences and understandings of gender. These constitutions were enactments of gendering boundaries and articulations, determining how the children became gendered bodies and, hence, how they became gendered subjects.

## **Chapter Structure**

I begin this chapter by exploring again how 'animalising' child bodies produced gendering effects through their intra-activity, but in the extracts discussed here costumes and props to assist these transformations are notable by their absence. Here, children are working on the shapes and movements of their own, unadorned bodies to enact gender subjectivations, and the possible gender becomings emerge differently to those discussed in the last chapter.

I then move to data that concerns children's bodies becoming vulnerable, and caring becomings where children look after the needs of those in positions of vulnerability. These intra-actions seem to support gender subjectivations that

deviate from heteronormative expectations, particularly when boys take vulnerable positions. For girls, while caring tasks are often associated with motherhood and domesticity, in the extracts featured they are also able to garner power through these caring becomings, directing other children's movements and occupying stereotypically male-dominated authority through becoming 'doctor'.

The next extracts show children's bodies becoming physically powerful through size, strength, and age in gendering ways. These extracts show how transformations into physically powerful bodies were instigated in different ways by boys and girls, with boys performing strength and physical ability and girls occupying bodily seniority through age.

The final extracts concern aggression and rebellion, with children's bodies 'acting out', challenging the authority of children and teachers in varied attempts to exert power. These bodily transformations had significant gendering effects, primarily in the reactions of others to them (including my own).

Finally, after concluding my thoughts on gendering bodies in the nursery, this chapter ends with a section on gender and desire. As I briefly discussed in chapter four, this section applies the understandings generated throughout my analysis to think again about the human subject, relocating 'desire' (traditionally a humanist concept) as an agency that extends through intra-active bodies to drive gendering becomings.

### **Becoming Beast: Dominant and submissive bodies**

In the previous chapter I used data extracts featuring animal costumes and a crocodile puppet to think about how children's bodies becoming entangled with clothing objects could both perform binary gender roles and transgress them through 'wild-animalising' subjectivations. There was a second contrasting type of gendered animalising transformation that I found in my data: animalising intra-activity - wild or otherwise - which took place without the aid of objects. In other data extracts, some children took or created opportunities to transform into various creatures using only bodily actions of movement or sound, having no need for props to realise their desired subjectivation.

These two types of animalising transformations seemed to perform different functions in terms of emergent gendered subjects: as discussed above, those

that were inspired, prompted, or facilitated by material objects seemed to support transgressive subjectivations that produced the children as fiercer, braver, or more violent than their usual selves. Megan could physically attack others, exploring the possibilities of domination and running roughshod over discourses of kind and gentle girlhood, while Ethan explored an aggression rarely evident in him that evoked heteronormative masculinity far more than his largely gentle, quiet, and shy character. Here, however, I share a number of data extracts that suggest that something quite different was occurring when the children animalised their bodies without becoming entangled with complementary objects. In the cases that follow, the children featured are not performing out of character or 'of gender'; their play performances instead appear to draw on animal subjectivations to explore and exaggerate characteristics that were consistent with binary gender roles. This was true when playing within the domestic pet scenario included below, and in the monster transformations that follow, while a further extract featuring Ethan demonstrates the result of attempted transgressive animal transformation without the help of objects. I argue here that this contrast between children's play with objects that animalise the body and play that animalises the body through the imagination alone enacts different aspects of gender in the nursery and illustrates the power of objects to create alternative channels of subjectivation.

### **Good Cats, Bad Cats, and Tigers: Domestic Animalising and Hetero-fantasy**

With our bodies transformed into domesticated felines, Chloe and I play our role in constructing and legitimising a collective familial fantasy within the home corner that produces Katie and Jack as figures of heteronormative authority. Our docility should not be mistaken for passivity; Chloe and I are equally as agentially complicit in this scenario as its apparent directors.

*23rd February, 2012*

*I often spot Jack playing make-believe games with Katie and Chloe. Today I am sitting on a chair to the side of the home corner when I notice Katie, Chloe, and Jack playing together in the corner behind the kitchen units. The units hide them from*

sight of the rest of the classroom and I approach them to find out what they're doing. Chloe is lying on a couple of cushions that have been taken from the nearby sofa and put on the floor, while Katie and Jack carefully arrange a baby blanket on top of her. She lies on her back with her eyes closed, mimicking sleep.

Jen: What are you guys playing?

[Katie: Cats and dogs]

[Jack: Cats and dogs]. Katie is the mummy and, and I'm the dad

Jen: Cats and dogs? Can I play?

Katie: Yes (smiles and takes my hand to lead me around the kitchen unit). You be the good cat with Chloe, okay?

Jen: Okay. Is Chloe a good cat as well?

[Katie: Yeah]

[Jack: You have to] You have to lay down next to Chloe and we'll look after you

I do as I'm told and lie on the floor as there are no cushions left for me. Chloe opens her eyes briefly to see what's going on and seeing that I am on the floor moves her head so that I can rest mine on her cushion as well which I am grateful for and thank her. She doesn't say anything and closes her eyes again. Jack and Katie arrange a blanket over me as well, being careful to make sure it covers as much of me as possible (not very much). Katie talks to us quietly and strokes our heads, saying, "Good cats, you be asleep now", and tells me off for having my eyes open. I close them on her order. When Chloe opens her eyes and starts meowing, Katie tells her off, laughing, "You cheeky bugger!" During the game I am reassigned first to being a naughty cat and then to being a good tiger – though this doesn't seem to be linked to my actions. My location changes with each and I am ordered around the home corner by both Katie and Jack, who retain their mum and dad roles, discussing shopping, pretending to make dinner, and

*stroking me or Chloe. I succumb to their orders willingly, trying to accommodate their demands, though they get frustrated when I can't fit underneath a table that they want me to lie under as a good tiger. Jack insists that I will fit and suggests different ways I could get underneath it, though he doesn't try to force me. Chloe retains her role as 'good cat' until the end of the game where she starts snarling and gets thoroughly told off by Katie.*

It is apposite that the game takes place hidden away behind the kitchen units in the already private area of the home corner, offering privacy and security to a narrative of intimacy based on close personal relations. It is at moments such as this where I feel most fortunate to have developed such trust and friendship with the children: though I do initially intrude on this private space I am warmly welcomed by all three children as a playmate, accustomed as they are to my enthusiastic participation in their activities (by this point I knew all three children here very well). By deciding that I am to be a good cat and act the same as Chloe my adult status is temporarily stripped from me by Jack and Katie, and by obeying their command I voluntarily acquiesce to their temporal authority.

The respective bodily transformations that the four of us undergo during this extract enact a web of iterative power relations based around heteronormative familial scenarios that shift throughout the game: our initial positioning as compliant feline bodies is initially supportive of the authority and familiarity offered by Katie and Jack's aging and marital coupling. A process of embodied docility begins as my body joins Chloe's on the floor (literally 'lower' than Katie and Jack). The sharing of the cushion and the provision of the blanket for warmth indicates that the position is intended to be comfortable – luxurious, even – rather than oppressive. Our bodies are to be cared for and in exchange Katie demands to be obeyed, disciplining me for not following her instructions. As the narrative progresses and our characters change, each iteration of our feline bodies produces different effects in the play narrative, changing the progression of the narrative, the way that we manage our roles in the game, and the gendering implications it produces.

It is not only the temperament of our animals that is interesting in this extract, but the very nature of our animal embodiments. My shifting role is apparently linked to some unspecified but desirable aspect of the domestic narrative that Chloe and I are enacting through animalising our bodies. This raises the question of what collective desire might demand the performance of cat bodies rather than human bodies: what does domestic animalising enact in this scenario that is distinct from the child embodiments that were also a possible transformation for Chloe and me?

Chloe's body becomes increasingly unruly: her unsolicited meowing prompts Katie to reassert her authority through a scolding, while later her snarling begets a severe response from her friend, producing her as 'bad cat'. Chloe's deliberate shift away from her 'good cat' body shatters the transformation and she is wild-animalised instead; a metamorphosis of rebellion and transgression, as discussed in the previous chapter. The compliant, mollycoddled cat has gone and she is once again the focus of Katie and Jack's attention, which had wandered (perhaps too far for Chloe?) onto me as good tiger. Though Chloe's development of her cat body appears to be undermining the stable heteronormative vision offered by the game at the outset, her rebellious moves actually serve to solidify its coherence even further, providing opportunities for Katie not only to state her 'mother' dominance but actively assert it through the 'necessary' discipline of bodies (a kind of micro-scale biopower).

Whilst Chloe instigates her own transformation, my body is changed twice by Katie and Jack to create more challenging pets as they work on their domestic tasks: first I am a naughty cat (still domesticated but in need of controlling) and then a good tiger (not domesticated but compliant and willing). The effect of these changes is an iteratively increasing exoticism and wildness written through my bodily transformation for the 'parents' to manage, which, when done so successfully, extends the reach and authority of their powerful coupling; after all, anyone can take care of a domestic cat, but the ability to master a tiger is considerably more impressive. Unfortunately for Jack his control over my body unwinds rapidly as he tries to fit his 'good tiger' under a small table. I do attempt it, however my unruly adult body exceeds the fantasy shape it has been squeezed into – a firm reminder that I cannot truly escape my adulthood in the nursery any more than Jack can escape his childhood - and he

is disappointed. Our animalising produces a similar effect to the 'imitation subject' of the dolls – we are 'almost object', corralled to produce the heteronormative authority of Jack and Katie's domestic tasks.

### **Monsterring Boy Bodies**

The most frequent form of wild-animalising (discussed in the previous chapter) took place without costumes or hand puppets through the group game 'Monster'. This playground game offered two key embodiments for participants to inhabit: the aggressor/s (usually just one) – pronounced by the self or others as 'monster' – would make loud roaring noises, shape their hands into claws, and either actively pursue other children or stay relatively stationary, threatening those who passed nearby. This role was almost exclusively adopted by or allocated to boys.

The second role was that of victim: sometimes children became victims because the monster targeted them for pursuit, but more often children would actively seek this role, running over from other areas of the playground in order to scream, recoil in horror, and escape from the monster. This role was almost exclusively taken by girls and the youngest boys in the class. Occasionally a third role emerged during the game: protector. The protector would corral groups of victims to safety, usually in the playhouse or under the scramble wall, giving commands and warnings, using their body as a barrier or shield, and sometimes facing up to the monster if it approached. Sometimes it was the protector who created victims, warning children of a monster that they had either not yet seen or that did not exist (as Thomas does below). This role was exclusively taken by older boys.

The game was extremely popular throughout the school year; barely a day went by without cries of "MONSTER" pealing around the playground before children dissipated in terror. When it began it took hold like a virus or an electrical charge, leaping from child to child and causing each to enact their chosen or designated role instantaneously, abandoning all other games to participate; refusals to join the game were very rare and, in my experience, were limited to the youngest children who sometimes appeared to be overwhelmed by the power of the game.

Just two girls – Megan and Lindsey - ever took up the monster role, and this was extremely rare and brief when it did occur. In the first extract here both Lindsey and Clare are afforded the opportunity to join Thomas in monstering by virtue of their position when he joins them on top of the scramble wall (he has not climbed up there to terrorise them – their presence seems incidental). It is notable how quickly Clare acts to distance herself from the monster role, rejecting the dominating power that Lindsey embraces.

Although gender was not an explicit element of ‘Monster’ itself, the gendering of these constituent embodiments combined with its frequency and visibility made it a critical channel through which gender was produced in the nursery. Thinking through several extracts centring on games of ‘Monster’, this section considers the affective flows of power produced through its bodily relations and how these shaped local emergences of gender. Throughout the discussion, certain spaces created by structures within the playground – the playhouse and scramble wall – become contested sites of safety, vulnerability, and/or resistance as the children’s bodies inhabit them, raising questions about how the intra-activity between human and non-human materiality affects potential subjectivations occupied by the children during the game.

Throughout all the monster-games, gender remains as a significant but tacit emergence within the children’s becomings. Through the next data extract, I explore the localised consequences of gendering flows of power between embodied subjectivations during the game:

*16<sup>th</sup> September, 2012*

*I am sitting by the train set when Thomas runs in from the playground (and is told by Mrs T. to walk) and tells Mrs D. excitedly that there’s a monster, before running back out. I follow him outside by which time he is riding in the toy car. George is on one of the trikes cycling around the track until Thomas shouts, “Monster!” at which point he leaps off his bike and tears down the playground screaming. The game spreads through the playground: moments later, Thomas is on top of the scramble wall with Clare and Lindsey. Adam and Chloe are underneath and once they see Thomas they start shouting at the top of their voices, “MONSTER! GET OFF OUR ROOF!”*

*Clare gets down from the scramble wall, but Lindsey and Thomas stay on top, tapping on the wood which is replied to with solid thumps from below. As Adam and Chloe repeat their cry several times, other children start to peer through the eaves and squeeze under the wall with them (and me). Soon there are about seven or eight children under and around the climbing wall all shouting loudly, "GET OFF OUR ROOF!" so that it becomes an unbearable cacophony and a teacher comes over to silence and disperse them.*

*[Later that afternoon] Maya, and a couple of other children are in the playhouse when Thomas runs up to the window and suddenly roars at them. The children quickly evacuate, squealing in mock terror, most of them running to the trikes. Thomas doesn't follow them, instead grabbing a hula hoop and repeatedly throwing it to the ground, roaring each time. There are no other children around until Thomas starts running around, crying and gesturing to the playhouse, "Everyone, there's a monster! Quick everyone, in here when the monster comes!"*

This game begins in typical style: Thomas's running body creates excitement, drawing attention and impressing urgency. This effect is increased here as Thomas<sup>25</sup> is running inside, where it is strictly forbidden, and his momentum is quickly dampened by Mrs T. telling him to walk when inside. This is an early clue as to the nature of the game and the monster bodies it created, that were so powerfully frenetic as to be incompatible with the inside space that needed to be physically muted and controlled.

When Thomas jumps into the toy car there is a risk that the game will be forgotten and his monster role abandoned, however his frenzied pace

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<sup>25</sup> It is a coincidence that in three of the extracts I share here Thomas is in the monster role. While he was one of its more frequent adopters, other older boys also regularly became monster, however these three extracts happen to contain my most detailed notes, possibly because he was one of the most enthusiastic (and, thus, successful) monsters.

continues, as if by speeding around the painted track he could build up the intense energy that monsterring requires. George receives Thomas's excitement and this propels the game forward – the first submission to Thomas's monster body that draws attention and legitimises his claim to the role by enacting its intended effect. 'Monster' was always collaborative: if collaborators did not willingly appear to enact the oppositional role they could not be forced or coerced.

Fortunately for whoever started the game, the monster transformation magnetically attracted other children to it like raindrops running down glass, accelerating in both pace and power with each collected droplet. Here the scramble wall becomes the locus of this magnetic power in an intra-active monsterring-assemblage that collectively enacts flows of dominance and resistance between the roof and the children below. Resistance against monsters in this manner was rare – children in victim roles overwhelmingly favoured retreat and evasion over confrontation. Here it seems that the structure of the scramble wall is a key factor in encouraging the active resistance of the children who shelter beneath it through the material and symbolic protection that it offers. Mediated and, therefore, safe physical combat – usually absent from 'Monster' - is also able to take place through the retaliated thumping of its wooden sides. By offering these protective and combative opportunities, the involvement of the scramble wall in the game enables the shifting of its customary dynamic flows, empowering those in victim roles. This empowerment appears to be highly attractive, as soon the space underneath the scramble wall is crammed full and the shouting reaches a fever pitch. These cries of resistance gain such power that they come to dominate the playground space – more so than the monsters on the roof – and are suppressed by a teacher.

When the game later moves to the playhouse, the children taking the victim roles behave very differently to when they were underneath the scramble wall (though the children inside had inhabited both spaces). Its walls do not seem to offer the same potential to bolster resistance against the monster and the children choose 'flight over fight', apparently considering the speed of escape offered by the trikes as a superior strategy. They take the more familiar stance of revelling in their submission to the monster's power, their screams

acknowledging their own helplessness in the face of Thomas's aggression. This successful invasion of the replica home runs roughshod over the safety of the domestic, creating it as an insecure, even vulnerable public space (though monster-Thomas does not need to enter the house itself to establish this), and this shift in the affective flows during this incident suggests critical difference in the way that the children's bodies engaged with each structure during this particular game.

When the playhouse has been evacuated, Thomas's monsterring loses its audience and so in an attempt to whip up interest again and create further opportunities to explore his role he gathers one himself, warning others about his own activities and enacting multiple subject positions, simultaneously threat and protector. He seeks an avenue for the dominance of monsterring to emerge in play, not merely taking opportunities but creating them. These flows of power within monster games show how altering the body to slip within and between the cracks of subjectivation, embracing social control (or revolting against it) in one moment, then losing oneself through its total sacrifice the next produced powerful waves of pleasure in the children. Crucially, these enactments and the pleasure they created seemed to spontaneously erupt in intensely visceral bodily manifestations, appearing to swell under the skin and within the bones of the children participating until containment became impossible and all sense of decorum was sacrificed to its emergence. This is particularly visible in the next extract:

*9<sup>th</sup> January, 2012*

*The house has become a fortress for a number of children seeking to escape the monster and I am called in to join them in safety. About five girls, two boys and myself squeeze into the tiny space and lookouts pop their head out of the windows. Once ensconced in the playhouse it seems that the monster has been distracted and the children mill about for a few moments, quiet and tense, waiting to be discovered. When this does not happen, the children either get too wound up by the tension or simply bored of waiting, and seemingly as one they all start screaming, "MONSTER!", even though none appears to be close by. Taking this cue, Thomas who is in the house*

*suddenly takes on the monster role in response, making a growling noise that causes the other children to run, still screaming, from the playhouse in mock terror.*

During this game the playhouse starts out as a protective structure, enclosing victims by its plastic walls whilst also providing visibility through its windows, but becomes a vulnerable space as the tension of waiting becomes unbearable. Thomas's switch between roles, becoming a monster body in the midst of the group, is preceded by the explosive desire of the group to become victims, shouting out their demand to be chased, to submit to their fantastical fears. In one sense it is the group of victims who are the aggressors here and all the children in the playhouse become wild-animalised through the game, embracing the impetus of their bodies, the group coiled like springs in an oversized jack-in-the-box playhouse that cannot wait for the music to stop.

When monsterring happens it doesn't just open up possibilities for bodily enactments of wildness and aggression, fear and resistance; it also creates space for children to become protectors and defenders, and these subjectivations were invariably inhabited by older boys. The following extract illustrates this as Thomas becomes shark – a variation on the monster game that makes the same material-discursive demands of its participants.

*21<sup>st</sup> May, 2012*

*I am standing outside near the playhouse when I hear George shout, "There's a shark in the house!" I go over to investigate and find Joshua in the house with George, who is pretending to take photos of Thomas with the play camera: it seems that Thomas is the 'shark' in the house. Joshua takes the initiative to push Thomas out the door, who is roaring and grinning from ear to ear. Joshua calls George to come inside the house and seeing me watching tells me to get in as well. I squeeze in through the door and he shuts it behind us, saying that we have to keep the monster out. George keeps taking photos of Thomas through the windows of the house and laughing but Joshua appears very serious about the threat and his ability to protect the house from the shark.*

In this extract, which features three of the older boys, nobody takes the victim role in the traditional sense. Joshua is clearly the protector, while George seems to have stepped outside the game's normal rules and locates himself as observer (this is very unusual). These boys decline the opportunity to embody victims; Joshua is set up as an equal to the aggressor, with the ability to physically expel monster-Thomas from the playhouse, while George is amused by the attack and acts as a documenter of events, shielded from bodily participation by the barrier of plastic camera and lensless aperture. During the attack, I appear to be the closest of us to becoming victim. Though I do not shout, scream, or run, I willingly respond to Joshua's attempt to protect me by ushering me inside and follow his command to stay inside. Whilst this speaks more to my role as ethnographer, where my instinct as researcher was usually to take a passive role in proceedings so that the children could pursue their own goals and interests in my presence, it should not pass without notice that here, once again, a gender balance of girl-victim and boy-aggressor/protector is maintained (albeit a rather oversized girl).

In the three games discussed thus far, Thomas has successfully embodied the monster on each occasion (if the measure of success is the establishment of affective aggressor-victim relations). Several of the other boys also saw equal success with monsterring throughout the year however there was one boy who repeatedly attempted it but usually failed to succeed in producing victims. Ethan, a usually quiet and rather timid boy, would sometimes join in monsterring or wild-animalising with another boy (like Jack, as demonstrated by previous extracts) but when he became monster alone he invariably found it difficult to establish the game through inspiring potential victims.

*10<sup>th</sup> November, 2011*

*Ethan walks over and I greet him. After a shy smile, Ethan quietly leans into Megan and makes a gentle growling noise, which I presume means he is pretending to be a monster. Megan smiles but says, "Ethan, don't be mean" and he goes away.*

Without buttress of costume or comrade to aid him, Ethan has trouble convincing Megan of his monster transformation. He fails to produce the key physical features of monsterring, with no claws for hands or loud roaring – his ‘gentle growling’ sounding more like a purr than a threat. Megan easily dismisses the ‘attack’, her smile hinting at the glee she might have indulged had she chosen to reciprocate in a victim role.

Ethan fails despite replicating the gender roles of successful monster games, and while Megan’s confident dismissal could be interpreted as transgressing the gender boundaries set by the game when contextual knowledge of Ethan is considered this extract becomes illustrative of how monsterring acted to reinforce rigid notions of masculinity and ‘appropriate’ boy bodies. As demonstrated within several other extracts that I discuss through these chapters, Ethan tended to follow the instructions of other children during play. I most often saw him playing with girls and younger boys, and he seemed to seek out calm, narrative-based play, particularly enjoying caring and family type games. None of this was unusual for the youngest boys in the nursery, however Ethan was one of the eldest in his year.

Megan’s refusal to take the victim role proposed to her marks out Ethan as inappropriate for monsterring, dampening his aspirations of dominance, and creates herself as uninterested in victimhood (in the previous chapter I shared several data extracts showing Megan enjoying aggressor roles during wild animalising play). Her (obeyed) command to Ethan belies the fact that the monster game and its constituent bodily subjectivations frequently serve to reproduce and circulate heteronormative notions of gender relations and subjectivities; since both shy Ethan and boisterous Megan transgress those notions this particular iteration of the game falls flat for both children.

### **Becoming Benign: Vulnerable and Caring Bodies**

Physical vulnerability was a critical element of monster games, with the attack and protection of the body enacting intense power relations for the enjoyment of participants, but there were other ways in which children explored these relations through bodily attention that embraced affection and trust over conflict. Doctor and patient play narratives, sometimes enacted through concerned parent and sick child, were also very popular with some children and

almost always took place within the privacy and seclusion of the home corner. Only a couple of weeks after Ethan's failed attempt to terrorise Megan, the pair undertake a rather more successful playtime enterprise that sees each child enjoying subjectivations more consistent with their usual preferences.

*23<sup>d</sup> November, 2011*

*Ethan is lying on the sofa in the home corner and Megan is sitting next to him on the floor. Thomas approaches them with the crocodile puppet that the children often use to scare/attack other children in monster games. Usually an enthusiastic participant in such games, this time Megan pushes Thomas away saying that Ethan is sick and is waiting for the doctor. Over the next ten minutes many children move in and around the home corner pursuing various activities, but Ethan remains on the sofa the whole time, passive, silent and smiling. Later, Caitlin takes Ethan's place and he nurses her, calling the doctor and pretending to give her medicine. This part of the game goes on for a full half hour, with several other children including Megan, Daisy and Chloe contributing to her care by giving her blankets, bringing her food, and calling the doctor again.*

The home corner sofa was a very popular location for children seeking out quiet time. As shown by the diagram in chapter four, the sofa was in a secluded spot and could be partially obscured by the kitchen cabinets, depending on the arrangement of the movable units that day. This flexible arrangement seemed to make the children feel safe and secure enough to explore vulnerability with others. Similarly to the monster game, when children took vulnerable roles it gave other children the opportunity to become protectors, as Megan does here.

During this game, Ethan is both at the heart of, and aloof from the home corner bustle. This seems to appeal to him – he makes no attempt to draw attention to himself and smiles happily throughout. Once again, the children enjoy shifting between the different subjectivations offered by the narrative, with Ethan switching to the caring role when Caitlin takes his place on the sofa. It might be anticipated that it is Ethan's usual shyness and timidity - distancing him from the expectation to be confident and boisterous that falls on young boys

- which gives him access to such a vulnerable role in the narrative, however he is not the only boy who enjoys being cared for in this way.

*18th November, 2011*

*Jack wants to play babies with Caitlin, Alexa and Chloe. I ask Jack why he likes playing babies as despite having one of the less ambiguous masculine characters in the class, I have often seen him playing this game enthusiastically. He says that he likes 'being the baby'... I comment that I think he's quite good at looking after the babies as well and he agrees, saying that he likes it. I am distracted for a moment and when I turn back Jack is curled up on the floor next to Alexa who is 'phoning the doctor' to say that her baby is sick.*

Jack's character differs quite significantly from Ethan's, yet he takes the same pleasure from creating a vulnerable body and allowing it to be cared for by others. As demonstrated by the 'good cat' extract above, Jack can also take pleasure from caring for others in home corner, as he attentively comforts Chloe and me in his role as 'dad'. It seems that despite its overt allusions to heteronormative domesticity, the comfort and privacy of the home corner provides avenues for boys and girls to enact elements of subjectivity that other, more public parts of the nursery (the playground, the small world) make difficult. In this way, the play options integral to home corner set-ups in classrooms that become discursively feminised in adult life – cooking, dressing up, hairdressing – create a heteronormative veneer saturated in opportunities for privacy that simultaneously protects boys wishing to explore those feminised options. As the school year passes and the nursery boys spent less and less time within that space, those opportunities evaporated along with their interest (or, perhaps, social comfort) in it.

Despite Jack's role in the 'good cat' game and Ethan's switch in the extract above, the caring roles were usually less flexible regarding gender and were overwhelmingly taken up by girls. While domestic mothering was the most popular context for these roles, sometimes girls escaped this predictability and found other avenues through which to enjoy caring.

*30<sup>th</sup> April, 2012*

*In the home corner Caitlin is lying on the sofa. Maya is kneeling next to her. I sit down near them and Maya tells me that she's the doctor and she's looking after Caitlin who is sick. She places her hands over Caitlin's head and then carefully spreads a blanket over her body, saying, "She's sleeping now". Caitlin closes her eyes on cue and feigns sleep. Maya is very proper as the doctor and assumes her stern voice.*

Becoming doctor is a chance for Maya to surpass domesticity and assume publicly-recognised authority and knowledge that extended beyond the direct familial influence of mothering. Unlike Alexa in the previous extract, Maya does not need to phone anyone else to remedy the situation she is faced with and provide appropriate care. Her words have a power to direct the narrative that both girls acknowledge, and the relations of power it demands are enacted through the body: Maya introducing a sternness to her voice and Caitlin immediately complying with the narration of sleep by closing her eyes, trusting Maya with complete physical vulnerability. The gravitas of Maya's commanding voice sees her body escape understandings of girls as 'nurturing' and 'kind', instead creating the effect of technical expertise and corporeal social power associated with the medical profession.

### **Becoming Big and Strong: (In)capable bodies**

Material strength, size, and age all came to matter in the production of gendered bodies through boundary articulations that afforded particular discursive properties, privileges and exclusions to those considered big, strong, old, or young enough. These boundary articulations set the physical capabilities of bodies as inherently gendered and imbued those capabilities with desire. In this extract, desire for bodily strength is produced through Jack's performance of muscles on his model and then his own body, and then his pride regarding his father's muscles.

*19<sup>th</sup> June, 2012*

*Jack and George are playing with a construction/modelling set that consists of many different shapes and sizes of coloured*

*plastic which link together. Jack has made a large model which he tells me is a 'muscleman'. I ask, "Who's the strongest person you know?" and Jack replies, "Me", flexing his arm by way of illustration and pointing to his upper arm. I ask about grown-ups and he says he doesn't know so I ask if his dad is strong. He confirms that his dad is very strong and explains how big his muscles are with admiration.*

In our conversation here, both Jack and I are very clear about the maleness of physical strength, Jack eschewing the genderless word 'bodybuilder' for old-fashioned 'muscleman', a word drafted into popular use from brightly painted piers and the vaudevillian amusements of family holiday camps. The word 'muscleman' evokes a ludicrous exaggeration of masculinity, bringing to mind not just fitness but highly tangible power written over the body with the outlines and curves of pumped up muscles. Jack's body also creates a cartoonish impression of hyper-masculine strength with his flexed arm – the only missing elements from the image are a can of spinach and an anchor tattoo. I then continue the gender association by suggesting that his Dad might be a strong grown-up and this reproduces a potent association between age, authority, maleness, and strength that Jack then revels in, confidence asserted through his father's apparently successful occupation of that material-discursive space.

*19th October, 2011*

*George and Jack are running around in the playground holding the toy carpenter tools and a toy green traffic cone. They tell me they are builders as they march past me purposefully. I ask if I can be a builder as well.*

*Jack: "No, you're too big"*

*JLS: "Are girls allowed to be builders?"*

*Jack: "No, only big boys"*

*JLS: "What if a girl is big and she wants to build?"*

*Jack replies again that it is only big boys who are builders. I press on with, "What if she wants to?" but he has no answer.<sup>26</sup>*

In this extract, the objects that they wield combined with the power and competence their bodies project with their confident march across the playground bestow a materially-located authority on George and Jack. Their importance and professionalised ability did not need to be spoken: it was evident from the way their bodies seemed to grow in age and size that the boys had exceeded their present physical limits and temporarily become 'men'. Jack's awareness of the boundaries set around this embodiment is demonstrated by his articulation of who else might also assume its authority, and, as he makes quite clear, I am not within that number.

It is extremely rare during my time at Hillside that my request to join in with a game is turned down, making Jack's refusal here even more notable. Through our subsequent conversation the gender-based body-boundaries that create possible subjectivations and shut off others are clarified to me by Jack, yet the exact locations and criteria of those boundaries appear slippery and somewhat intangible – even to the young boys who are so certain of their importance.

Jack produces a curious doublespeak to prevent my body from also 'becoming builder': I am 'too big' yet, as he then establishes, for boys a large physical size and/or age is a prerequisite for building. My bigness (or lack of), then, is not the sole factor behind my exclusion, and my next question elicits an additional bodily detail that is preventing my desired transformation: my gender. Despite my repeated questioning Jack cannot or will not elaborate as to why girls of any size or age (and, presumably, small boys) are not permitted to become builders.

It is unclear from my perspective whether Jack felt that these boundaries were pre-established and could not be meddled with, or, alternatively, whether he was creating and enforcing them on the spot to justify his desire for me to stay out of their game. Regardless of his intentions, his words produce powerfully gendering body in/exclusions that reserve the creativity, skill, and strength inherent to building work for male bodies.

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<sup>26</sup> Though I have already included this extract above, I reproduce it here for reference due to its relative brevity.

## Size, Age, and Gendered Power

*20<sup>th</sup> October, 2011*

*Chloe, Katie and Jack are having a pretend party in the home corner. Megan announces that she is having one as well but eventually appears to merge hers with the others. There are dozens of plates and bowls laid out on the table, some stacked up in piles. Caitlin and Daisy come over to join in and Katie gets annoyed, telling me they're spoiling the party because they're 'little girls' and she and Chloe are 'big girls' so they can't play together. She asks me to make them leave but I refuse so she approaches them and tries to stop them entering the home corner. The pair are resistant to this and Caitlin pushes past her and grabs a plate, pretending to eat off it, quickly shovelling empty space into her chomping mouth with a defiant, triumphant expression. While Katie turns to challenge Caitlin over this, Daisy also breaches the home corner boundary and joins Caitlin. Katie gets angry when she sees this and violently snatches the plates off them. She then storms off with Chloe in tow.*

The creation and discussion of parties was a popular activity for the girls in the nursery and became more so as the school year went on. Personal invitations to parties – both real and imagined – were often used as a social in- or exclusionary device to delineate friendship groups and enact alliances or divisions between girls. The power that attendance held meant that parties were invested with deep social meaning for older girls who understood their significance, and their implementation was taken very seriously by those girls.

The allure of the party is apparent from the opening of the extract as Megan catches onto the other children's idea but wishes to design her own gathering. If she was successful, Megan would have gained the coveted prestige and social power of being a party host, enabling her to enact the party's boundary-making properties according to her wishes, but this is not to be. Due to the limited space and resources of the home corner, and perhaps her relative isolation compared to the teamwork of Chloe, Katie, and Jack, Megan's attempt fails and, in the process, increases the magnetic pull of the original event.

Despite this, Megan's participation is accepted unquestioningly by the other children; she is also among the elder girls in the nursery and her body is produced as acceptable to join, if not to 'lead'.

Caitlin and Daisy receive a markedly different response from the group as Katie angrily dismisses them from the game and home corner area based on their age. Her confidence in the legitimacy of her complaint is such that she feels confident asking me to back her up and get rid of Caitlin and Daisy, assuming I will be sympathetic to her plight (unfortunately for Katie, I am not). To her the distinction between 'little girls' and 'big girls' is clear and of vital importance in her party scenario, as illustrated by her increasing aggravation as the younger girls successfully invade the party area.

Katie's words and anger enact a binary division between 'little' and 'big' girls' bodies that allocates certain activities and opportunities to big girl bodies that little ones are not appropriate for, and her party is one such activity. The carefully arranged home corner, with all the plastic plates and bowls stacked or laid out neatly around the table, evoked neatness and order while the party narrative itself alluded to glamour (play parties in nursery inevitably involved the wearing of princess dresses) and social popularity. In short, the 'big girls' bodies become capable and sophisticated. The assertion of these qualities is restated with Caitlin and Chloe's defiant snatching of plates and vigorous (pretend) gobbling seems to confirm Katie's fears about their lack of refinement. As 'little girls' their bodies become unmanageable and chaotic.

Through careful space-management and subsequent revolt, the fantasy party being held in the home corner enacted embodied boundaries around age and gender that excluded younger girls from the privilege of attending the party and socialising with older children. This exclusion (re)produces narratives of desire by enacting a hierarchy of aged, gendered bodies hinging on the aspirant sophistication of older femininity.

### **Becoming Bad: Aggressive and Rebellious Bodies**

Maclure et al.'s study (2009; 2012) on the production of 'problem' child reputations within early schooling identifies what they refer to as 'mixed-messages' regarding desirable or appropriate behaviour – whether that conflict emerges between home and school environments, between peers and adults,

or between different schooling spaces – as a key source of educationally disaffected behaviour. Within the published research report the authors restrain from speculating on the interaction between gender and problematised behaviour in the classroom, though the majority of the children to whom this behaviour is attributed in their examples are boys.

This restraint avoids repeating or providing ammunition for the troubling deterministic arguments that position boys as ‘naturally’ less controllable or compliant that are often alluded to in the discussion of boys and problem behaviour in early education. For example, the guidance document produced by the Department of Children, Schools and Families in 2009 relating to preventing educational disaffection in young boys overtly states that practitioners should not stereotype gender behaviour, yet stereotypes that locate boy bodies as unmanageable are deeply embedded in its language as the document repeatedly describes its ‘confident and capable’ boys as “active learners” (2009: 3) - descriptions that barely mask allusions to disaffection and physical rebelliousness in a “paradox of multiplicity/diversity and sameness/fixity” (Renold & Epstein, 2010: 70). By promoting irrepressible physical expression as a universal quality of boy bodies the framing of this guidance not only limits understanding of the variance in boys experiences and subjectivities but also establishes this as ‘different’ to the behaviour of girls, subverting the recognition of girls as equally ‘confident and capable’ and subtly suggesting that they tend to be passive (otherwise the need to describe boys as ‘active’ becomes superfluous).

Despite these potential linguistic pitfalls that risk naturalising the very problems that practitioners are trying to prevent, it remains important to discuss how the mixed messages that Maclure et al. identify as critical to the emergence of ‘bad reputations’ relate specifically to gendering practices that produce boy bodies and girl bodies. In the data I produced at Hillside I repeatedly recorded instances of boys rebelling against nursery and/or social rules of conduct through unsanctioned movement and, rarely, physical violence. Meanwhile, girls sometimes emerged as victims of these rebellions or proxy enforcers for nursery rules, but also sometimes engaged in embodied ‘problem behaviour’. In each case, boy and girl bodies became imbued with particular meanings that affected the progression and iterative outcomes of their intra-

activity with others. In my discussion of the data extracts shared here, it is not my goal to attribute gender *causes* to problematised behaviour, but rather to think through how problem behaviour and reactions to it produce gendered boundaries and expectations regarding boy and girl bodies.

*19<sup>th</sup> March, 2012*

*In the playground Joshua and Jack are competing to produce the funniest slide, usually contravening the strict rules that govern use of the slide enforced by teachers. Sometimes they go down on their stomachs, sometimes they deliberately launch themselves extra hard and bump at the bottom with a jump. They are interested in who is watching them and when they land they look around quickly to catch someone's eye (including myself) and laugh, commenting on their performance and gauging their audience's reactions.... [Shortly after] George joins Joshua and Jack in their funny slide game which has resumed after the football. They have incorporated head-over-heels rolls into their ever more noisy and spectacular landings and need to be told several times by a teacher to slide down on their bottoms instead over their stomachs (the optimum position for rolls and injuries at the bottom).*

Researchers focused on the production or presentation of hegemonic masculinity in Western society have repeatedly identified that a preparedness for competition, and the achievement of control and authority over male and female others through success in that competition, is one of its most prominent features from middle childhood (Francis, 1998; Renold, 1997; Skelton, 1999) through to adulthood (Connell, 1983, 1990; Mac an Ghail, 1994; Trujillo, 1991; Wilson & Daly, 1985). In this extract, a good natured but vigorous competitiveness drives the production of skilled, brave boy bodies – competitiveness not only between boys themselves but also between those bodies and the rules of the nursery space that seeks to eliminate material risk within it. The reward for this rebellion is the assertion of authority over one's own body, each other's bodies, and the nursery as an institutional non-human body that loses this control over its human-constituent bodies.

Through the ‘funny slide’ competition, Jack and Joshua’s bodies exceed nursery parameters of acceptability; they become *too* tough, *too* risky, and *too* visible in the enactment of these qualities, creating an infectiousness of their behaviour that draws in other bodies as George joins the fray. When the (female) teachers attempt to enforce those parameters, approaching the boys to remind them of rules that they already know, a narrative of protection and risk-avoidance encloses and legitimises the discipline and enacts a restriction and control over these iterations of boy bodies that repeatedly fails to contain them. The opposition such enactments of rebellion and authority set up between child bodies and the material-discursive nursery body occurred continuously throughout the year in ways that produced boy bodies as risky and physically powerful and the nursery, in both material and discursive structure, as risk-avoidant and rule-enforcing/compliant. Those later qualities were repeatedly associated with woman/girl bodies as not only were the universally-female nursery staff imbued with them as constituent human bodies of the nursery but, as is evident in the following two extracts, particular girls also acted as proxy enforcers of nursery discipline.

*22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2011*

*During carpet time Mrs D asks the children to sit nicely and she’ll choose the best ones to wash their hands for snack-time first. Most of the children cross their legs tidily and sit up straight but Katie points at Adam (who is fidgeting) and gasps to draw attention to his misbehaviour. The teachers are talking for a moment and pay no attention. Adam looks at Katie and raises his eyebrows at her, still fidgeting, as if challenging her back.*

During carpet-time or other seated activities the children all knew what ‘sitting nicely’ meant: the crossed legs, folded hands, and upturned expectant faces reiterated a pre-established and codified body discipline that the children had internalised as ‘nice’ through its repeated assertion to them. There was a reward of adult-recognition for successful internalisation of this effectively moral judgement (playing on the ambiguity of ‘nice’ and suggesting that arranging the body in submissive pose was not simply obedient but carried an inherent

humanistic *goodness*), and part of it involves further bodily discipline as the washing of hands is here an explicit element of being ‘chosen’.

In order for the moralistic undertones of this language to effectively enact ‘good bodies’, the existence of ‘bad bodies’ must be highlighted. Maclure et al. (2009) argue that in the production of ‘good’ child identities in the classroom, “the integrity of the normal path is consolidated by the identification of deviations” (2009:4). In this case it is Adam whose restlessness contrasts with nursery ideals and, as she turns body police, Katie produces his marginalisation, contrasting it with her own ‘acceptable normality’ and highlighting the disparity to the classroom. Her gasp enacts shock and disbelief at the spectacle she points out, setting up a binary between his deviant, uncontrollable boy body and her compliant, neat girl body with her accusing finger channelling the authority of the nursery to discipline each of their bodies. In this instance the teachers who have the ability to create further consequences for Adam are distracted and this flow of discipline dissipates before it reaches him, who acknowledges his deviation and disaffection with raised eyebrows.

This was not an isolated incident for Katie, who seemed to enjoy adopting leadership and proxy-teacher roles with the other children:

*20th January, 2012*

*The children are all sitting on the carpet waiting for a teacher to lead an activity. In the teachers’ absence, Katie has sat up on her heels at the front of the group and is imitating a teacher.*

*“No hitting”*

*“I’m watching you”*

*“I can see you, stop it!”*

*When Mrs D comes over she immediately stops this and sits to face the front again.*

This extract opens during a structural gap in the nursery organisation: the children occupy the carpet in anticipation of a class activity but as of yet no such activity is forthcoming and a confused limbo state – the kind that emerges frequently during the management of any large group of people – takes hold. This gap creates space for the emergence of ‘alternative management’ and

Katie is keen to take the role. She appears to find a form of sustenance in the enactment of the nursery biopower that seeks to produce compliant bodies; her own bodily 'goodness' is created through channelling that discipline towards other 'bad' bodies.

The gendering of Katie's own body, which was consistently styled as hyper-feminine through her clothes, hair, and – sometimes – make-up, should also be considered in relation to this alignment with nursery discipline. As I discuss further in the next section, the 'prettiness' of Katie's body would frequently elicit approval from adults and other children, creating it as desirable, and Katie appeared to find significant pleasure in the subsequent compliments and seemed to become accustomed to them; often in my research diary I note that Katie asks what I think of her dress or nail polish (and I inevitably reply positively). These compliments produce her body as 'good' in the eyes of adults but also create pressure for her to continuously reproduce that goodness through her body in order to maintain any self-esteem based on those compliments. It would therefore be unfair to Katie to construct her as pious or egotistical based on her policing of the other children's bodies: as Maclure et al. point out, her own integrity rests on being identified as desirably normative and this can only be achieved if deviance from that normality is also identified.

As for Adam, the above extract is merely one episode in a continuously reproduced nursery narrative that positions his body as 'bad'. Here are some of my initial notes about Adam early in the school year that describe a range of his behaviour deemed 'naughty' due to its deviation from normative nursery conduct:

*23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2011*

*Adam is a very sweet and cheerful boy but he very often disobeys teacher instructions and ignores the rules of the nursery. He gets told off several times a day without fail, and most days is sent to the 'naughty chair' for a spell. He is generally of a kind and generous nature, frequently complimenting and helping out other children, giving 'play presents' (like plastic food or a sandcastle), and seems to constantly have a smile on his face (except when he's arguing or being told off)... However, he talks when the teachers are*

*talking, runs when he's been told to walk, carries on playing when he's told to stop, moves around the carpet while a story is being told, throws food on the floor or puts it on other children's plates, and, occasionally, will hit or push other children if they argue over a toy or game. At snack-time today he is put on the naughty chair and is told it is for 'being silly' – he sits quietly for a moment but is soon acting up again. He is full of energy and is always moving about and making noise... Mrs S. tells me she thinks there is a lack of control at home, speculating that their parents may laugh at misbehaviour rather than discipline them for it.*

In this extract Mrs S's comments on Adam's parents directly establishes the existence of 'mixed messages' regarding appropriate behaviour, where his deviation is located as a result of parenting style clashing with educational style. Similarly to Jack and Joshua during the slide game, here the origin of his naughtiness lies in a body that continuously exceeds the boundaries of 'good' child material bodies, spilling over with noise and movement independently of external discipline.

As the autumn term passed, Adam's behaviour gradually shifted to become more aligned with nursery expectations and I noticed him getting on better with others and being sent to the naughty chair much less than I report in that early research diary extract. However, Adam's body carried the residue of that repeated marginalisation as 'bad' in ways that continued to affect his relations with others even as his behaviour changed:

*5th December, 2011*

*A dispute has broken out in the kitchen between Chloe and Adam. Chloe is looking fierce and Adam is standing watching Mrs R. who is on her way over. She asks what happened.*

*Chloe: "Adam hit me"*

*Adam: "I didn't!"*

*Chloe: "He did!"*

*Mrs R. looks over at me and asks if I saw what happened and I reply truthfully, "I'm sorry I was writing". Adam protests his*

*innocence again and Mrs R. responds in harsh tones, "Well I'm more likely to believe Chloe than you!" Adam gets upset and Mrs R. admonishes him further: "You don't hit little girls!"*

Adam's reputation seems solidified here: his body has already 'become bad' and enactments of its badness no longer have to be witnessed to be known. Mrs R's assumption that a physical attack would originate from Adam speaks powerfully to social perceptions of his body (both his own and those of others) as violence is no longer something Adam *does* – violence is something that he *is*. There is no question that Chloe's accusation could relate to an accident, a misunderstanding, or could itself be a lie. The violence of Adam's body is expected, anticipated, almost naturalised to an inherent physical trait.

Mrs R's next words bring the gendering potential of the situation into sharp focus. First she imbues Chloe with greater integrity than Adam, allowing her words to hold greater weight in her judgement of the incident. This could potentially be viewed as gendering in a manner that creates girls as of greater moral character than boys, however it is arguable that she may have considered any child's word as more reliable than Adam's. There is, however, no ambiguity regarding the effects of her assertion that Adam (a boy body) should not be aggressive towards 'little' (various interpretations of which could include: diminutive, disempowered, weak, and/or defenceless) girl bodies.

Mrs R is probably unaware here of the deep significance her words hold for the material-discursive shaping of gendered bodies in the nursery, but, nevertheless, they enact deeply entrenched heteronormative relations of power that work on boy and girl bodies to set boundaries around their possible and desirable becomings, setting girl bodies as weak and vulnerable, and boy bodies as powerful and dangerous. The impact of her words is amplified immeasurably by the generalisation inherent to her phrasing: rather than specifically asserting that Adam should not have hit Chloe (keeping the moral situation-specific), or stating that it is wrong to hit other children (of any gender or size). Moreover, the wide-ranging implications of this phrasing resets the possible interpretations of her previous statement that Chloe is more trustworthy than Adam; if she is speaking broadly about boys and girls, then perhaps girls are generally of greater moral character than boys.

Much of this analysis of aggressive and rebellious bodies thus far has focused on finding how boy and girls bodies are established as inherently different regarding their conformity to nursery social conduct rules, however other incidents served not to produce binary gendered bodies but instead to establish hierarchies between different expressions of gender embodiment. In the next extract negotiations between Megan, Daisy, and me regarding dancing and movement ultimately produce a particular hetero-feminine girl body as more desirable and acceptable than other alternative expressions:

*26<sup>th</sup> May, 2012*

*I am jumping up and down on the carpet with Daisy (apparently inspired by a group dance that happened on the carpet last week) and Megan runs over enthusiastically. She attempts to wrestle Daisy's hands out of mine forcefully so that she can jump with me instead. This upsets Daisy and she starts protesting at me (though I do tell Megan that I am dancing with Daisy and will dance with her afterwards). I encourage them both to join in a circle with me so we can all jump together but Megan wants be very fast and boisterous while Daisy (younger and quieter) wants to be gentle. Megan won't cooperate with Daisy or my attempts to accommodate her, instead trying to get us to run around in a circle. She laughs loudly, ignoring my attempts to talk to her and explain that we aren't going to run round. I remind Megan that running isn't allowed indoors and she will get told off again (as she did just last week). I tell her that we aren't going to run and let go of her hands, jumping alone with Daisy again, but Megan is undeterred and instead grabs some younger children who are watching us to join in with her running, though they seem unwilling to do so having heard me warn Megan about being told off.*

This extract sees a tug of wills between Megan and me, as I repeatedly attempt to resist her and she consistently ignores those attempts. Despite my ability to draw on my adult authority, I do not actually discipline Megan. Instead, I passively refer to the rules of the nursery and the authority of the teachers in

my reminder that she was told off for running indoors, then I disengage from her so that her behaviour does not change my own or the equally reluctant Daisy. Despite the deliberate distancing of myself from nursery institutional authority (I did not wish to emerge as one half of that regulating binary), as a recognised adult explicitly acting by the nursery rules, I indirectly enforce their legitimacy.

When my words have no effect, Megan attempts to physically force us to join her, wrestling my hands away from Daisy and trying to pull us round in a circle when we all hold hands. Megan's body is uncontrollable and rebellious and it seems important to her to join with other bodies in her movements. When she fails to engage Daisy and me she moves to potentially more pliable targets (though they also resist her). This uncontrollable physical exuberance and rebelliousness sits outside of expected heteronormative behaviour for girl's bodies.

By willingly joining with Daisy's body but refusing to link with Megan's my own dancing and jumping body extends the emergence of Daisy's 'gentle and good' girl body whilst refusing that of Megan's 'boisterous and naughty' girl body. It has the effect of reinforcing Daisy's gendering performance and creating her body as desirable while denying Megan's as repellent. In this way my differing reactions to the girls produce gentleness and sensitivity as positive attributes for their bodies, and boisterousness and disruption as negative ones.

I have argued in this section that where embodied intra-activity is problematised, whether by adults or other children, it can have implications for the production of those gendered bodies. Through tacit disapproval or overt discipline, it can restrict the range of potential becomings for boys and girls by imbuing their bodies with binary properties. These properties locate socially desirable girl bodies as aligned with the goals and intentions of the educational institution that promoted physical compliance motivated by an appreciation of adult approval. Meanwhile boy bodies are created as unmanageable and boisterous, socially *undesirable* in the context of educational institutions, yet deeply powerful within them as their behaviour is closely monitored for signs of 'badness', with strong, visible reactions when it is identified.

As the extracts I shared here have demonstrated, regardless of the origins of any apparent gender difference in problematised classroom behaviour when adults and other children respond to troubling intra-activity there may be

opportunities to sidestep potentially gendering reactions. When these opportunities are not taken, as Mrs R. and I fail to do in these extracts, the iterative development of gender stereotyped pressure on children's embodied subjectivations continues unchallenged.

### **Bodies that Gender**

The extracts featured here show human bodies at play, both alone and with others, and their transformations of shape, sound, movement, and touch, and the discourses that saturate these transformations to create configurations of gender through and around the body. The children's body play explored the relations of power that moved through and between the nursery as social-material-discursive space, experimenting with both directing and submitting to others, finding pleasure and interest in each but particularly when straddling the liminal spaces in-between, where the question of who dominates and who submits became blurred and intangible. It is these blurred relations of power that created opportunities for heteronormative notions of gender to be subverted or altered. The fluid shifts of power through intra-activity produced opportunities for temporally-bound emergent subjectivations that the children could transition through – aggression, submission, fear, warmth, love. The created localised temporal gender boundaries and articulations that these subjectivations by child bodies produced can be read as the enactment of gendering desire, the agential force that imbues material-discursive intra-activity with emotion as gender boundaries and articulations are produced. Desire, and the intense emotions that its fulfilment or disappointment sparks, is the subject with which I end this chapter, leading to a thesis conclusion which considers how the findings from my research can be applied to improve our understandings of emergent gender in early childhood and, hopefully, to create better emotional experiences for the youngest children in our care.

### **Bodies that Desire**

I began this thesis by arguing that from very early childhood, social acceptability rests on a positive recognition of gender enactments: as the controversy over baby Storm demonstrates, an inability to publically recognise a person's gender (and hence their assumed biological sex and assumed sexual

inclinations, whether present or future) may be roundly condemned as an undesirable subject. Furthermore, as I argued in chapter two, where binary gender is produced it is necessarily in reference to heterosexuality: the two phenomena are inseparable, and this underlying sexual component to gendered bodies is identifiable either as explicit reference or subtle echo. Where sexuality emerges, as do notions of physical attractiveness, with bodily desirability offering assumed current or future success in the enactment of that sexuality. This interpretation of bodily desire, while certainly usefully applicable, is essentially humanistic, locating desire as seated within the individual subject and exerted on oneself and others. Barad sees desire somewhat differently, expanding its range of applicability beyond the boundaries of brain, flesh, and bone:

*Eros, desire, life forces run through everything, not only specific body parts or specific kind of engagements among body parts. Matter itself is not a substrate or a medium for the flow of desire. Materiality itself is always already a desiring dynamism, a reiterative reconfiguring, energized and energizing, enlivened and enlivening.*

*Barad (In: Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2009)*

This chapter began with a quote from Barad concerning how agency enacts boundaries and exclusions and how it manifests channels of agency to create and restrict potential embodied becomings. In the quote featured above, she seems to unify – at least partially – her notions of agency and desire, establishing shared definitions as driving forces that establish connections and ruptures, freedoms and boundaries on and between human and non-human bodies, affecting the emergence of objectifications and subjectivations in local relations of power and prompting intra-activity in the material-discursive production of local phenomena.

A new materialist approach shifts analytic focus from traditional conceptions of the agential subject to the movements of agency/desire itself through spaces and bodies, but ultimately my research concern is with children's' individual experiences of gender and how these could be improved in ways that will both benefit their own lives and contribute to increased gender and sexual equality in

the society that they will grow up in and create. In this chapter's final section I explore how intra-acting channels of desire work through bodies to create or close off opportunities to occupy particular subjectivations and the gendering potential they offer. This brings together the various elements of my analysis to think through how the emergence of gender in the nursery is manifesting in individual children's lives, and seeks to contribute to the application of agential-realist theory.

### **Becoming Gendered, Becoming Desired: A brief return to the subject**

This section acts as a continuation of the discussion I began in my introductory chapter regarding gender and desire in the early years by sharing the remainder of that initial research diary extract featuring Lauren, Katie, and Chloe, plus two further research diary extracts which illustrate the emotional consequences of gendering for individual children in the nursery. This returns my discussion to the subject and personal life narratives that has been deliberately absented during my theoretical chapters to enable the new materialist analysis.

I first return to Lauren and her material-discursive movements around the nursery as she faces her own forms of 'gender trouble'. Here she finds boundaries set around the desired hetero-gendered becomings that she continuously attempts to penetrate, and eventually engages in an opportunity to create those boundaries herself, simultaneously strengthening the barriers to her own desire. I then turn to a discussion of a romantic game undertaken by Katie, her friend, Jack, and a number of the other boys in the nursery which has distinct sexual undertones, producing Katie's gendered body as an object of sexual desire. The extracts here emphasise the attractions, rewards, and punishments of gendering sexed bodies in the nursery, making an observable impact on children's emotional experiences.

#### **“He can't wear that one”: A Private Party**

The first extract I share here is a continuation of the incident contained in my introductory chapter, where we see Katie and Chloe's party transition across different areas of the nursery and observe shifts in Lauren's trajectory, first as

tolerated participant and then as active producer of gender boundaries and the party's exclusivity.

*17<sup>th</sup> January, 2012 (continuation of extract in chapter one)*

*Once the food has been packed, Chloe leads the way out of the home corner towards the toilets on the other side of the room, Katie follows, smiling, and Lauren trails behind them. As she passes me she looks up and says, "We're going to have our party now". I follow the trio and stand at the (doorless) toilet entrance to watch, however once they are in the toilets Katie challenges Chloe's decision, saying, "This isn't the right place for a party". All three stand together for a minute, confused, and other children mill around them, using the toilets and washing their hands. Eventually, Katie says, "I know! Come here" and leads them out of the toilet and on to the green carpet, which is unoccupied by other children. This seems to be acceptable and they settle down on the carpet to have their party. As soon as they start to get the food out a younger boy approaches them and asks what they're doing, wanting to join in. Lauren says you need to dress up for the party and leads him over to the dress-up corner. I follow to see Lauren rummaging through the items on offer, while the boy stands there, watching. Eventually Lauren sees me standing behind her and, giving an exaggerated sigh, says, "I can't find anything!" Seeing a chance to strike up a gender conversation, I pick up another princess dress that is lying on the floor and offer it to the boy, who takes it smiling at me. However Lauren spots my game immediately and points out, "He can't wear that one. He's a boy. He has to wear the car one" (there are two red car outfits in the dress up corner, complete with Velcro wheels to stick on the sides). Before I can respond, the class bell rings to signal that the children should gather on the green carpet for a group activity (bringing the narrative to a forced close).*

It is notable that Katie and Chloe decide to use the toilets for their party, as this space was never used by the nursery children for games (apart from when some of the more boisterous children played with the taps, spraying the water over their friends and laughing with glee). However, if the girls' negotiation of the material-spatial dimensions of the nursery are considered, it escalates a search for privacy and the enforcement of physical and discursive boundaries around their party. The home corner, where the three girls start out, offers the most seclusion in the play areas of the classroom (see chapter four for a diagram of the home corner placement and layout) and often hosted intimate games with personal narratives during which the children wished to sequester themselves from the rest of the peer group and the teachers. It is, therefore, ideal for narratives of social privilege where the children sought to become aloof and enact privileged gendering roles, attended on by willing friends rather than becoming lost in the de-individualising melee of play that circulated freely around the rest of the classroom.

As seen in the first part of this extract that I shared in the introductory chapter, Lauren penetrated the social privilege of Katie and Lauren's party with middling success; the girls did not actually tell her to leave, but tolerated her presence in silence. Here we see that being 'sent to Coventry' was not deterrent enough for Lauren, who persists in her attempts to insert herself into the party narrative. Perhaps it is this persistence that leads Katie and Chloe eventually to the toilets – the only large space in the nursery more spatially-private than the home corner- that offers a chance to reinforce the exclusivity of their party, repelling the participation of others and setting their location at the centre of its discursive boundaries by the addition of material barriers. Yet they still fail to shake poor Lauren, whose cheerful comment to me as she passes makes her appear oblivious to her exclusion.

The move to the toilets entails a sacrifice of any possible glamour for their party, and this realisation seems to dawn on Katie as she stands on the damp tiles and shifts around the children trying to use the basins and hand-dryers. Furthermore the move failed to gain greater privacy due to the presence of other children and Lauren still managing to attach herself to the group. The compromise of the green carpet that Katie settles on still creates a tangible physical party area, has a dry, comfortable floor and – critically - is unoccupied

by other children. This latter factor soon changes, demonstrating how, by moving around the nursery space and structure, materiality enfolds around and within games to iteratively produce opportunities for subjectivation. Playing out the party narrative on the green carpet makes the game 'public' and entices other children to come and investigate what is happening.

When this happens to Katie and Chloe's party, it is the tacitly excluded Lauren who becomes the gatekeeper and asserts material-discursive boundaries to exclude the younger boy in his current state (he needs to 'dress-up', formalising his body and shifting into a new subjectivation of privilege, achieving his own and expressing respect for the privilege of those already within the party). Through her position as gatekeeper, Lauren further solidifies the social privilege of the party, in doing so justifying her own desire and attempting to assert her right to be counted within its boundaries.

As she moves to the home corner to choose an outfit for the boy, Lauren becomes gender-police, blocking the queering potential of the princess dress moulding around the boy's body. Lauren's statement that, "He has to wear the car one" shuts down all interpretations of being boy beyond the heteronormative masculinity that disavows beauty and glamour from those occupying it, instead insisting on the physical activity and boisterousness implied by the bulky red car outfit (see chapter six). This turn of events presents a discomforting irony for Lauren: her own attempts to enact femininity with her body have been blocked by Katie and Chloe (who, remember, will not allow her feminine roles in narrative games or validate with recognition her princessed body into their party) – despite her sex and self-identified femininity she is not 'girl' enough to obtain the feminine privilege they inhabit for herself. Her lack of conformity to the material-discursive boundaries of binary gender obstruct her desire, yet when she notices these boundaries being broken down - in my offering of the dress and its acceptance by the boy – she is quick to reinforce them herself in a humourless scolding that cannot find pleasure from rebellion against normative gender.

### **“I'll marry you, Katie”: Boundaries of Desire**

The second extract shared here features Lauren, Katie, and Chloe enacting a wedding narrative which locates Katie as an embodiment of heteronormative

femininity and romantic desirability, Chloe as co-feminised gatekeeper, and Lauren in a liminal subjectivation attempting to enact her own desire for femininity and to be an object of desire herself but being obstructed by Chloe and Katie in different ways.

*28<sup>th</sup> May, 2012*

*Katie has taken all the pink flowers from the baskets at the shop and refuses to let Chloe share them. She holds them aloft above her head and dances around the home corner with them. Chloe follows her around, reaching for the flowers and protesting that Katie has to share, but being shorter than Katie she can't manage to reach them. Eventually Katie stops dancing and Chloe, now furious with her, says, "You're not going to come to my party". This gives Katie pause for thought and after considering Chloe for a moment she hands her a few flowers from her bunch, "Here, you can have these ones". This seems to satisfy Chloe who then helps Katie to obtain the rest of the flowers from the shop which they take back over to the home corner. They arrange the flowers carefully on the kitchen counter and start to co-construct a wedding/family narrative. Katie tells Chloe that she needs the flowers for her wedding and Chloe responds, "I'll be the sister and you be the mum". Lauren has been hovering nearby for some time, watching the pair closely, and now she attempts to join the game. On hearing that Katie talk about a wedding, Lauren volunteers, "I'll be the dad" (meaning that she will marry Katie). Chloe looks at her sternly and says, "No, you can't be the dad, you can be the brother". Lauren is not satisfied with this and retorts, "I'll be the sister then". Apparently confusing the narrative thus far, Chloe says, "You can't Katie is the sister so you're not allowed". After a brief face-off with Chloe, Lauren marches past her to go up to Katie (though Chloe tries to obstruct her with her arms) and says, "I'll marry you, Katie". Katie glances up from her flower arranging, but ignores her. Seeing me watching them, a sweet smile emerges on Katie's face and she bounds up to me,*

*excited. I ask if she's getting married which she confirms, happily, and I add, "To Lauren?" "No, Joshua" (who isn't in nursery today). I am surprised by her candidness but not about the romantic pairing. Through the rest of the game Chloe continuously attempts to direct the narrative according to her wishes, while Katie repeatedly persuades her to change it to fit her ideas, the details of which I miss, and Lauren hovers on the edge of the narrative, no longer attempting to take a leading role. Eventually, Chloe goes off to the hidey-hole in a sulk. Katie goes to find her, and I go with her. Katie crouches at the entrance to the dark compartment, trying to persuade Chloe to come out and play. Not being able to fit in the entrance with Katie, I can't hear Chloe's exact response but she is clearly dismissive of Katie's attempts at reconciliation. After a few moments, Katie emerges to tell me that Chloe isn't her best friend anymore, looking upset. I ask why and she just replies, "She said".*

The girls' intra-activity as material-discursive bodies during this extract speaks volumes about the possible subjectivations produced for each child in relation to heteronormative gender. The alignment of the colour pink with heteronormative femininity, particularly for young girls, is well documented in cultural and social research (Freeman, 2007; Koller, 2008; Paoletti, 2012; Pomerleau et al., 1990). As this extract starts, the sought-after pink flowers – their desirability amplified threefold due to their colour, their beauty, and their scarcity - become emblematic of a privileged femininity which Katie possess and Chloe wishes to share in. Finally she achieves her goal by threatening to shut Katie out of her own zone of social privilege – her party - and Katie's fast acquiescence to her friend belies the underlying priority to be socially desirable. Throughout the rest of the incident the girls appear to be co-operating in the hyper-feminisation of Katie as the epitome of gendered romantic desire, a bride (a 'mum' in Chloe's telling conflatory articulation), while Chloe herself is undisputed by Katie as occupying the second most desirable feminine subjectivation of 'the sister' (not as powerful as a 'mum' or 'bride' but equally unambivalent in its feminisation). However an underlying tension is evident in

the final dispute that sees Chloe dismiss Katie and her friendship; the source of this rupture appears to lie in the wrestle for control of the wedding narrative between Katie and Chloe, beginning with the fight over the flowers and ending in Chloe storming off to the hidey-hole (a small, dark tented area that the children could sit in to relax or play that offered extreme privacy which enacts a physical separation of her body from the nursery social group). If the wedding narrative can be read as an enactment of heteronormative feminine privilege, with Katie's embodiment of the bride at its centre, then Chloe's eagerness to direct the narrative serves as an attempt to find influence and, therefore, acceptance as equally feminised (or close to) as Katie.

Katie and Chloe's treatment of Lauren here offers an illustration of, not just a *de-feminising* but a *de-heteronormalising* (to coin a convoluted term) of her body that excludes her from any potential enactment or embodiment of gendering desire. Lauren has heard Katie and Chloe locate themselves within the two most desirable and privileged positions of femininity – the bride/mum and sister - which by proxy, denies her equal feminine status. She elects instead to bypass seeking further opportunity within the narrative for feminisation of her own body and creates a subjectivation that enacts a desire for Katie's hyper-femininity and would enable her to not only possess that femininity for her own as romantic partner, but also to perform heteronormative desirability and, hence, commandeer power in the game as a 'dad' who can be bridegroom to Katie.

Chloe immediately evokes the boundaries that close off Lauren's body as potentially desirable in any heteronormative sense (gender-bending or otherwise), demoting her to 'brother'. Being the 'brother' in family-based narratives was the least popular position to occupy for the girls; not only was it masculinising but it was also disempowering, as brothers had no authority over others in the family unit (the possibilities of masculine power belonging to fathers alone). When brother roles were enacted they were directed to activities by those in the parent roles and were not beautified or fussed over physically like sisters were. Often the brother role, similarly to 'dog', was to be disruptive and naughty – to be scolded by the parents, creating opportunities for them to discipline their playmates. Chloe's decision regarding Lauren's role in the narrative therefore avoids any desirable heteronormative subjectivations,

feminine or otherwise. Given this common construction of young masculinity in the nursery it is not surprising that Lauren sidesteps Chloe's allocation and grasps at a second choice of 'sister'. Though other games I have observed see multiple sisters accepted within a family unit, here Chloe implies that one sister - herself - is enough and a further discursive production of feminine desirability is closed off for Lauren.

Having failed to secure desirability through discursive negotiation, Lauren attempts material infiltration of the privileged space where Katie is preparing to be married through the arranging of flowers, the flowers themselves setting a materially-bounded heteronormative-feminine space for the imagined culmination of the game to occur. She starts to walk past Chloe, who faces her and is turned away from Katie, but Chloe quickly extends her arms to create a human barrier catching Lauren. Lauren throws up her arms in front of her and, bigger and stronger than Chloe, she easily manages to push past her to access Katie. This blocking and subsequent breakage produces Katie as precious, vulnerable, and elite: a performance escalated by her aloof silence as Lauren approaches and proposes. Katie's princessing has now elevated above the need for the material shaping of costumes. At this point, late in the school year and reaching the peak of heteronormative gender production in the nursery (see chapter five) Katie now performs the hyper-femininity of princessness with her unadorned body alone. With no desire for Lauren - as bridegroom, dad, or sister - she instead blithely announces the object of her affection to be Joshua, a choice made whimsical by his absence that keeps the narrative possibilities open and within the bounds of her control.

While Katie and Chloe bicker over wedding arrangements, Lauren fades out of discursive view from the narrative. I make no further observations concerning her except noting her abject physical presence in the wedding space that she has discursively withdrawn from. All opportunities to realise her desire as subject or object have been closed off to her and she is physically and discursively silenced. Her commitment to the narrative does, however, continue to attract her and her continued peripheral presence serves its own purpose for the wedding game: her body marks the boundaries of heteronormative desire that enacts the privilege that Katie and Chloe claim to hold. She takes the place

of Chloe's arms as the wall containing that desire, freeing the others to negotiate the nuances of their feminine performances in relative security.

### **“I'm waking you up”: Heterosexualising Gender**

A couple of days before the wedding game took place, Katie and Jack became engaged in a game of royalty and heroism that created multiple heterosexualised becomings for each child to occupy. Their game engrossed a group of boys who became complicit in the game's escalating sexualisation, but repelled one of the girls, Caitlin, who refused to participate in the narrative despite showing interest in their activities.

*26<sup>th</sup> May, 2012*

*Katie, George, Jack, Ethan and a couple of younger boys are playing together outside. I have noticed Jack and Katie running around together for a few minutes and eventually get the chance to see what they're up to. Katie is holding a bat and Jack has a stick. The children are standing by the tractor tyres – Jack is holding out the bat to Katie calling, “Quick, here's your sword”. Katie reaches out for it and as she turns around Ethan roars at her. Katie squeals and collapses on the tyre as if she is asleep. Jack immediately drops to his knees by her side. He strokes her head and puts his face close to hers to talk quietly. The other boys mill about, sometimes stroking Katie and sometimes calling her name quietly, however she continues to pretend to sleep. After a few minutes of this she apparently decides that it's time to wake up and allows Jack to help her onto her feet. After he does this, Jack flops down onto the tyre in Katie's place, and Katie gives him similar attentions to the ones she received. The group then runs off to the den in the trees, which Jack tells Katie is her bedroom. She stands in the corner for a moment but quickly pelts off down the playground, leaving Jack and George to run after her, calling, “Princess!” The game continues in the same vein for some time, with Katie running off and suddenly falling down deliberately, lying prone*

*on the floor until Jack comes to wake her. She does this at least six or seven times during the course of the game. One time she falls by the playhouse and Jack is crouching beside her. Ethan is nearby being the monster and Jack is trying to protect Katie. Caitlin joins in as well and Jack suggests that he is the knight and she is Superman. Caitlin protests that she is a girl so Jack says, without hesitation, "You can be Superman-girl" but Caitlin runs away instead. Jack looks back to Katie and kisses her stomach through her t-shirt, saying, "I'm waking you up". Katie duly wakes up, smiling, and allows Jack to help her to her feet.*

In this extract what appears to have started out as a monster game becomes, as I watch, a performance of heteronormative gender relations incorporating a complex interplay of power and desire between Katie and Jack, but casts each of them in a different relationship within the binarism of gender roles.

In chapter seven I wrote at length about the possible subjectivations of dominance and submission that would reliably emerge during monster games, and discussed how those in 'victim' roles (which girls would tend towards with only a handful of exceptions throughout the school year) would delight in their submission and mock fear, usually fleeing desperately from the aggressive (almost always male) monster, their only means of resistance their feet. Here this flow of power is disrupted by the possibility of active defence from Katie through the transference of a 'bat-sword' that carries the possibility of fighting and confrontation, opening potential for Katie to become that rare and masculinised third monster game role of 'protector' rather than leaping to protect her himself. In this transference, the bat-sword shifts the material-discursive parameters of the monster game and dismisses its usual gendering roles.

Katie does not pursue this potential: as Ethan roars she flops like a ragdoll onto the tyre in an embodiment of vulnerability that practically demands that those gendering roles are reinstated and adhered to, the possibilities of the bat-sword closing off as quickly as they arose. Her prone figure becomes magnetic as the boys who were involved in the monster game abandon aggression and

become engrossed in this vulnerability, quickly shifting into protective roles that circulate around her body. Jack is able to take the most privileged position closest to Katie's body, his whispers and stroking bonding them in intimacy. This bond established, as Katie wakes up their roles are reiterated, Jack stabilising her form as she rises to her feet, before Jack's subsequent collapse and incapacitation in her place effects a further disruption of the heteronormative-gendering potential that the game offers. The group of boys do not participate in the comforting this time and it is left to Katie to tend to her companion.

The next part of the narrative evokes the well-established game of 'kiss chase' (which I never observe taking place in Hillside Nursery) in that it sets up "a ritualized heterosexuality which can open up forms of sociality, pleasure, flows of desire between boy-bodies and girl-bodies, as well as sedimenting molar lines of heterosexualized gender" (Holford et al., 2013: 717-8). An underlying sexuality is revealed within the game by the group's movement to the den under the trees – the most private area of the playground which can only be reached by adults like myself by the pushing away of branches and hopping over grounded trunks. An intensely heterosexualising dynamic that might be frightening in 'real' adult life (and perhaps here) is quickly produced as the group of boys hover around Katie in what Jack calls her 'bedroom'. In the corner she stands, uncertain and silent, before deciding to run from the denouement of desire the situation alludes to – the sexual fulfilment of their relations by the tyres. Only Jack and his good friend George pursue her, princressing her as they call her back to them.

An elaboration on 'kiss chase' is then produced as Katie darts around the playground with intermittent collapse and then reawakening on Jack's ministrations, with the dangerous monster figure of Ethan as a continuous threat in the background. Yet it is Jack she is running from, rather than Ethan. Her collapsing body causes two effects: it ends Jack's pursuit of her by refusing engagement with him (until she elects to 'wake' before running off again) and yet simultaneously draws him to her body, allowing him close to her. Thus her movements produce a rehearsal of the pivotal moment of 'waking', where the most intense point of connection and eroticised need between the pair, the culmination of their communal desire for a reciprocal bond in the face of fear as

victim and protector, is perpetually reached before its tension is dispersed and the pleasurable ritual begins again. In the final 'waking' this eroticism and enactment of heterosexualising desire reaches its peak through the kiss Jack bestows on Katie's stomach, a bodily connection that evokes adult sexual connection while remaining benign enough to avoid offence or create confusion. Katie responds to the kiss with a smile, recognising its power and the possibilities it presents for another place and another time.

Even at this point, where both Katie and Jack appear to be cast in fully heteronormative relations, possibilities for queering gender emerge as Jack invites Caitlin to join his heroism as 'superman' and then 'superman-girl'. Although Caitlin was already engaged in heroic activity by helping Jack to defend Katie against the monster, she declines the title, balking at the binary gender disturbance it creates. While Caitlin may have chosen not to pursue the opportunity, the offer shifts the subjectivations that the game has created once again.

Throughout this extract Jack moves between multiple gendering subjectivations: his offer of the bat-sword to Katie challenges notions of masculinity that are open to him in the game as he recognises Katie's ability to defend herself without his help. Responding to Katie's embodied vulnerability Jack becomes heroic 'knight' and tends to her, but suddenly switches their roles by becoming vulnerable himself. He then becomes sexual pursuer, seeking Katie as his prize, but then again diminishes his potential for heteronormative embodiment by attempting to share his heroism and strength with Caitlin as an equal.

And what of Katie's desire? During the game she is repeatedly positioned as object, rather than subject of desire: she will not defend but must be defended, she will not chase but must be chased, and she will not wake but must be woken. Yet she willingly, actively seeks her own objectification, turning the narrative to produce herself as desirable but only fleetingly within reach. Perhaps this is why she flees from the 'bedroom' so quickly: the enclosed branches create a safe space for desires to be met and explored freely, but here Katie prefers to keep desire at arm's length, a projection on her hyper-feminine body that she produces for the enjoyment of others (always beautified,

princessed, and seeking appreciation) but that prevents her from exploring the physical capacity of her own desire.

### **Conclusions: Desire as Agency**

This section illustrates how heteronormative gendering can transition incrementally to more obviously heterosexualising intra-activity, particularly for children like Katie and Jack who repeatedly find opportunities to become 'feminine' and 'masculine' open to them. In the data extracts above the successful and repeated production of heteronormative subjectivations offers privilege through social recognition that imbues that intra-activity with desirability, and the agency to pursue inclusion and influence within the heteronormative space, as Chloe and Katie do in the above extracts. This privilege is not, however, permanent due to the inherent temporal instability of gender performances – gendering requires maintenance of boundaries which define its un/desirability. If subjects emerging through it wish to construct the appearance of heteronormative coherence and stability they must police those boundaries, as Katie and Chloe do both discursively and materially. A dreadful irony then occurs for Lauren who cannot find a place for herself within those boundaries, yet, unable to turn away from their allure, opts to police them regardless, reinforcing the walls that keep her excluded from desirability.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

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## Introduction

To conclude this thesis, I want to return to the matter of 'genderless' baby Storm and those comments that claimed we cannot 'argue with biology' in the ensuing nature versus nurture gender debate. The aim of this study has been to think differently about gender, outside of the binary nature/culture divide. To achieve this, I have applied Barad's new materialist account of material-discursive relations to my ethnographic data, shifting causality and agency in ways that fundamentally reshape the onto-epistemology of the world. The effect of this has been an analysis that locates gender not as product of nature *or* culture but as an effect produced when agential-cuts are made to delineate subject/object relations in intra-active (re)configurings of the natural/cultural world. In other words, the world becomes gendered as we strive to identify it in ourselves and in others, human or non-human. Gender itself, like any other phenomenon, has no pre-existence prior to its emergence through agential-cuts that seek to identify it, therefore the question of what produces it returns to ourselves and the apparatus of examination through which we seek the answer. In this theoretical approach, Storm never 'has' and never will 'have' a true gender to be concealed or, indeed, revealed, while the anger of their parent's critics is the frustration at a failed agential cut that cannot ascertain the object it seeks.

Why is it important to apply this view of gender to preschool children? Thinking outside of binary simplicity appears rarely to emerge in public discussion, where unproblematised assumptions about the emergence of gender in early childhood seem to saturate common understandings of gender and sexuality. As I argued in the introduction, the two most prominent contemporary concerns regarding gender inequality: the 'gender gap' in early education success, which produces boys as unengaged with schooling, and the sexualisation debates which manifest fears around protecting the proto-sexual young girl body whilst enhancing her body image and self-esteem (each of these being constructed as strictly anti-sexual), suffer from a confused

understanding of the relationship between discourse and materiality, as guidance appears to pander to both determinist and constructionist views of gender whilst satisfying the demands of neither (Ivinson, 2014a; Jackson, 2003; Paechter, 2003; Robinson & Davies, 2008).

In each debate the young child's sexed body is allotted binary gender categories with innate traits attributed to those categories as if they were a part of the material design of their respective bodies. Gender, therefore, becomes sidelined as a concern or even as an observable process, and management of perceived issues for those bodies (education for boys and sexuality for girls) assumes the responsibility of either encouraging or controlling those bodies 'natural' traits. In this project I have contributed to the ongoing feminist research task of making gendering processes visible and obvious, seeking out the moments in children's lives where gender is produced through and around their bodies, but not located within them as an inherent material or discursive property. By enacting my analytic agential-cuts on my data, I have located various iterations of spacetimemattering where gender emerges in their lives, and explored these moments as productive of gendering relations of power rather than evidence of material or discursive causes. Thus this thesis has sought to denaturalise binary gender assumptions and discover opportunities to help children escape from the expectations and assumptions represented within the gender gap and sexualisation discourses. By making material-discursive gendering visible in the lives of real children, the findings of my analysis have suggested new ways of thinking about gendering in early years education that step away from the reductive arguments that continue to dominate public discourse. If we continue to perceive gender in this way, and attempt to implant 'gender equality' based on notions of inherent difference, we will be unable to appreciate the complexity and flexibility of the lived gender experiences of young children and, hence, be unable to create opportunities for becoming differently as emergent gendered subjects.

In this conclusion I summarise my findings and discuss the analytic themes that have emerged throughout this thesis. I first return to the research questions that guided the design of this study and consider how successfully they have been addressed, and the implications of the answers elucidated from my data. I think through how my analysis might be helpful for early years policy

and pedagogy, and also how my findings might inform parenting practice for those concerned with raising their children as free as possible from gender rigidity and the limitations of binary roles.

I then think through the challenges and limitations of this study, and also discuss ideas for future development of the ideas and data produced through it. I propose a number of different areas for future new materialist research on early childhood and gender which could contribute to this particular strand of research and further advance our collective understanding.

## **Research Questions and Findings**

This section discusses the findings of my analysis in relation to the research questions that guide it. In this discussion I reflect on how successful I have been in answering these questions and consider how the research might have been altered or extended to further the understandings produced.

### ***How is gender produced in the social spaces and relations of early childhood?***

*Sub-question: How do notions of gender emerge materially, discursively, spatially, and temporally within the specific locality of Hillside Nursery?*

While heteronormative gendering continuously emerged in my data, it was far from a universal law producing predictable behaviour; in the above chapters we have seen Ethan successfully explore vulnerability and achieve desirability as a playmate in this way; we have seen Megan achieve social dominance through aggression, vibrant with agential power channelled through crocodile plush. However the pull of heteronormative gender continues to weave around these children's intra-activities - finding a loose thread here, a crack there - where Ethan's ambivalent attempts at aggression can be drastically accelerated without his intervention as he becomes half-hearted yet highly-successful monster, and boisterous Megan can become embarrassed at a skirt that shows her knickers and curtails her carefree enjoyment to meet a silent demand for decorum. Lauren is enthralled by heteronormativity – now that desire has grasped her and she has made the connection between successful gendering and privilege, her enjoyment in the nursery now appears to be contingent on

successfully penetrating its bounds. Thus she is 'stuck', her abject presence on its outskirts performing its own function for heteronormative desire by marking those liminal boundaries ('here is what we are not') and demonstrating the pitfalls of nonconformity for the older children in the nursery – intentional or otherwise.

Despite the pervasive social power of heteronormative performances, masculinity and femininity as identities did not form 'naturally' for the children but were produced and reproduced in normalising, bounded ways that offered social rewards for those who materially and discursively performed them in emergent subjectivations. As they grew older and became more immersed in the social world of the nursery, the children become increasingly aware of those rewards and the methods of achieving them.

The privilege of heteronormativity was produced in the nursery through a variety of material and discursive channels: it entered through the styling and location of toys in areas of the classroom, grouping domestic and feminised activities together in the private home corner, and action-based, masculinised activities in the public small world. It seeped in through the characters and narratives in storybooks and television programmes. It subtly pervaded through the universal female gender of the teachers and assistants (and myself as early childhood researcher). It was written on the children's clothes, their accessories, their bags, and the transitional objects that entered from the home. Finally, all these material-discursive channels producing masculinities and femininities entered through our collective speech; in casual conversation between adults above the children's heads; in play narratives that used them as structural reference points; in debates and friendships. And all these productions spoke of desirability, but not desirability as icing on a cake or unanticipated bonus but as a condition of social recognition, a necessary conformity to achieve subjecthood and take the right to distinguish oneself from objects within agential-cuts that were part of the critical matter in the nursery of becoming older and, inextricably, becoming gendered. The privilege offered by becoming entangled with the agency of heteronormative desirability was the privilege of being subject, of being 'normal', of being human. And what child would not want that? A way forward for research and practice is to open up and enhance alternative desirable subjectivations through material-discursive

formations outside of gendering boundaries that enable children to feel fulfilled in their desires without conforming to binary gendering or feeling the shortfall when their bodies are excluded from it.

In chapter five I argued that the nursery was not a gender-neutral space: the structure of the classroom and playground created channels for gendering flows of power that created particular areas as public or private, still or vibrant, and linked together objects in arrangements that led from one activity to another with escalating gender possibilities. Through the examples of the home corner, the small world, and the scramble wall, I demonstrated how iterative material-discursive formations in intra-action with the human and non-human bodies that entangled with these spaces developed and changed over time to produce gender. Agential-cuts performed within these spaces found gendering subjectivations and objectifications enacted on those bodies to create impressions of masculinity and femininity as coherent with heteronormative binary gender. However these spaces could also engage with queerings of binary gender as different desires were channelled through these entanglements that enabled boys to find pleasure in vulnerability and girls to explore their physical potential.

Moreover, structures within the nursery or playground could create their own 'micro-spaces' where gendering took place (the playhouse, the scramble wall, the tree den, the hidey hole, the toilets, the sofa, behind the kitchen units. Many of these micro-spaces were primarily inhabited by girls, producing their bodies as private and marginalised, while boys roamed more widely over the open, public spaces of the nursery, producing more scope for boisterous physical activity and domination (Francis, 2004). A demonstration of this division can be found in the monsterring games described in chapter seven, where the (mostly male) monster dominated open spaces and the (mostly female) victims would dissipate to the hidden micro-spaces for protection.

The nursery was also not a stable space: it changed on a material level throughout the school year as gender became increasingly pronounced – the home corner became messy and overlooked while the small world remained plain and rigid. Children could utilise areas for purposes at odds with their customary or designated use: for example, Jack and Joshua making the home corner microwave a television and games console, or the green carpet normally

used for teacher-led activities for girls (and younger boys) to enjoy play-parties and dancing. However such alternative uses of these spaces tended not to produce challenges to these gendering potentials, but enacted further gendering relations of domination: Joshua and Jack did not engage in the traditional home corner activities of food preparation and dress-up when they entered the space, but instead performed the stereotypically masculinised activities of violent video-gaming using the same resources, making them unavailable for the feminised narratives of home-making that the girls tended to engage in through the home corner space.

Meanwhile, the green carpet was often found to be the most welcoming space for play-parties that required an open space to arrange food and allow dancing due to the fact that play-oriented areas of the classroom that offered this space (like the small world) were already occupied primarily by boy-bodies and the trains and cars they increasingly played with over the year. Importantly, parties and dancing on the green carpet were frequently interrupted by teachers so that the space could be used for its usual purposes, displacing the girls who occupied it. Though the small world carpet was also used for organised nursery activities like waiting to be picked up by parents, this would only take place outside of designated play times, while the green carpet could be reterritorialised by the teachers at any point during the afternoon. This potential interruption located the girl's public activities as inherently unstable, effectively chasing them back to the home corner where they could carry out their narratives unabated.

These findings support arguments introduced by other researchers that schools must carefully interrogate the organisation and potential uses of material space within the early years classroom and playground. My analysis suggests several points of possible interrogation where schools and practitioners could act to support transgression of the binary gender boundaries that are enacted through these spaces; these are discussed under the last research question addressed here.

A limitation to this study in terms of answering this research question was the lack of visual or audio data, which would have been extremely helpful to a mapping of the material classroom and also to the entanglement of bodies in intra-activity. As I mention in chapter four, I believe I could have collected this

data in different ways had I realised what help it would have been to my analysis. Unfortunately, due to my late discovery of new materialism, I did not attempt this at the time. I look forward to generating such data in future studies to explore the different ways it could produce of seeing gender in the early years classroom.

In terms of other possible future research, the changes I observed in the classroom space over the course of nine months suggest that more longitudinal studies focusing on the iterative gendering emergence of time and space within the early years classroom are needed. Furthermore, I would like to have conducted the home visits differently so as to be able to incorporate a spatial analysis of entangled spaces, where the school and home can be considered as simultaneously emergent in intra-activity with the children's bodies that move between them each day.

***How do human and non-human bodies become gendered in early childhood?***

*Sub-questions: How does gender become naturalised to particular bodies?*

*When and where do boy-bodies and girl-bodies, material objects and discursive narratives become 'masculine' and 'feminine'? What happens when binary (heteronormative) gendering is diverted/refused/failed?*

In chapters five and six I explored how entanglements of human and non-human bodies created possible subjectivations that enacted gendering boundaries and exclusions through material-discursive intra-activity, enabling or foreclosing opportunities for the children to express desires and prompting gendering engagements or rebellions

Girl-body entanglements with princess dresses created a hyper-femininity that was materially disposable and transient but could be attached indelibly to wider discourses of princessing that pervade girlhood. The attraction of these dresses served to create and reinforce boundaries that determined heteronormative femininity. While they could empower girls when worn through enacting desires for beauty and approval, this effect was temporal and could be exploited for amusement and then dismissed afterwards. From my observations of girls at play it was the hyper-feminising of girls' 'normal' appearance which proved to be more pervasively powerful in producing gender,

as the modesty-inducing skirts, high-maintenance hair styles, and impractical decorative shoes closed off opportunities to become subjects outside of femininity. These pressures on female bodies to perform femininity in the everyday could be restrictive to other desires, such as enjoying the physicality of the body beyond appearance, or continuing play uninterrupted by the need to rearrange hair or slip off unsuitable shoes

Entanglements with animal costumes established a distance between temporal performance and behavioural expectations that created a safe social space for children to inhabit aggressive subjectivations and enact violence on those around them without the fear of causing actual harm. Rather than being a cause for concern, this freedom could be particularly helpful for girls and less confident boys who might otherwise have struggled to find acceptable channels to experience these desires for dominance. I observed how some girls could use the animal costumes to find the freedom to break from heteronormative rigidity, like Megan enacting aggression with the crocodile. Meanwhile, one of the quieter boys, Ethan, found an otherwise elusive opportunity for him to experience the aggressive dominance expected of boys but which he did not usually attempt. It is interesting that despite their frequent involvement in family narratives there were no domestic animal costumes available for the children, such as cats or dogs.

My analysis also showed non-human bodies produced as gendered through intra-activity. Children's play with dolls provided some of the most powerful examples of how gendering could emerge through proxy human bodies, becoming 'almost (gendered) subject' in their humanisation. Moreover, the dolls provided embodied opportunities for the children to explore different aspects of gender, where the dolls were subject to anger and violence (as Adam attacked them for not being 'boys'); care and nurturing attention (but only for those who Katie found 'girl sponges' for; and personal identification that cut across race and gender (with both Maya and Clare finding same-ethnicity dolls of greater interest, and Clare choosing the pale-skinned doll as female).

I found multiple points in the data where girls' and boys' gendering becomings were subverted by other children. Sometimes heteronormative bodily becomings were rejected (as the persistent Lauren was consistently brushed off by Katie and Chloe) and sometimes queerings of gender were

refused (like George ignoring Ethan's pleas to save his falling car, or Caitlin's suspicion at Jack's proposal of her becoming 'Superman-girl'). Sometimes these subversions created simmering emotional consequences, as with Lauren's sad hovering at the periphery of play; other times immediate and abrupt consequence materialised, as Caitlin pelts away from Jack and the suggestion of becoming hero.

What has been consistently clear through this analysis is that coherent gendering emerges through collective intra-activity, and the support of other children is as crucial to gender outcomes in agential-cuts as any individual's bodily enactments. The apparent naturalisation of gender operates not only through the inclusion of particular becomings as 'gendered bodies' but also through the enforcement of exclusionary boundaries that produce the rigid definitions of 'what counts' as gender enactment.

In future research it would be fascinating to return to the same group of children again to explore how these becomings continued to shift and change throughout their early lives. Through such a return I might observe how each child's earlier experiences enfolded with their present and future becomings and better understand gendering as a non-linear, flexible phenomena of emergent subjectivity.

### ***How do young children experience gender and sexuality?***

*Sub-question: What are the emotional effects of gendered/gendering experiences on individual children?*

*The desire for gender, often felt as a visceral excitement, is a crucial component of heterosexuality as a political institution... gender dynamically empowers heterosexuality*  
(Jefferys, 1996: 75)

Throughout my data analysis I have explored the ways that individual children occupied various subjectivations to produce and experience gender through their bodies, in intra-activity with other bodies. It was challenging to reconcile a political concern to improve children's experiences of gender with my theoretical framework of new materialism, particularly as I began this study so thoroughly embedded in discourse and the subject. When it comes to considering how to discuss the individual's experience, the presence of desire

seemed to be key to children's emotions-in-gendering, whether thwarted or fulfilled.

In the introduction to this thesis, I wrote about desire in my data and how it seemed to flow through intra-activity to produce gender through children's bodies and constitute them as emotional subjects in gendering ways. That desire, discussed in relation to social acceptance and recognition of heteronormative gender enactments, can be construed as a meeting point between agential-realism and humanist notions of subjectivity. Where Barad decentres the subject and denies its pre-existence to its intra-active emergence, this can create a discordance in the way we feel about ourselves and our apparent will and ability to exert agency. How can we reconcile this troubling feeling with thinking about posthuman theory? Where do we find 'ourselves' left by new materialism when all our becomings are temporal and transient? This section seeks to explore a possible answer to this question through the theorising of desire as agency and the notion of emotion as the sediment of intra-activity in spacetimemattering. I feel I am on unstable ground here as I shift slightly beyond what agential-realism has thus far offered and I am no philosopher nor eminent theorist; nevertheless, through performing this work I have been exposed to too many expressions of concern about these matters to ignore their import, and thus I will offer what I can to the ongoing conversation about how we as humans can think about the self in a posthuman world.

At the end of chapter seven I discuss how several children negotiated possibilities to enact desirable gender. I tracked desire as it operated and progressed through the intra-activity of materiality and discourse, gendering space, time, and matter as it passed. In the agential-cuts made by this data, desire acts agentially to enact gender in material-discursive formations.

*Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers*

*Barad (Dolphijn, R. & van der Tuin, I. 2009)*

But why does desire have such pull as agency? Desire, particularly that which flows between and about human bodies, seems to emerge deep within our matter, with vivid, visceral bodily effects that work their way to our minds. In other words, desire enacts emotion within us, as illustrated by Lauren above.

As continues to be proved by innumerable failed Turing tests, it is not language that makes us 'human' but emotion. In an agential-realist approach, the origins and genealogy of our - apparently - individual emotions, and our interpretation of them in relation to our lives appears to be in contradiction with our iterative emergence as temporal subjects. How do we achieve this perception of linearity and constancy in our hearts if agential-realism would have us created anew with each moment and multitudinous in our temporalities; when "there are no trajectories" (Barad, 2007: 181)? How do Katie and Chloe's activities influence Lauren to powerfully that she forgets herself in their pull? Why does Katie delight so intensely in her heterosexualising pursuit?

In her discussion of spacetime mattering, Barad offers the metaphor of age rings within tree trunks materialising temporality:

*This metaphor is meant to be evocative of the sedimenting process of becoming... the past matters and so does the future, but the past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming.*  
(Barad, 2007: 181)

Through this metaphor, I find it compelling to perceive the emotions of human bodies as analogous to Barad's tree age rings. If emotions are the sediment of our becomings, they materialise past, presents, and futures through their emergence. While we experience their emergence as transient (like tree rings, emotions eventually sink beneath the surface) they are a product of our being-in-temporality, of our iterative enfolding as human bodies with other bodies, and prompt glimpses of our past, present, and future experiences. In each of the data extracts shared in this section, it is emotions produced through the tensions between past, present and future gender becomings that seem to driving their intra-activity, fears and longings for what has been, what is, and what could be.

So what of desire as agency? I would argue that desire is how we are able to translate Baradian spacetime mattering into our becomings as feeling subjects, working through the evocation of emotions to create apparently linear

narratives of experience upon which to locate ourselves. Desire exposes the temporal sediment of becomings that has formed through a human body, a raw cut into the tree trunk, and it is the emotions evoked through this exposure of sediment where we find our humanity. While this line of thinking does nothing to save our notions of divine privilege as human beings, with our lumpen bodies as tree trunks, it does offer a possible entry point to new materialist theory for those who cannot identify themselves within posthuman thinking. Ultimately, I found space within agential-realism to translate emergent becomings into emotional experience. I have been limited by time in extending this theoretical work, and there is more investigation to be conducted here, where there are possibilities of incorporating notions of 'affect' that theorise emotional intensity within and between bodies (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 1995; Shouse, 2005; Stewart, 2007; Wetherell, 2012). This work could extend the range of agential-realism has already been set in motion (Anderson, 2014) and is certainly worthy of further exploration.

***How can understandings of these productions, becomings, and experiences be usefully applied to early years pedagogical practice and policy?***

*Sub-question: How can young children be better supported in relation to gender, and how can their experiences within preschool education be improved?*

By treating gender and gendered subjectivities as temporally emergent rather than pre-existing in children's experiences, I have attempted here to stop looking at my participants as cultural-discursive containers or sponges that 'soak up' gender as they are exposed to it, but as active co-creators of gender in their own lives. This then shifts the focus for politicised attempts at change (of which this project is one) from changing 'what goes in' to creating new opportunities for gender to 'come out' of early childhood. In this section I think through some possible ways that practitioners might work with new materialist concepts to open up new and different gendering possibilities for the children in their classrooms. It should be noted here that I have no experience in teaching practice with any age group beyond the 'teaching assistant' role I informally played in the nursery, and possess relatively limited knowledge of pedagogical

theory, as should already be clear at this point. Therefore I have not moved to make assertions regarding what practitioners are doing 'right or wrong' in relation to gender. What I have produced here are some thinking points for classroom organisation that are particularly pertinent to a new materialist perspective. They are intended to translate some of the findings here to explore how they could be applied usefully in early education.

Recommendations for changes to practice should not be made lightly as this is a field of expertise that undergoes continuous policy revision, weighing practitioners with constant change and instability of focus. Therefore while my suggestions here are 'thinking points' rather than concrete outlines for further change, there is nevertheless the possibility that thinking in a new materialist framework might prove unusually freeing for early years practitioners. The motivation behind these thinking points is the creation of opportunities for children to experience subjectivations that either directly challenge heteronormative gendering, or even free them from its implication in their activities. Some of these ideas require more practitioner-intervention while others suggest a deregulation of activities. They hold in common changes to some of the material-discursive formations in which I have observed gender emerging within this study. They may be workable and useful in some classrooms, but be deeply problematic within others, and are intended as points for discussion rather than as simple solutions. The common theme of these ideas is that they attempt to respond to Osgood's call to create "space for children to play with gender" (2015: 55), but as pedagogical spaces and styles differ widely they may be more helpful in some classrooms than in others.

In the future, it would be exciting to work with practitioners to encourage engagement with new materialist research. This could occur in a workshop format where practitioners could discuss data and enact their own agential cuts in interpretation to identify new perspectives, or within classrooms with groups of children with interventions thoughtfully enacted and their effects experienced and discussed. What may be particularly attractive about these recommendations for practitioners is that they often rely on the shifting of spaces and objects to produce change (which, once enacted, has the potential to effect change for many children in one move) or on a de-regulation rather than a framework of new rules. Because of this, these ideas can be enacted

alongside formal policy and practice guidelines without demanding more of practitioner's supply of time and attention that their heavy burden of monitoring and regulation already cuts short.

### ***De-zoning Gender:***

The structure of 'themed' spaces in classrooms enacts gendering flows of activities, where those in physical proximity are associated with each other (eg. hairdressing and dressing up are associated with kitchens and shops in the Hillside home corner, while mathematics is associated with cars and trains in the small world). My findings suggest that these 'commonsense' associations are actually highly gendering: where one or more of these activities is strongly associated with a gender stereotype that the children will be aware of (eg. girls are interested in hairdressing and princess dresses) then other activities in the area also become associated with that gender (cooking food in the kitchen and shopping for food/flowers). This also encourages the development of gender segregation over time as I observed in Hillside, where the girls found themselves increasingly attracted to the home corner, while the boys were increasingly attracted to the small world. De-zoning activities by reorganising classrooms in ways that disregard or question such commonsense associations of particular activities (why should the hairdressing salon be located near to the kitchen? Why were the mathematics learning materials and books not in the more gender-neutral 'learning space' of the green carpet, instead of in the male-dominated small world?) could produce new and unexpected linkages between activities in ways that disrupt or challenge the gendering of space, place, and objects, allowing the children greater freedom of expression outside of gender expectations. In addition, the creation of private micro-spaces that were free from gendering implications (unlike the home corner or the playhouse in the playground) could provide spaces for boys to engage in intimate play within small friendship groups.

### ***Movement and deregulating gendering use of space:***

This point ties closely with the last in that it also involves schools and practitioners questioning the regulation of children's bodies in their use of the spaces provided by the nursery. The classroom and the playground created different opportunities for movement not only due to their material structures but

also because of the regulation of activities within those spaces. Active, boisterous monster games were usually only permitted to take place outside because they involved running and loud noise, which were prohibited inside the classroom (as demonstrated within the teapot rebellion extract in chapter five) while dressing-up in costumes was only permitted inside, effectively barring princessed girls from engaging in physically active play. These regulations enacted gendering boundaries around these types of play and closed off possibilities for subjectivations that challenged gender stereotypes. Where deregulating activities might produce new challenges for practitioners - for example, if princess dresses are allowed outside then they might get dirty - new solutions might also emerge. For example, regular scheduling of laundering the princess dresses using school facilities may be a workable solution to fears of them being spoilt by outside play, whilst designated 'noisy time' inside enables children to find freedom to transgress the material boundaries of play whilst remaining manageable by teachers.

***De-gendering of gendered activities through object selection:***

This point complements the de-zoning of gendered spaces in the nursery: through carefully selecting and mixing play objects for use in the early years classroom, schools may be able to discourage gender segregation in engagement with those objects. For example, the hairdressing salon was decorated in pastel hues and floral patterns which are culturally linked with femininity. The effect of this design is to designate the activity of hairdressing as being 'for girls' and not boys. If efforts were made to source/design a hairdressing area with gender neutral colours, perhaps boys would not feel excluded from this activity. That is not to 'banish' pink and pastels from the early years classroom as if they were toxic objects; in other areas their use as signifiers of femininity may be put to effective use. For example, sourcing cars or play tools in culturally feminised colours may encourage the girls to play with such objects and challenge the division of areas by gender. This solution is not perfect: in an ideal world colours and decoration would not be gendering in and of themselves. In the absence of such a world, exploiting such gendering by attracting boys and girls to different objects and activities that in themselves overcome gender boundaries may be the most realistic action that schools can undertake. In regards to the dressing-up box I do not wish to suggest that

princess dresses should be removed, however I would argue that addressing the serious imbalances in the variety of costumes provided for the children that I found in Hillside would be vital. Princess dresses formed the majority of dress-up options within the nursery while gender-neutral or masculinised outfits were sparse and, apart from the new animal costumes introduced in the spring, ill-defined (for example, a lone unadorned hi-visibility jacket that could belong to a builder, police officer, or council worker). Based on the gendering activities involving dressing-up within my data I suggest that addressing this imbalance would be a highly productive move within any preschool classroom that features it. Moreover, attempts could be made to provide outfits that challenge the gendering of particular subjectivations: for example, wealth and beauty were only accessible dress-up options through the princess dresses. What if there were also a variety of 'prince' outfits available that were equally beautiful and delicately adorned but designed for boy's bodies? What if the possibility for 'police woman' to be performed was encouraged through the provision of a police officer's outfit with a (practical) skirt? My observations on the potential of wild animal costumes to safely enact dominance and aggression also suggest that having domestic animal costumes may have been helpful for those children who needed support to inhabit submissive compliant roles, so that they could enjoy being cared for or, alternatively, caring for other children using the costumes. A further solution could lie in the intervention of practitioners into the children's dress-up activities. For example, creating activities where children are allocated dress-up outfits that transcended conventional play preferences and helping them to develop characters that might sit outside of normative gender expectations (girl-wolf, for example) but this solution could create discomfort for the children and perhaps even lead to further solidification of gender if children publicly refuse roles which challenge heteronormative gender.

### **Locating Gender in Early Childhood Studies**

The intention behind conducting this new materialist analysis is to locate gendering not only in language but in space and time with humans and non-humans. By taking such an approach new points of intervention may be identified where restrictive 'striated' (Deleuze, 2004) heteronormative gendering can be challenged. Examining discourse and cultural influences has been

hugely productive for gender studies across a range of applications but there are two limitations that this has produced: firstly, the perception of gendering as linear and cumulative. This perception creates the assumption that discursive change (speaking to children differently directly or through narratives) and cultural change (advertising, branding and media) will produce more flexible understandings of gender roles. In fact, my analysis here shows that experiences of gender are transitory and shifting, and a child's understanding or performance of gender may alter depending on temporal material-discursive formations. It shows that gendered subjectivity is not singular and stable, nor can it be gradually developed as unaffected by gender stereotyping: the ability and inclination to challenge gender roles may be more possible and desirable in one instance, while a child finds pleasure in adopting those roles in the next moment. Secondly, focusing exclusively on discursive change to enable boys to feel comfortable being emotional and gentle, and girls to feel confident in boisterous and public play, denies the functions that binary gender enactments serve for young children as they negotiate the world around them.

Heteronormative performance is often protective for children, enabling them to feel powerful, safe, and desirable where perhaps other avenues to gain these feelings are closed off. This is not to argue that heteronormativity is therefore a force for good in children's lives, but rather that challenging it means recognising the complex and multi-layered experiences of early childhood where their voices are too frequently unheard and adult views of them often reference those stereotypes to judge their value or behaviour. These aspects of childhood life cannot be changed simply by encouraging career role models for girls or praising sensitivity in boys. Here I have sought to understand what it is that children *gain* from gendering or *lose* by failing to successfully perform gender by studying its effects rather than its causes.

A key element of this research project was to research with rather than on children; to talk with them, play with them, and move with them. To hear the sounds they heard, make the noises they made, and feel the emotions that circulated around and within them. The experimental immersion and intimacy this produced enabled me to map temporal, spatial, and social points of gender production, accommodating the material and the discursive in analysis to trace the agential flows of power that underlie its production as an observable

phenomena within Hillside Nursery. I thought about how desire could be viewed as Baradian agency that produces gendering and corrals human and non-human bodies in its emergence, sparking intra-activity through and between these bodies that creates boundaries to contain or repel the children's gendered subjectivations; opening opportunities to fulfil its promise, shutting out those which do not meet the criteria for binary recognition, and in doing so producing other opportunities to produce those bodies as gendered in alternative ways. This process iteratively creates localised understandings of gender specific to this peer group in this place and time; as the children move on to other places, other people, and other lives, they will carry these understandings with them. The analysis that I have conducted here illustrates how the nursery as a material-discursive social space is immeasurably rich in points of gender emergence and the manifestation and/or suppression of subjective gendering desires it creates makes the early childhood institution a critical site for understanding how children begin to actively produce themselves as gendered, whilst simultaneously creating meanings for their gendered productions. Furthermore, it illustrates the incapacity of purely discursive analysis to fully capture gendering in the classroom through exposing the maelstrom of matterings, desire, and temporality through which the bodies of the nursery burst forth in their iterative becomings. Far from arguing with biology, it seems to me that, currently, the most compelling way for gender and childhood studies to move forward is to draw on new materialist approaches to embrace these material-discursive bodies, in all their transient possibilities, and to ask what the consequences might be of their future, present, and past becomings.

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