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# **Crush: mapping historical, material and affective force relations in young children's hetero-sexual playground play**

## **Abstract**

*Drawing on ethnographic multi-modal data of the gendered and sexual dynamics of pre-school play (age 6) in a rapidly declining fishing and farming community in North Finland, this paper offers a glimpse into our sense-making of a short video recorded episode in which three boys repeatedly pile up on and demand a kiss from one of their girl classmates. Our analyses resonates with a wider community of feminist and queer scholars who are bringing affective methodologies and posthuman approaches to re-invigorate how we might understand the complexities of gender and sexual power relations in the early years. Inspired by the writings of Guattari (1989, 2005) and his concept of 'existential refrains', we create three 'crush' assemblages to map the more-than-human territorializing and de-territorialising force relations at play. Each assemblage offers a thinking otherwise about gender, sexuality, violence and consent in which place, space, objects, affect and history entangle in predictable and unpredictable ways.*

## **Introduction:**

It's just a little crush (crush)  
Not like I faint, every time we touch  
It's just some little thing (crush)  
Not like everything I do, depends on you  
Sha-la-la-la, sha-la-la-la

It's raising my adrenaline  
You're banging on a heart of tin  
Please don't make too much of it baby  
You say the word, 'forever-more'  
That's not what I'm looking for  
All I can commit to is 'maybe'

So let it be what it'll be

It's just a little crush (crush) ...

(Jennifer Paige, Song Lyrics to 'Crush', 1998)

This paper offers a speculative analysis of an eleven minute video recorded episode of four 6 year olds playing in and around a climbing frame and school fence at a pre-school in a rapidly declining fishing and farming community in North Finland. Three boys, Sami, Markus and Tino (pseudonyms), repeatedly chase and pile on one of their female classmates, Isla (pseudonym), with the full force of their bodies by wrapping their legs and arms around her. Each 'crush' operates in a dynamic rhythm involving forward attack, persuasion, resistance, hesitation and escape. Most games include one of the boys kissing Isla or demanding a kiss. There are 16 crushes, with variation, during the short recording.

Kiss chase and pile-up games are not unusual among young children's playground cultures. However, when sexuality (kiss) and physical forces (pile-up) entangle, as they do here in the discursive materiality of the 'crush', normalizing developmental tropes of 'boisterous' or 'rough and tumble' play and moral panics of 'premature sexualisation' or 'sexual bullying' can jostle and collide when scenes like these come into view by an adult observer. As researchers who have spent the best part of our academic lives exploring the gender and sexual power plays amongst children in school settings, this episode not only connected to our central substantive interest, but it was affectively charged for us with a weighty materiality that, in the words of Jennifer Paige, "raised our adrenaline". This episode burnt our senses and sparked dreams, memories, and talk about the im/possibility and urgency of troubling the complexities of gender and sexual power plays in the early years - a domain that is relatively untouched by and under theorised in the empirical qualitative social sciences.

Building on previous projects (Holford, Renold and Huuki, 2012; Renold and Ivinson, 2014a, 2015; Ivinson and Renold, 2013a, 2013b) this paper resonates and dialogues with a wider community of scholars bringing affective, creative and multi-sensory methodologies and more-than-human and new materialist approaches to bear upon and re-invigorate the child and childhood in the early years. Our aim is to attune to the full ecology of experience through creating three crush assemblages that offer a thinking Otherwise about how gender, sexuality and violence emerge in the socio-materialities of playground peer cultures and specifically, the ways in which place, space, objects, affect and history entangle in predictable and unpredictable ways.

### **When affect jumps: creating 'crush' assemblages, mapping territorializing refrains**

The episode outlined above occurred in the first few days of a longitudinal ethnographic research project *Gender Equity, Conflict, and Power among Young Children*. This project set out to explore the ways in which gendered power shapes young children's peer relationship cultures in school as they transition from pre school (age 1-6) to primary school (7-12).<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork took place over three years and was carried out in a school in Santakylä (pseudonym), located in a semi-rural town/village of approximately 4000 inhabitants in North-Finland, close to the Polar Circle. Built on agricultural and fishing industries over a period of 400 years, Santakylä has recently undergone severe structural changes seeing a rapid decline in both the fishing and farming industries. The last farm was closed down at the beginning of the 1980s, and the commercial fishery has only a couple of remaining fishermen. In contemporary times, the harbour draws in leisure yachts rather than trawlers, and the privatized agricultural land now accommodates a new Information Communication Technology (ICT) park and detached luxury houses. In relation to the three boys and one girl that feature in the video footage, Isla's heritage is located in the

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<sup>1</sup> The research is funded by the Academy of Finland 2012-16. In the research project in question, the first author works as PI and the second author works as research partner. The two authors have come together through a shared history of collaboration in earlier research and development projects (*From Violence to Caring, The Academy of Finland, 2007-10; ALLiES - Developing teachers' and parents' alliance for early violence prevention in pre-school*", EC Daphne III, 2010-12.)

declining fishing community and the three boys reside in the wealthy houses of the ICT park and business sector.

Coming to know and un-know children's cultures, and be attuned to the unpredictable flows in the micro-worlds of everyday life in school, the first author, Tuija, created a wide-range of research encounters across playgrounds and classrooms, including talk-based methods, walking-tours, video-recorded observation, photographs, and a range of creative child-focused activities. This methodology sought to make visible the 'awkward, messy, unequal, unstable, surprising and creative qualities of encounters and interconnection across difference' (Stewart, 2007, p. 128; see also Olsson, 2009, Lenz-Taguchi, 2010; MacLure et al., 2011, Coleman and Ringrose, 2013; Holford et al., 2013; Osgood, 2014; Holmes and Jones, 2013). For the video footage that focuses this paper, we (Tuija and Emma) then spent an intensive week, and subsequent sessions, over a 3 month period, viewing and re-viewing the footage: pausing, rewinding, slowing down and speeding up the data in a process which nurtured the 'qualitative multiplicities' (Braidotti, 2006) we felt vibrate and ripple across each pile-up/crush. We isolated different modalities: sound, speed, light, colour, objects, movement, and language to explore Deleuzo-Guattarian repetitions and differences, or what they conceptualise as 'refrains' (see below) and how they 'intra-acted' within and between each crush: that is, how things come together in the process of becoming, where each becoming "iteratively enfolds into its ongoing differential materialization" (Barad, 2007, p. 234). Putting the concept of intra-action to work here, meant being attuned not only to how this new expanded data set intra-acted internally to create new data assemblages (Fox & Alldred, 2013) but how the data moved us affectively and in turn, moved the process of analysis into new cartographies. We began to notice how each crush passed through our bodies, and as Stewart (2007, p. 39) describes, how each affective charge "lingers for a little while as an irritation, confusion, judgement, thrill or musing" but, and importantly for us and this paper, "however it strikes its significance jumps".

For us, noticing when affect jumps enabled us to acknowledge but also get beyond how affects' "visceral force keys a search to make sense of it, to incorporate it into an order of meaning" (Stewart, 2007, p. 39). We draw on Deleuzo-Guattarian territorializing yet dynamic socio-semiotic-material-historical assemblages. This dynamicism is central for us in being able to map the territorializing and deterritorialising<sup>2</sup> lines of force inside each crush assemblage and in ways that keep the 'processual creativity' of each crush (Guattari, 1995) in play. To assist us in this mapping we also make use of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the refrain (ritournelle): a repetition that creates and re-creates a territory (e.g. the gendered force relations of the crush), in ways that defend against chaos (e.g. multiplicity of gender expression). While the refrain is most often deployed as an auditory concept (Genosko, 2009; Young-Blood Jackson, 2013), it can also be considered as a material, historical or affective expression. We consider in this paper how its repetitive or cyclical function manifests in a rhythm of de and re-territorialisation. So while each 'crush' might look the same, something *more-than* is going on in ways that connect to other existential territories and territorializing force relations. Indeed, as Guattari writes: "a refrain-analysis could be productive of ... other enunciative modalities that dispose existence differently" (2013, p. 149). In this paper it is the ways in which we think, feel, theorise and intervene in episodes of gender and sexual power plays like these.

In what follows then, we experiment with our data and attempt to put Guattari's refrain analysis to work by creating three 'crush' assemblages, comprising of moving bodies and body-parts, climbing frames, grit and dirt, school fences, and language (verbal and textual, from speech to historical archive). Each assemblage illuminates and brings a different modality into view: objects, history and movement. In each section we try and draw attention to how 'affect jumps' across existential territories, and into what Erin Manning (2013) writes about as the 'time-slips' of territorialized and deterritorialised refrains. We also go some

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of de- and re- territorialisation stem from Guattari's (1989, 1992) posthuman ontology of subjectification, where humans are criss-crossed by semiotic, material and affective forces that hold and/or block (territorialise) and rupture and/or release (de-territorialise) modes of being in the world (see Genosko, 2009).

way to re-create the ways in which our rhizomatic analysis unfolded. At the end of the first section, *It's just a little crush?* we foreground the non-human (climbing frame) and also show how seemingly random comments about waste and drain pipes moved us to reconsider a previous crush episode and subsequently carry out further interviews with local residents, search historical archives, and statistical surveys to understand the wider historical and neo-liberalising force relations at work as old industries make way for the new. These historical affective residues are explored further in section two, *Crushing histories*. The final section, *Crushing like a girl* builds on the previous two sections and glimpses the blocks and ruptures of affective territorialising gendered force fields that shift the sedimented rhythms of what (else) a crush can do.

### **It's just a little crush?: body stacks, forced kisses, steel frames, stoned faces and drainpipes**

"The body hums along, rages up, or deflates. It goes with the flow, meets resistance, gets attacked, or finds itself caught up in something it can't get out of" (Stewart, 2007, p. 75)

#### *ROUND 1*

*Isla, Tino, Markus and Sami are hanging from, standing under and running on top of the large climbing frame in the middle of the play area. Isla, standing on top of the frame shouts out, "you can't come on top of me at any rate". She slides down, and sits on the ground beside the climbing frame. Tino soon jumps down too, runs to Isla, pushes her to the floor face down, wrapping his legs and arms around her. The other two boys follow Tino and jump on top of Tino and Isla, forming a pancake stack of bodies, each piled upon the other. Isla lies on the bottom of the pile, so that only her legs can be seen. Tuija, who is filming from the school fence near the pile up interjects: "Wasn't it so that everyone should be on the bottom by turns?" Isla responds: "Ouch! Tino, my face will get all black". Tuija keeps asking questions about taking turns in the pile up, after which boys shout one by one: "I won't be on the bottom!". The boys release Isla and withdraw, scurrying up the*

*climbing frame. Isla asks Tuija whether she has something in the corner of her eye. Tuija removes a stone that has stuck to Isla's cheek.*

## *ROUND 2*

*Isla stays sitting on the ground. Tuija asks her if she is always on the bottom of the stack. "Er, yeah", Isla replies. Tino jumps down from the climbing frame, runs to Isla, and jumps on her like before. Tuija asks whether someone else could be on the bottom. Sami announces that it is only Isla who is on the bottom because she is "so wonderful". Tuija keeps on asking questions about the play. The crush continues. Isla is lying on the ground, yelling, kicking in the air and struggling slightly, after which Tino releases Isla. Isla goes close to Tuija, who is standing by the school fence, and sits down beside her between the fence and beneath Tuija's legs.*

## *ROUND 3*

*The boys stay nearby, standing in a semi-circle around Isla and Tuija. Tuija is standing against the fence that separates the school from the local restaurant. Isla is sitting in the tight space between Tuija and the fence. Tuija asks again, "what if the one on the bottom doesn't want to be on the bottom? "It must be", says Sami "cause otherwise you (looking at Isla) end up there", pointing his finger to the other side of the fence in the direction of the restaurant.*

*Isla: "Whoa! I want to go there 'cause you get pizza there!":*

*Markus: "No, no, otherwise you end up in Canada!"*

*Tino: "No, you go to champagne! [pointing and wagging his index finger at Isla]*

*Markus: "Yeeeeeah! So you will be drank there" [he steps towards Isla, pointing at her with his index finger]*

*Tuija asks Isla whether she wants to be on the bottom, and when Isla says she doesn't know, Tino immediately jumps on Isla and kisses her. Isla, who is still sitting between Tuija and the fence, pushes Tino away with her hands, shouting, "Don't you come here to kiss me!" Tuija asks more open questions about what happens, and the boys, led by Tino, withdraw.*

## *ROUND 4*



*The boys run off and lie on the ground. Isla shouts: "Yes, now they're lying down!". She runs after the boys, who escape by climbing on top of the climbing frame. Isla returns beside Tuija, sighing happily and says to Tuija, "You're my mum". And shortly after she says: "They're digging a trench in our place....doing drainpipe stuff."*

In 'what (else) can a kiss do', (Holford et al., 2013) we explored the multiple material and affective flows of how kisses travel across girl and boy bodies and things in playground cultures (e.g. the 'kissing hut' and the 'school line'). In contrast to the democratization of the kiss as it consolidated boy-girl romantic attachments in the kissing hut, with each girl taking it in turns to kiss the boy, this kiss takes on a hetero-relation of seemingly one-directional force. In all 16 rounds, only Isla is kissed, and the kiss always comes at the end of the crush. With her initial challenge, "you can't come on top of me" Isla invites the first crush, yet it isn't long before she is hurt in the first crush, attempts to get away from the second and third crush and retreats between the becoming-mum of Tuija's legs and the fence, chasing the boys away in round 4. Watching the footage over and over, we struggled to invest in the 'not knowing' of what looked and felt like a regular scene of non-consensual, if ambivalent, romancing of sexual violence. Isla is repeatedly crushed, for her 'wonderfulness'! Her face is pushed into the playground which leaves its mark in her stoned face. She 'must be' at the bottom of the pile, physically subordinated, in which three boys jump on top of her, sealing each crush with a kiss that she struggles to evade.

The crush, for us, is simultaneously physical and symbolic, a visceral weighty material force that connects to decades of research, practice and activism of the everyday sexual violence inflicted upon girls and women by boys and men. But wait. These are six year olds. Isn't this a game of young children experimenting with power relations? Are they playing at 'sexual violence' and 'consent'? During the watching, Emma was reminded of the 10 year old boys in her doctoral data who talked about playing 'gang rape' in their bedrooms with each other taking it in turns to be the 'kidnapped girl' or the 'van driver'. This data resulted in a queer analysis of boys' schizoid play at misogyny and homoeroticsm (Renold,

2008). But what is being produced and created here when three boys play 'crush the girl', in the public arena of the school playground? What queer energies and becomings can flow from this scene? Moreover, given the paucity of research on peer sexual violence in the early years, should we not terminate our analysis here and provide the 'evidence' that sexual violence is learnt through everyday play and indeed begins early. For example, in traditional developmental psychological research on conflict and harm-making between children, the concepts of sexual bullying or aggression have been used to identify and then isolate and to some extent pathologise the personal traits of particular individuals (Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, & Catalano, 1999; Monks & Coyne, 2011). In feminist scholarship the boys' behaviour would be connected to oppressive and aggressive gender roles entangled with the formation of hegemonic masculinities which young boys are pressured to perform, and which girls become the casualty of (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1999; Holland, 2003; Connolly, 2004; Brown, 2007; Eidevald, 2009). Much of this research focuses on children's inter-personal relations, and provides a powerful and important critique of the socio-cultural and socio-structural gender and sexual power relations that manifest in coercive sexual play in scenes like these.

However, few approaches would complicate the victim-perpetrator subject positions or, as we hope to do here and throughout the paper, go beyond critique and explore further the ebb and flow of power relations that make-up the directional force of the crush. Should we not explore how subject-object relations intra-act in ways that produce refrains (as "the deterritorialising vectors of any given assemblage" Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 327) that make some assemblages more or less territorializing than others, or attend to those moments when, as discussed earlier, 'affects jump'. What about the more-than-human relations at play? How does the non-human intervene and entangle in more-than-human assemblages. We pause here to do just that – to speculate about how the climbing frame, standing erect and high enables the boys to direct the force in the build up to each crush, enabling them call and jump from an extended height and where physical structures of limbs and steel harden the

affective weight of each crush where bodies and things entangle to bolster territorializing force relations.

### *Framing the crush*

The climbing frame is where much of the play and around which the crushes take place. It is the largest of the playground furniture, standing high up in the middle of the school yard. It forms the base from which the three boys mostly operate either in, on, under or behind and seems to provide a sanctuary and retreat when they escape and withdraw from each crush. Barad (2007) writes that there is “no independent, self-contained existence” – rather all organisms are inter-dependent in a non-hierarchical fashion. The climbing-frame and the boys then can perhaps be understood here in terms of continuity rather than in terms of discrete units. They form a boy-frame assemblage in this episode insofar as Isla is relegated to the fence and the surrounding area around the frame. Moreover, just as the boys are adjusting their bodies, weight and movement that the climbing frame affords, so the climbing frame, standing erect and high enables the boys to direct the force in the build up to each crush enabling them call and jump from an extended height. Physical structures of limbs and steel harden the affective weight of each crush. The Isla-fence-Tuija assemblage affords no such height or spatial dominance and presence, being physically smaller, and located in the periphery of the playground. Compared to the centralized dominating stature of the climbing frame which is in constant movement, the fence/Tuija/Isla/ground assemblage is more static, peripheral, taking up less space to the extent that in the third and fourth round they are physically entangled, with arms, legs and bars wrapped around each other, affording protection and sanctuary, but marginalized in the increasingly contracted space. These two assemblages intra-act, by calling the direction of the force into question (Isla-Fence-Tuija) or by consolidating the force (of how things ‘must be’). Agency, in terms of who incites and energizes the crush seems only to emerge from within the climbing frame assemblage. Isla’s first challenge provoking the first crush is spoken from inside the frame and the ensuing crushes emanate from the boy-frame. But then, cocooned and perhaps sheltered

in the becoming-mum body of Tuija at the threshold of the school grounds, 'affect jumps' through Isla's words:

"They're digging a trench in our place ... doing drainpipe stuff".

This seemingly arbitrary statement transports us to the domestic space of the home and ruptures the rhythm that is being set up, in which Isla is physically marginalized and increasingly stilled and crushed in ways that grate and hurt. While we could work creatively and symbolically with these powerful images, and it is very tempting to connect the phallic drainpipes with the sexual force of the boy-frame-crush, we want to consider how Isla summons a vivid semiotic assemblage in which trenches are dug to support drains which carry away waste. In the next section we pause again to create an agential cut which connects the boys' positioning ("you'll end up there") and consumption ("you will be drank") of Isla to wider socio-historical relations of violence in and around Santakylä.

### **Crushed by history: consumption, stolen kisses and community trauma**

*The boys stay nearby, standing in a semi-circle around Isla and Tuija. Tuija is standing against the fence that separates the school from the local restaurant. Isla is sitting in the tight space between Tuija and the fence. Tuija asks again, "what if the one on the bottom doesn't want to be on the bottom? "It must be", says Sami "cause otherwise you (looking at Isla) end up there", pointing his finger to the other side of the fence in the direction of the restaurant.*

*Isla: "Whoa! I want to go there 'cause you get pizza there!"*

*Markus: "No, no, otherwise you end up in Canada!"*

*Tino: "No, you go to champagne! [pointing and wagging his index finger at Isla]*

*Markus: "Yeeeah! So you will be drank there" [he steps towards Isla, pointing at her with his index finger]*

*Tuija asks Isla whether she wants to be on the bottom, and when Isla says she doesn't know, Tino immediately jumps on Isla and kisses her. Moments later Tino*

*shouts back nastily “You got a little kiss!”, which is followed up by Sami: “and you’ll soon be on neighbour’s side!”.*

Entanglements of bodies and phenomena, such as the more-than-human assemblage created above are always located in time, history and place. Sometimes we can sense, in the slowing down, how affective traces of the past surge through the social in ways that leap between any number of what Deleuze and Guattari call, ‘existential territories’. In the episode above we glimpse those ‘transversal flashes’ (Guattari, 1995, p. 93) where affect jumps across time-space domains. Here, objects (the fence) utterances (“drank you”, wanting “pizza”), institutional (school), and recreational bodies (pizza place), human body parts (pointing-wagging fingers, lips, jumping bodies), among a myriad other fragments pulse and vibrate. These vibrations deepen our sense-making of the crush as we watch them ripple and intra-act with recent and ancient histories, criss-crossed by an affective stream of “alterant-altering inter-fusions” (Manning & Massumi 2014, p. 25) that pass through the mouths, actions and bodies of Isla and the three boys. We pause here to bring some of those historical tensions to the surface.

The Santakylä school was originally built in the 1940s to provide education for the children of the local fisher and agricultural community (of which Isla is a part). It was renovated and re-built in the early 2000s in order to meet the needs of a growing number of inhabitants from the ICT and business sectors (of which the boys are a part). The school is located next to the centre of the village, separated by a fence. Thus the closest ‘neighbour’, as Sami names it, is the village centre with its local restaurant. According to the results of the Well-being questionnaire, the SWOT-analysis of the local inhabitant association, as well as ethnographic interviews with local residents, the village centre is perceived as ‘out of control’, ‘unpleasant’, ‘unsafe’, ‘troubled’ and ‘unsettled’, “where you can often see drunken people hanging around”. The area, which consists of a local restaurant, a hairdresser, a supermarket and a block of apartment houses owned by the local authority is avoided by many other villagers. In stark contrast to the harbourside’s regeneration project accompanied by an exuberant

yaughting/speed-boating culture, the actual village centre has been abused and neglected. Many of the residents are second generation unemployed and caught up in the inter-generational trauma of the slow burning and then more rapid decline of the fishing and agricultural industries. But some are first generation, including children of the ICT complex, struggling or unable to locate themselves in the emerging service and/or business sectors. Many endure poor socio-economic conditions, drugs and excessive alcohol consumption is high and is accompanied by social stigma and marginalisation. Indeed, the pizza restaurant, a notorious haunt for many of the local residents who eat, drink and trade illegal drugs seems to operate as a physical and affective container for the inter-generational collective trauma of the neglected ancient-local community body and an increasing first generation of unemployed children from the professional classes. Indeed, we have begun to consider the restaurant as a “spilling out spot” (Walkerdine, 2010, p. 95–99) which makes the hidden traumas of the community’s past and indeed their present and future conditions highly visible.

The children’s location at the liminal space between the school (built for the children of the ICT community) and the pizza restaurant (house of/for the dispossessed) becomes significant. The see saw between the consumption and economic exploitation of the land and water, and the consumption practices of the local residents as they struggle to survive their commodification, rocks and glows in ways so stark, that it seems to leak into the children’s own power plays. Tuija’s questioning that Isla should always come bottom, beneath the pile, seems to push the boys into transporting Isla over the fence and into the “other side”. Recognizing the pathological put down, in a flash, Isla summons her own assemblage, and leaps into the centre of the crush stating how she desires the other side, the restaurant and the pizza it sells (“I want to go there, I like pizza”). This assemblage of becoming-consuming the Other, swelled up with energy and trauma, is rejoined with another place, Canada. Canada becomes champagne and in one further utterance Isla is metamorphosed into a liquid, to be consumed and swallowed. If Isla refuses her subordinate positioning (as girl, as child-of-fishermen) she will not only ‘end up’ at the pizza place/home for uprooted Others, she will ‘be drank’. The boys with their wagging authoritative fingers

circle and point at Isla, swept up in a fantastical assemblage that has sucked in, spat out and crushed Isla with the affective weight of the village(r)s' commodified and exploited history. Indeed, we begin to see how history, enmeshed with sensory experience, becomes creative in this assemblage, where embodied, physical, conscious, un-conscious historical affects are in full flow, and entangled in the power plays. (Walkerdine 2013: 757)

Tuija's persistent questioning of the gendered hierarchies of stacked bodies deterritorialises their triumph, but this is swiftly re-territorialised as Tino, swelled with the affective residues of wider patriarchal colonizing power and with the full force of his body, steals a kiss, without warning (that is, without the rhythm of the pile up), and without consent. The kiss lands on Isla and its non-consensual status is aggressively named ("you got a little kiss") and shamed ("you'll soon be on the neighbour's side"). This kiss isn't a marker of her 'wonderful-ness' but seems to be wrapped up in conscious and unconscious histories of commodification, consumption and violence of the land and of the people - re-territorialising Isla by putting her firmly in her place. Moreover, it is a refrain that emerges in later rounds when the crushes become more frequent and intra-act directly with practices of objectification and consumption as Tino remarks: "that was such a tasty target of a kiss". And if we return to the drainpipe that led us to explore the wider socio-historical force relations, it connects us more directly to the ways in which Isla, drunk and consumed, is drawn into a patriarchal assemblage in which she becomes the boys' waste. Yet drains also prevent blockages and enable water to flow and this provides the focus for our final section in which the crush gains momentum in ways that both territorialise and de-territorialise these coercive force relations.

### **Crushing like a girl: the time-slips of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation**

"Agency can be strange, twisted, caught up in things, passive or exhausted. Not the way we like to think about it ... circuits bodies moves connections. It takes

unpredictable and counterintuitive forms ... it's not really about will power, but rather something much more complicated and much more rooted in things."  
(Stewart, 2007, p. 86.)

The final crush assemblage captures the ways in which the rhythm of earlier crushes, in which Isla gets caught up in, invites and simultaneously withdraws and resists, intensify. Of significance in the following rounds is how the more-than-human relations, in this case, the gravel which marked her face, is now rubbed between her fingers as she considers how she wants to participate (or not) in further crushes:

#### ROUND 5

*The boys have withdrawn to the climbing frame. Isla shouts out to them, "Who do I play with now?" Summoned, the boys immediately jump down from the frame and one by one run to Isla. Calling them into action, she quickly retreats in between Tuija and the school fence. Tuija asks Isla whether she wants to start up the game again. Isla says she does not know. She rubs small pieces of gravel between her fingers. Tino replies for Isla, saying that he knows what she wants. Tino sits down and kisses her. Isla carries on rubbing the gravel, and says to Tuija and Tino "I don't want ... I want ... I don't want" all the while Tino is trying to jump on her, an action that is futile with her position between Tuija's legs and the fence.*

*As she says "I want" a second time, she bends over and places her head in Tino's lap. Tino then bends to cover Isla, at which point she says:*

*"I don't want ... I don't know if I want to or not. Cos if I say 'I want', then they both stay there. If I say 'I don't want, then they'll lea...[ve?]'... well...well....well...well...well...well...I don't...Well, come on, then!"*

*Tino then jumps on Isla, who shouts: "Don't again!". Tino kisses Isla, and says, "It's done now." The boys withdraw to the climbing frame, and Tino says, "that was such a tasty target of a kiss!"*



This scene is a rare glimpse at the ebb and flow of consent, which in the speed of real time looks like Isla doesn't know what she wants and is delivering mixed messages. When she moves to Tino's lap is it that she wants to initiate the physical crush without being smothered, or without the 'heterosexualising' kiss? Is the gravel transporting her back to the first crush which hurt and marked her face? Or is it part of the rhythm as each particle of gravel is turned over and over, as she is, when caught in the crush. Or, could she be playing with the feeling of (what counts as) consent? By drawing the boys in ("come on") and then stopping them ("Don't again") is she creating her own crush, which squashes their desires to jump on and kiss her, a rhythm inside the Tuija-fence assemblage which is making the pile-ups more difficult to achieve? Our questions are not for the answering, but directed at opening up the ways in which Isla, inside the Tuija-fence assemblage is becoming more vocal - a process we might theorise as becoming-consent.

Indeed, in later rounds Isla becomes more consistent in what she does and doesn't want. First she draws the camera in to the increasingly resistant assemblage, telling the boys that "she's filming you". Next she declares that their persistent demands for a kiss "is so annoying" to more generalizing comments that "the boys are really annoying". Loud sonic screams of "NO" interrupt a further crush as she demands the game to stop. This call is immediately echoed by Tuija, and the boys retreat once more to the climbing frame shouting, "We Surrender!" and pile up on each other. At this moment, a further rupture occurs as Isla separates from the Tuija-fence assemblage. Indeed, as soon as this utterance of surrender escapes into the air, we feel what Erin Manning writes about as a time-slip of deterritorialisation:

#### ROUND 8

*Isla screams loudly, "ON THE TOP" and without hesitation runs toward the pile of boys extending her arms and legs to their full capacity, maximizing the amount of ground she can cover. However, just as she accelerates to full speed, and just before she anticipates the final jump to be "on the top", her body almost freezes in mid air and comes to an abrupt halt. She then slowly and carefully kneels down, lays herself*

*on her stomach, and, extends her body again, in anticipation of the crush. The boys dutifully oblige and pile upon her body, one by one. Isla screams and kicks her legs behind her, and the boys shout, "Kiss, kiss, go give a kiss... now we've kissed her!" and the pile unravels.*

The affective residues of first watching this scene still linger. It is one of those rare almost imperceptible moments caught on camera that enables us to glimpse, as Iris Marion Young (2005) so powerfully argues how for a girl to "open her body in free active open extension is to invite objectification" and moreover, that this objectification is "what keeps her in her place". And Isla, as we have described above, has indeed become entangled in objectifying and commodifying crushing affective assemblages, in which each kiss seals her heterosexualised subordinated fisher-girl femininity/fate, transporting her over the fence, with the Others. It is almost as if in one split second, just as her body opens up and out, that she crosses an affective force field which abruptly territorializes and stills her moving body. She then resumes the rhythm of subsequent crushes. But like each crush before, and in the spirit of the Deleuzo-Guattarian refrain, there is always difference in the repetition: each crush creates a new assemblage, charged with potentiality.

Leaping on top of the stacked boys seemed to be one deterritorialisation too far for Isla. However, what is of significance for us is that this is the first time we observe her run toward the boys, incited by her *own* utterance 'on the top!'. Each move is carefully considered as she kneels and lies down. Each move, moving the boys to bring on the 'crushing kiss'. Is Isla at this moment, a little more in control of orchestrating her own 'crush' assemblage? Are we entering the inbetween space of how refrains operate at the threshold of de and re-territorialisation? Of course we will never 'know' this, and our analysis here is not to focus on the meaning of the event, but rather what the event can do. We can perhaps glimpse the shift in tempo and rhythm of the force relations at play here. And, for us, it is important to hold on to the promise that uncertainty in the 'not knowing' offers. Indeed, what we can perhaps contribute is that something did rupture from this new rhythm. It was the final crush of morning play sealed with a kiss.

Subsequent crushes involved boys at the bottom of the pile (Huuki & Renold, in progress) including crushes in which Isla does not lie on the boys as they did her, but does involve her touching the backs of the boys on top of the pile. In these crushes she is no longer Isla the (hetero)sexualized-girl-to-be-jumped-on-and-kissed, but to be “on top” Isla draws upon a dominant familial assemblage of becoming-mother. Through laughter, and as she lays her hands on Markus’ back, she claims him as her son: “he’s my child” she says. Yet while the boys open up a space for her to crush them, echoing Isla’s own earlier words ‘on the top!’ she declines their invitation, and directs other boys to take turns. Some de-territorialisations take time (see Deleuze & Guattari’s 1987, p. 178) on how sudden or big ruptures to the status quo can be too much to bear, and spin people out into chaos and ontological uncertainty. And given the powerful socio-material-historical affective forces at play, it is perhaps understandable that Isla withdraws from and then quits the ‘crush’ game, telling Tuija that she doesn’t want to play anymore because it’s ‘not so much fun’. She turns towards the frame, climbs inside and zooms down the slide, becoming-movement, becoming-flow.

### **Crushing consent: messenger birds, gravel and research-creations**

“We need to reconceptualise the real as forces, energies, events, impacts that pre-exist and function both before and beyond, as well as within representation” (Grosz, 2011, p. 85).

In his writings on ‘existential refrains’, Guattari (1989/2013, p. 147) introduces the metaphor of the messenger bird “that taps on the window with its beak, so as to announce the existence of other virtual Universes”, that is, other ways of being that rupture the status quo. For us, the process of writing this paper is one such messenger bird, calling up new ways of thinking again about the force relations in gender and sexual power plays. An experiment then in thinking Otherwise, we hope that the paper might offer an alternative passage into what constitutes ‘the real’ (Grosz, 2011:85) - not through epistemological questions of the ‘true’ state

of things but in a reconceptualisation of the real where new connections emerge that enable us to question the habits of what we think we know when scenes like the kiss-crushes in this paper emerge in our everyday practice, across our research or via media representations. Nowhere, we would argue, is this more needed than in studies of young peer gender-based and sexual violence where territorialising literatures pervade the field in ways that undermine, normalise, pathologise or obfuscate the social, historical, cultural and affective dynamics of children's gendered and sexual power plays in school.

In preparing this paper, we have connected many times over with Isla's unknowing. Just as she rubbed the gravel over and over between her fingers, contemplating what she wanted, didn't want, and didn't know, our own ideas were being turned over and over-turned. Aligning ourselves with Guattari's messenger bird, we worked with the uncomfortableness of keeping the affordances-in-assemblages, in play. Scrambling around in the paralysis of binary either/or thinking we skidded, off-balance, to connect with and map the multiplicities shooting out from the refrains that constituted each crush assemblage. However, as Grosz (2011) cautions, we were always careful to keep in check the rhythms of how each crush was criss-crossed by refrains that were often, both territorializing and de-territorialising.

A key driver in writing this paper was to share our experimental moves with what (else) affective methodologies can bring to subversive or taboo subjects in ways that continue to unsettle and transform. This, as we have argued above, is important, yet nevertheless a risky endeavour when it comes to re-imagining the affordances of childhood assemblages in which sexuality, violence and gender are centre stage. Our aim has been two-fold: **first**, to understand, and *loosen the stranglehold of how the binary subject positions victim (Isla) and perpetrator* (three boys) can obscure the qualitative multiplicity of inter-personal force relations such as we have mapped through the 'crush' assemblages above. Indeed, in eleven minutes of play we see oppressive force relations constantly expand and contract as Isla, the three boys and Tuija experience what feels fun, safe, uncomfortable, disorienting and hurtful etc. Key here is how 'consent'

operates as a relational force or flow, constantly in process, which leads us to our **second** aim to explore the more-than-human dynamics of consent. Throughout, in our focus on foregrounding object, history and movement in assemblages we hope to have gestured towards the limits of a humanistic and individualised theorisation of consent by opening up children's sexual power plays to the more-than-human: from the material (the climbing frame, the fence, the pizza restaurant and gravel) to the discursive and semiotic (becoming-drink, becoming waste) and including the socio-historical and affective force relations of which assemblages are always entangled. Indeed, it is important to stress that history is not only an important contextualising feature of situated events like the crush game, but a set of powerful affective forces that weft and weave through each assemblage and potential becoming.

With each crush assemblage we have attempted to open up the dynamics of how more-than-human assemblages jostle and intra-act with each other (e.g. the boy-climbing frame with the Tuija-Isla-Fence). In the first two sections, we explored these intra-actions in ways that allow us to glimpse at how some ruptures (e.g. Tuija-Isla-Fence gestures of resistance to the force relations of the kiss-crush) can unsettle the status quo (e.g. the boys' ability to direct the force relations of the crush). We consider how in a bid perhaps to re-organize the chaos when sedimented gendered and classed roles are loosened and 'fractalized' (Guattari, 2013) further territorializing assemblages are created that draw in contemporary and historical legacies, temporarily restoring hierarchical power positions (e.g. Isla is aligned to the Other side, she is 'drunk', becomes the boys' waste and is consumed into a highly classed patriarchal assemblage). In the final section, *'crushing like a girl'*, we suggest that over time, and with each territorial refrain, something shifts. The boys call on Isla to join them, and jump 'ON TOP'. While her body leaps forth, hesitates and returns to the territorializing refrain of the kiss-crush, we notice a key change. As becoming-mother she can re-orient the crush, lay her hands on the boys, her 'sons'. We also see a new refrain emerge as she withdraws from the game and entangles herself in the previously boy-dominated climbing frame, by becoming-slide.

Our growing awareness of how even very small incremental moves to de-territorialise and re-lease the grip of constraining gender norms can ignite fear and summon assemblages that tighten the straight jacket of how girls and boys can be and become, has huge pedagogical implications for interventions in practice. While some of our ideas and intra-ventions in this paper have travelled into pedagogic practices using a range of arts-based and embodied methodologies (see Renold, 2013), in the spirit of this special issue's call to "overcome the discursive and other forms of representational stagnation that lurk" we have also produced a visual and textual research-creation which for us fuses the ebb and flow of consent with the more-than-human socio-historical life affirming/life-destroying affective practices traversing the land and people of Santakylä. As Manning and Massumi (2014) suggest in their take up of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'immanent critique', it is not enough to offer critical commentaries on the 'state of things' that do not also forge transformative practices that might gift new modes of thinking, doing and becoming otherwise. So while we can't whip up a workshop inside the pages of an academic journal, we can leave you with the image assemblage, 'Crush' and the poem (made up from Isla's words) 'becoming-consent' – a research creation that may intra-act with the paper you have just read, or if you started at the end, you might now read and/or read-again.

**Figure 1: Crush**



## BECOMING-CONSENT

i don't want  
i don't know  
if  
i want to or not  
If  
i say 'I want'  
IF  
i say 'I don't want',

then they'll leave

well ... well ... well ... well ... well ... well ...

i  
i don't  
well  
come on then  
it must BE  
well-come

ON  
the  
TOP

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