

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/145587/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Marston, Kate 2022. Fabricating future bodies: making digital sexualities research matter. *Qualitative Research Journal* 22 (1) , pp. 67-80. 10.1108/QRJ-01-2021-0014 file

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-01-2021-0014>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-01-2021-0014>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



# FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES: MAKING DIGITAL SEXUALITIES RESEARCH MATTER

## Abstract

### *Design*

The *Fabricating Future Bodies (FFB) Workshop* formed part of the final phase of my Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded doctoral study, titled *Exploring young people's digital sexual cultures through creative, visual and arts-based methods*. With additional support from Wales' Doctoral Training Partnership, the workshop provided sixteen young people (aged 11 – 13 years) from one fieldwork school with the opportunity to work with two professional artists in order to creatively re-animate research findings on the digitally-networked body. In a three-hour workshop, participants produced cut-up texts and life-size body fabrics that re-imagined what bodies might do, be and become in the future.

### *Purpose*

This paper critically examines the development and direction of the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*. Troubling notions of co-production as enacting equality or empowering participants, it draws on feminist posthuman and new materialist concepts to understand it as an eventful process that occurs in unpredictable and shifting affect-laden assemblages.

### *Findings*

This paper finds that co-productive practices cannot flatten out the institutional and societal power dynamics operating within schools, highlighting how adult intervention was necessary to hold space for young people to participate. It also observes the agency of the art materials employed in the workshop in enabling young people to articulate what mattered to them about the digitally-networked body. While the workshop was limited in its ability to renegotiate institutional and peer power dynamics, it produced rich data that

indicated how carefully choreographed arts-based practices offer generative possibilities for digital sexualities research and education.

### *Originality*

By employing speculative fiction, cut-up poetry and textiles to explore the digitally-networked body, this paper outlines an innovative methodological-pedagogical approach to engaging with young people's digitally-networked lives.

### **Introduction**

The past two decades have seen rapid transformations in the kinds of technologies through which young people connect with and relate to one another. As social media, smart devices and gaming platforms become increasingly integral to the formation and maintenance of everyday relationships, research has sought to navigate the complexities of an ever-changing digital sexual age for young people (McGeeney and Hanson 2017; Driver and Coulter 2018). By adopting a participatory creative and arts-based approach, inspired by feminist posthuman and new materialist theories, my study set out to experiment with what else digital sexualities research can be, do and become. Over fifteen months I employed a multiplicity of creative, visual and arts-based methods with a socio-economically and culturally diverse sample of young people aged 11 – 18 years old in England and Wales. Rather than focus on a pre-defined set of digital practices such as sexting, selfies or cyberbullying, I facilitated open-ended research encounters that allowed participants to articulate which practices mattered to them.

In the first research phase, twenty-five young people participated in creative and participatory group interviews working with collaging, drawing, photo and statement elicitation. In the second, seventeen young people participated in follow-up interviews. These group and follow-up interviews generated talk about digitally-networked peer cultures, social media celebrity, hetero-coupledness and LGBTQ+ counterpublics online, pet-working, mediatised foodscapes as well as gaming and Netflix fandoms (Marston 2020). The body was a recurring topic of discussion, stirring up a mixture of anxiety, fascination, fear

and pleasure. In this paper I use the term digitally-networked bodies to explore the body not as an ontological unit with inherent boundaries that can be easily defined and disconnected from digital technology but as composed through constantly shifting and changing sets of relations (Blackman 2008).

Inspired by Renold's (2017; Renold and Ivinson 2019) theorising of the making and mattering of darta and dartaphacts, I was interested in how the participants could communicate their feelings and experiences with the digitally-networked body through creative writing and objects that might carry affects into new places. Participants from one fieldwork school were invited to participate in the *FFB Workshop* where research data could be re-animated through cut-up poetry and textiles. This phase aimed to explore how a co-productive arts-based practice might engage with and communicate the complexity of young people's digital sexual cultures. In this paper, I detail how I conceptualise co-production before outlining the development and direction of the *FFB Workshop*. Finally, I discuss one of the cut-up poems and fabricated figures produced in the workshop.

### **Conceptualising co-production**

Co-production refers to a range of research practices that seek to disrupt hierarchies between the researcher and the researched by enabling participants to collaborate in the production of knowledge about their lives (Facer and Enright 2016). It has proved popular with childhood scholars as participants are recognised as 'agents of knowledge about their own lives' and 'active participants' in the research endeavour (Mallan, Singh and Giardina 2010, p. 259). However, some childhood scholars have problematised the notion that 'agency', 'empowerment', 'voice' and/or 'equality' is something that can be 'enabled, promoted or "given" by the "adult researcher"' through co-production (Holland et al 2010, p. 362; Gallagher 2008). This assumption relies on a conceptualisation of power as an always, already repressive external force that can be predicted in advance by the researcher (Gallagher 2008).

Drawing on feminist posthuman and new materialist theories (Barad 2007; Bennett 2009; Braidotti 2013; Haraway 2016), my study understood agency to be negotiated within

broader socio-material-discursive arrangements and not just within individuals. While feminist posthuman and new materialism are heterogeneous fields of thought, Truman (2019) notes that they are frequently brought together by their focus on distributive agency; the prioritisation of affect; attention to the politics of matter; and a re-thinking of the nature / culture binary. Accordingly, researchers and participants are not considered discrete, intentional knowing subjects that come together to shape the research. Instead, research encounters are co-produced through shifting assemblages<sup>1</sup> of force relations where the human (participants, researchers, gatekeepers) and the more-than-human (research materials, architecture of the fieldwork site, objects in the room) come to affect or be affected in multi-directional ways.

In addition to looking at the multiple relations that constitute a research assemblage, I draw on affective analysis to zoom in on what emerges in-between and through these relations and how each is animated by the encounter. Understood as a 'pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution of that body's capacity to act' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. xvi), affect attuned me to the visceral shifts in speed, movement and sound when participants were in-relation with each other, the room, the research materials, myself and the other adults present as well as their 'corporeal expression' into 'bodily feelings' of happiness, sadness, worry and so on (Anderson 2006, p. 736). Rather than justifying co-produced research as enacting equality between participants and researchers, understanding research as occurring through dynamic affect-laden assemblages supports greater attentiveness to the micro-socialities that shapes the knowledge produced (Manning 2009; Duggan 2020). This paper examines how the hierarchical, power differentiated patterns of teaching and learning that strongly operate in schools constrained efforts to renegotiate pedagogical relationships through creative co-production (Evans, Rich and Holroyd 2004). However, by mobilising the force of arts-based materials to animate

---

<sup>1</sup> The English word 'assemblage' is an 'awkward translation' of the original French term *agencement* used by Deleuze and Guattari. The two words do not mean the same thing. While the French and English definitions of *assemblage* suggest a bringing, coming together or union of things, the French word *agencement* means to layout, arrange, piece together relations. The latter term supports Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical efforts to reject unity in favour of multiplicities and develop a relational understanding of agency (Nail 2017; Puar 2012).

young people's engagement this workshop did create space for some young people to articulate what mattered to them about the digitally-networked body.

### **Experimenting with arts-based methods in digital sexualities research**

Childhood scholars have long noted the value of arts-based methodologies that draw on aesthetic, imaginative, sensory and embodied ways of 'thinking-making-doing' (Leavy 2019; Springgay and Truman 2018, pp. 3 – 4) to explore sensitive topics with young people. For example, EJ Renold (2017) employs sculpture, poetry, movement, body projections and jars to explore teenage girls' experiences of sexual violence in Wales. Similarly, Kathleen Quinlivan (2014) considered how painting offers an exploratory context for examining pornography and the commodification of sexuality with young people. Furthermore, Ringrose et al. (2019, p. 259) worked with Play-Doh sculptures of vulvas and felt-tip drawings of penises to 'resist and refigure unsettling experiences of receiving unsolicited digital dig pics'.

Feminist posthuman and new materialist scholars argue that creative methodologies agitate different ways of relating to and making a difference in a world in process. Anna Hickey-Moody (2020, p. 724) observes how arts-based methods can enable young people to 'co-create and communicate complex ideas' by mobilising the force of 'images, icons, feelings, color, textures, and sounds' to make 'cultural, lived, ephemeral issues visible'. She notes that the art materials employed have agency that can change thinking and relationships between people, offering 'an ideal way not only of accessing but also reorganizing emotional investments' (Hickey-Moody 2020, p. 731). In addition, Renold's (2017) work on the making and mattering of dactaphacts explores the possibilities of crafting art-ful objects that might tap into and transmit young people's feelings in more impactful ways than standard academic outputs allow. Inspired by this work, the *FFB Workshop* harnessed cut-up poetry and body mapping with textiles to 'unlock and process young people's embodied, material, spatial, and affective experiences' with the digitally-networked body (Quinlivan 2018, p. 20).

## **Intervening into Safer Internet Day 2019**

The *FFB Workshop* was hosted in connection with the annual UK-based awareness-raising event Safer Internet Day (SID) 2019, which offers schools a suite of lesson plans, assembly scripts and posters to ‘promote the safe and responsible use of technology for young people’ (Safer Internet Day 2020). While such programmes create space to explore a rapidly changing digital age, they narrowly focus on young people’s individual, rational decision-making regarding safety and responsible use without addressing the broader gender and sexual norms at play (Ringrose and Barajas 2011). Online safeguarding discourses unwittingly reinforce the heteronormative bifurcation of active male / passive female sexuality by focusing on at-risk girls and predatory boys. Research indicates that boys have more freedom than girls to ‘publicly display their bodies without risking adult or peer condemnation’ and are socially rewarded if their bodies fit with muscular masculine ideals (Albury 2015, p. 1742; Ringrose and Harvey 2015), whereas girl’s bodies online are judged as attention-seeking or self-exploitative (Dobson 2015).

Delivering the workshop in connection with SID 2019 offered an opportunity to intervene into these gendered scripts by inviting spontaneity and creativity. Not only does social media operate as a key site through which gender and sexuality is regulated, negotiated and expressed but it positions the body as the centre of activity for materialising a better future (Coleman 2011). Focusing on future bodies through speculative fiction in the *FFB Workshop* functioned as a distancing technique that allowed participants to explore a sensitive topic without revealing too much of themselves (Renold 2017). By inviting imaginative responses, the workshop endeavoured to attune to young people’s feelings and experiences rather than assume how the digitally-networked body came to matter.

### **The setting**

Green City School is an English secondary school situated in an affluent inner-city suburb that draws pupils from socio-economically and ethnically diverse backgrounds. In 2018 I had visited the school regularly for six-months to work with ten young people in Year 7 and 8 on the first two phases of my research. At the end of the school year, the Year 7 participants,

Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara (all aged 11 – 12 years old)<sup>2</sup>, expressed an interest in continuing with the project in Year 8. Therefore, it was agreed that I would return after the summer holiday to co-develop the *FFB Workshop* with them. While the Year 8 participants, Basar, Jalil, Layla, Karma and Droshux (all aged 12 – 13 years old), did not wish to continue, they did gift a digital story about the research to inform the workshop.

The *FFB Workshop* was intended to bring different knowledge-making communities together to engage with and re-animate emerging findings from my doctoral study (Maclure et al. 2010; McGeeney 2017). The pastoral team at Green City School were particularly keen to engage pupils who reflected the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the school. In the first two research phases, working with those who freely volunteered to give up their lunchtime was inflected by the classed, raced and gendered politics of education in which participation arguably relied upon resources disproportionately available to and deployed by white, middle-class young people (Francis and Skelton 2005; Mirza 1992). Significantly, Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara all identified as girls and were from middle-class backgrounds. Additionally, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara were White British, while Safa had South Asian and Sikh heritage.

Engaging a wider cohort of young people in the workshop highlighted the uneven and complex power relations operating in schools and the limits of understanding co-production as enacting equality (Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019, p. 3). Hierarchies between adults and children are maintained in schools through standardised pedagogical practices such as monitoring behavior or judging academic abilities. At Green City School, I observed efforts to promote ‘School Manners’ through assemblies, displays and a film produced with students to delineate behavioural expectations around common courtesy. Research has documented how students emerge through these practices as obedient and self-disciplined which limits the ability of participatory projects to challenge educational hierarchies (Bragg 2007).

---

<sup>2</sup> All names in this article are pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity.



In planning the workshop, questions of behavior illuminated the racialised dynamics of schooling as Mia and Isabella suggested that 'No Ahmed's' and 'No Iqbal's' from their tutor group should be invited due to their reputation for being disruptive. Although at other points Mia and Isabella had critiqued how Black and Muslim boys were unfairly disciplined by teachers, latent discourses that constitute particular racialised masculinities as 'problems' (Archer 2003) in educational policy and practice appeared to shape their views on classroom dynamics. In earlier fieldwork, Safa had also critiqued the lack of racial diversity amongst staff at Green City School in comparison to the pupil body. Her comments highlighted how my role as a white adult exercising a degree of authority shaped the research encounters by over-scoring longstanding inequalities with regards to who gets to occupy these positions.

Meeting the schools behavioural expectations also presented challenges for the Year 8 girls. While the teachers knew Mia, Isabella, Chiara, Imogen and Safa to be helpful 'superstars', they had earned the derisive moniker of 'Sparkle Committee' from their peers due to their investment in extracurricular school activities and love of glitter. Despite their eagerness to facilitate activities for SID 2019, the group were anxious that pupils in their year or above would mock them. This raised questions about the affective labour involved for Mia, Isabella, Chiara, Imogen and Safa in making this workshop happen (Coleman and Osgood 2019; Duggan 2020). In line with their wishes the workshop was only extended to pupils in the year below, yet this produced another power asymmetry in relation to the age difference between the Year 8's and Year 7's who participated.

Staff at Green City School took responsibility for inviting Year 7 pupils to participate alongside Chiara, Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and an additional Year 8 with whom they were friends. In total, ten Year 7 pupils were recruited for the workshop representing a mix of genders, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Inviting young people to participate in the workshop highlighted how adults sometimes have to exert power in co-productive processes. While the staff identification of Year 7 participants was intended to overcome the exclusions of earlier fieldwork, their inclusion relied upon regulating participation with a clear expectation from school staff that they would actively engage for the whole morning. This challenges the justification of co-production as empowering for young people,

indicating that it might be for some and not for others.

The staff recruitment of additional young people did not allow for the same considered process of ensuring freely given informed consent that I had undertaken with other participants, therefore I do not consider the Year 7's to be research participants. My observations in this paper, undertaken through fieldnotes, photographing and partially filming activities as well as a follow-up interview, remain focused on Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara. Consequently, this paper does not account for the way local raced and classed norms intersect with the gendered politics of the digitally-networked body. Further research is needed to attend to how differently positioned young people respond to the fabricated future figures produced in this workshop and re-imagine what the body might be, do and become in the future. Observing Safa, Mia, Isabella, Imogen and Chiara in this workshop did, however, allow me to consider what was opened up and what was shut down through putting the research to work in the wider school context.

## **OUTLINE OF THE FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES WORKSHOP**

The *FFB Workshop* was further developed in collaboration with the artist practitioners Bryony Gillard and Ailsa Fineron<sup>3</sup> and comprised of three key elements, the warm-up; assembling speculative fictions; and fabricating future bodies. Drawing on Bryony's and Ailsa's expertise to thoughtfully choreograph the workshop further highlighted how it can be necessary for adults to exert their knowledge and authority in co-productive processes to facilitate young people's engagement with arts-based practices.

To introduce the workshop, we facilitated a series of activities to get participants thinking about the digitally-networked body. This included playing the digital story made by Basar,

---

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, Bryony and I had been working together on a feminist heritage project during which I learnt about her practice co-producing speculative fictions in participatory arts workshops with young people. We began to discuss how these techniques might be adapted to re-animate emerging findings from my doctoral research and Bryony also introduced me to her colleague Ailsa, a visual artist and writer, whose previous work has explored topics related to body image and sex and relationships education (SRE) in schools. Together the three of us developed the *Fabricating Future Bodies Workshop*.

Jalil, Layla, Karma and Droshux which provided examples of digital practices that made these participants feel good in their bodies such as video games, Netflix shows, cat pictures, Snapchat filters and YouTube videos of men doing parkour.<sup>4</sup> Following the warm-up, participants were supported to assemble speculative fictions and fabricate future bodies in small groups.

### ***ASSEMBLING SPECULATIVE FICTIONS***

Speculative fiction refers to an expansive literary genre encompassing science fiction, fantasy, the supernatural and horror that embraces ‘a different version of reality than the empirical-materialist one’ (Oziewicz 2017, p. 1). To assemble their speculative fictions, the participants were asked to imagine it was the year 2119 and consider: What will our bodies be made of? How will we express our feelings? How will we know what other bodies are feeling? Working in small groups, participants were provided with a selection of texts and invited to cut out words or phrases that grabbed their attention before drawing on these to assemble a new text that responded to one of the questions. The texts included anonymised research quotes alongside extracts from speculative fiction, popular culture, contemporary art, news reports and academic texts that provided rich descriptions of bodies, feelings and technologies. This activity mobilised a ‘collaborative remix’ approach to inquiry that creatively reimagined how elements might be put together to produce ‘an assemblage that one hopes has significance, salience and meaning for those people who experience it’ (Markham 2013, section 4.2, n.p). Starting with texts that the participants could cut-up and re-assemble offered an accessible way into the creative writing task, with Chiara suggesting that ‘this is what [they] should always be doing’ in English lessons. Within twenty-five minutes, all of the groups had created a poetic speculative text.

### ***FABRICATING FUTURE BODIES***

After every group had read out their cut-up speculative poem, they were asked to create a

---

<sup>4</sup> Parkour is a discipline developed from military training that involves running, swinging, vaulting and climbing through a typically urban environment in the fastest and most efficient way possible (Parkour UK 2020).

bodily pose that reflected a feeling from the text. A volunteer from each group then took up the pose by lying on a large sheet of felt and, once comfortable, other members of their group carefully drew around the body contour. The resulting body shapes depicted power poses, exuberance and movement as well as vulnerability and protectiveness. At this point, the participants took a mid-morning break during which Bryony and Ailsa cut out the felt body contours. Meanwhile, I prepared the room with fabric pens, paints, scissors, fabrics and other materials that could be used to annotate and embellish the fabricated future bodies. The fabrics we employed picked up on threads from earlier fieldwork by including, for example, faux animal furs that connected to participants talk of pet pictures online, a shimmering fish scale fabric that linked to talk about the ocean, sea creatures and mermaids and metallic studs that were akin to those worn by another participants favourite video game character (Marston 2020).

The materials employed in the workshop were not understood as inert objects to be moulded to the participants will but as collaborators in the making process with their own material-discursive agency working to shape the knowledge produced (Hickey-Moody 2020). Returning from their break to a room full of colourful, tactile textiles animated the participants who responded by draping, swooshing and cloaking the fabrics over themselves, creating new intimacies between their bodies and the materials that would form their future body visions. Some materials proved more appealing than others. For example, every fabricated figure was adorned with metallic studs which perhaps had a more immediate connection to futuristic aesthetics than the other materials. These were transformed into shorts, a belt, an extravagant necklace, beaming red eyes, chains as well as wrist and ankle restraints. Other materials had agency for some participants and not others. Later I detail how Safa and Imogen were drawn to the shimmering fish scale fabric which tapped into and made visible experiences of emotional turmoil.

After the groups had selected the materials they wanted to work with, they each set out on the tactile process of cutting and sticking fabrics, squeezing paints into swirls across the bodies and pressing fabric pens into felt. Building on the cut-up texts with this activity enabled participants to give form-force to their future body visions in a way that engaged their bodies in the process. This practice was similar to body mapping within sexualities

research which works with and on the body to explore emotional aspects of bodily norms in safe, lively and dynamic ways (Chenhall et al. 2013; Renold and Iverson 2019).

## **FELT EVENTS**

Bringing the Year 7's and Year 8's together with a range of texts and materials was intended to open up conversations about the digitally-networked body. However, the process was equally capable of shutting down and blocking the participants' power to speak and act. Participants were required to work in small groups of four. In preparation, the school staff had encouraged Mia, Isabella, Safa, Imogen and Chiara to work with the Year 7's as peer leads to support their engagement. On the day, however, the prospect of working with unfamiliar pupils in mixed-gender and mixed-aged groups was met with protestations from the Year 7's and the Year 8's. While during the warm-up activities Mia, Isabella and Chiara worked separately with groups of Year 7's and Safa and Imogen worked together with two Year 7 boys, these group dynamics were a challenge. I witnessed Chiara shut down some of the Year 7's ideas whereas Mia stepped back from her group and did not contribute. Every time there was a transition from one warm-up activity to another the participants quickly splintered back into friendship clusters. Correspondingly, when it came to assembling the cut-up texts and fabricating future bodies I allowed Mia, Isabella and Chiara to work together. Again, this illustrates the role that adults are sometimes required to take in order to facilitate a space where participants can meaningfully engage. My intervention allowed the majority of Year 7's to work in peer groups with which they were more familiar. Tensions were not calmed however as Safa and Imogen still had to work with two Year 7 boys who they described as 'irritating' in the follow-up interview.

In Safa's and Imogen's group, the participants had different investments in and understandings of the relevance of the *FFB Workshop*. For Safa and Imogen, it was the culmination of their dedicated engagement with my doctoral study over 12 months. They arrived enthusiastic and primed to play with the possibilities of what arts-based methods could do. While the boys in their group struggled to engage, Safa and Imogen pressed ahead on their own terms. When assembling the speculative fiction, for example, they moved away from the cut-up technique to express themselves in their own hand-written rhymes

(see Figure 1). Again this challenged understandings of co-production as empowering participants or enacting equality, raising questions about who benefitted from the workshop. These peer dynamics also prompted further consideration of how the methodological-pedagogical practices employed could be extended to better include those who were new to arts-based explorations of digital culture.

Navigating fractious peer relationships left me with ambivalent feelings about the workshop, highlighting the dilemmas that can arise when trying to renegotiate pedagogic relationships through co-production (Ollis, Coll and Harrison 2019). However, I take heed from researchers who argue that peer tension can operate as important sites of knowledge (Fields, Gilbert and Miller 2015). Inspired by Haraway's (2016) call to 'stay with the trouble', Niccolini, Zarabadi and Ringrose (2018, p. 325) argue that tension can be an activating and agentic force in the 'troubled life of the classroom' that can be 'worked, rather than worked through or resolved'. While arts-based practices cannot promise harmony, they can provide a 'contact zone' that 'enables new affective relationalities between humans and nonhumans' that might open up avenues of inquiry (Niccolini, Zarabadi and Ringrose 2018, p. 325). I explore these ideas further in my discussion of the cut-up poem and fabricated figures produced by Safa's and Imogen's group.

#### **EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY**

*[Insert Figure 1 Safa's and Imogen's cut-up poem]*

#### **SAFA'S AND IMOGEN'S POEM**

Would you take apart every nook and cranny of your body?

Your body is fat. Do you dare to be different?

Perfectly executed facial expressions, posing just for likes

You change, just for a like, over and over

All that you Change

Changes you

My anger, your fear is like trying to be different

Feeling sad, I would rather be completely switched off.

The feelings, happiness

Silenced when a person online thinks differently.

It really makes you think when hate is shared

Like have you been loved,

Did they ever care?

All the hate,

You're ugly, fat, mean

But how should they know,

Just from a screen?

This emotive poem powerfully articulates the demands placed upon young people's bodies in a visual social media culture where existing commodified gendered and sexualised norms are intensified (Ringrose and Harvey 2015). The collective cut-up and handwritten composition gives it a multi-vocal quality: exemplifying how poetic inquiry can distil complex

experiences into affectively powerful forms that reach out and exceed the specificity of Safa's and Imogen's personal experience. While the future-orientation of the poem is not overt, its framing as speculative fiction invites imaginative readings. For example, the line '(f)eeling sad, I would rather be completely switched off' evokes a hybridisation of machine and organism whereby the body is capable of shutting down the transmission of signals in its sympathetic nervous system just as a smartphone can power down its electrical circuit. The desire to be 'completely switched off' can be understood as a powerful articulation of the way young lives are rendered temporarily un-liveable through the life-destroying affects of body-shaming comments and idealised bodies on social media (Ringrose 2011; Marston 2020).

In its expression of 'sadness', 'anger', 'fear' and 'happiness, silenced', Safa's and Imogen's poem taps into palpable feelings of disaffection. However, the process of assembling it was seemingly affirming for Safa and Imogen who read it out proudly and emphatically in the workshop. Through their poem typically pathologised and privatised emotions were given vivid expression without necessarily being reduced to the personal or confessional (Renold 2017). Detached from the workshop however this poem risks being re-absorbed into the narrative comfort of pathologising social media as a source of bodily malaise for young people without attending to broader socio-cultural factors. Considering the poem in relation to the fabricated figure situates this disaffection in relation to the broader spatialities of gendered embodiment at Green City School.



## FABRICATED FIGURES

Figure 2: Fabricated Masculine and Feminine Figures



For the Fabricating Future Bodies task, Safa's and Imogen's group created two connected body poses and thus manoeuvred the activity so that the boys could contribute but still work independently (see Figure 2). The Year 7 boys were tasked with working on the figure on the left, which Safa and Imogen referred to throughout as 'he' and described as 'free' and letting 'his emotions show'. Meanwhile, they worked on the figure on the right which they referred to throughout as 'she' and described as 'trapping her emotions inside' and

'weighed down by emotions'. Here I discuss how the juxtaposition of these figures builds on Safa's and Imogen's poem as well as gives form to the troubled gender relations at Green City School.

To craft the fabricated feminine figure Safa took up a closed protective posture that Imogen drew around. The figures inhibited pose resonates with Young's (2005) observation that girls and young women embody the risks of objectification through introverted bodily comportment which hinders their capacity and willingness to engage in certain activities. Safa and Imogen were the only one's to employ the fish scale fabric which they cut into waves that rise up through the fabricated feminine figures legs and stomach accompanied by feeling words ('depressed', 'sad', 'trapped'). This fish scale fabric is a significant agent in the composition that animates thought, calling to my mind Safa's earlier observations that she 'love[s] the ocean', has 'mixed emotions sometimes' and is 'always in a sea of thoughts'. Here Safa's 'sea of thoughts' is brought to life through the fabricated figure, compellingly articulating how thoughts of being 'depressed', 'sad', 'trapped' can swirl inside the body. The waves lead to a broken heart cut from tin foil and hidden behind reflective mirrored card.

Safa and Imogen spent much of the workshop cutting out and gluing speech bubbles to the figure that were filled with pejorative and pathologising comments. The head of the fabricated feminine figure is full of critical commentary such as 'fake, so ugly', 'she's weird', 'she has issues', 'what is wrong with her?' 'who was mad enough to like her pic?' An additional speech bubble shows the figure pondering: 'Am I ugly? I guess I am if they say so, I look bad in my clothes and I don't fit in'. This composition materialises how online comments can stick to and fix bodies in place. Terms such as 'weird', 'ugly', 'fake', 'wrong' and 'mad' are powerful points of discursive fixation as well as affective capture that over-score the felt force of post-feminist pathologies and embodied gender norms (Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; McRobbie 2008). By the end of the workshop, the figure was so encumbered with cut-out speech bubbles that it was hard to move without the comments becoming unfixed. This fragile quality symbolises both the way in which such terms pin bodies in place as well as the potential for movement to loosen the grip of these subjectifying forces

(Borovica 2017). Movement, however, is presented as the preserve of the fabricated masculine figure.

The exuberant leap and outstretched arms of the figure crafted by the boys seemingly depicts a body unencumbered by post-feminist pathologies. Safa and Imogen embellished the figure's chest with the words 'freedom', 'love' and 'peace' and gave it a crown stating 'you can be anything'. The fabricated masculine figures animated pose brought to mind Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen's frustration at the school policy of gender segregating physical education (P.E) which required boys to do parkour and girls to do gymnastics. Both parkour and gymnastics centre on skills such as balance, endurance, spatial awareness, agility, precision and coordination. However, parkour is an outdoor sport that involves moving 'freely over and through any terrain using only the abilities of the body' (Parkour UK 2020) whereas gymnastics is an indoor sport performed in constricted spaces such as a 12-meter by 12-meter events floor. The spatiality of gymnastics, therefore, channels the confinement that girls and young women are found to embody in everyday life (Young 2005). Despite the strength requirements of gymnastics, scholars have noted how it is feminised and devalued through its focus on aesthetics, artistry, grace and perfection (Krane 2018). In a similar fashion to the visual culture of social media, gymnastics is a sport in which 'perfectly executed' poses are rewarded with quantified scores. By juxtaposing the inhibited fabricated feminine figure with the animated fabricated masculine figure, cultures of bodily display on social media are put into conversation with the broader gendered body politics at school.

The inhibition depicted in the fabricated feminine figure was particularly striking given how animated the girls had been in earlier fieldwork sessions. This group had expressed frustration at what they observed to be the sexist practice of gender segregating P.E, punctuating their points by leaping on tables, swinging between chairs and parading around the classroom chanting 'Change the world!' The revelry of earlier fieldwork was notably missing from this workshop. Where anger had been playfully voiced in previous fieldwork, here their contributions offer pensive expressions of immobility and stuck-ness. However, Safa and Imogen did not appear inhibited by the *FFB Workshop*. On the contrary, the expansion of the fabricated figure into two poses meant that their group took up more lateral space than any other. Despite emerging from a spontaneous effort to overcome the

difficulties the group had in working together, the fabricated figures challenge moves to set pupils apart from each other along gendered lines. The fabricated masculine and feminine figures remain tethered to one another and the product of opening a 'contact zone' between Safa, Imogen and the Year 7 boys which evoked a different way for them to be in-relation and occupy space together (Halberstam 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the impossibility of flattening out the institutionalised and societal power dynamics that operate within schools through co-production. Holding space for young people to explore a sensitive issue like the digitally-networked body raises complex and nuanced methodological-pedagogical considerations which cannot always be predicted in advance. At various stages of the process it was necessary for adults (teachers, artists, myself) to intervene in the interplay of power differences between young people and steer peer group dynamics in order to allow the creative, co-productive process to continue. Despite these limitations I also highlighted the agency of the art materials employed to animate thought and practice, enabling some young people to access and powerfully communicate difficult feelings about the digitally-networked body in 'real-time'. The cut-up poem and fabricated figure produced by Safa's and Imogen's group made visible the bodily regulation they strongly felt at school and online, as well as materialised peer tension in a dynamic way that troubled gender segregating practices at their school.

While the participants' creations illuminated the possibilities that carefully choreographed arts-based approaches offer for enabling young people to articulate what matters to them, the workshop did have notable drawbacks. This included the differing investments and benefits it offered for the Year 8 participants compared with the Year 7 participants who were new to arts-based explorations of digital culture. Although Safa and Imogen declared the workshop 'amazing' and requested that I return every term to facilitate similar sessions, it remained unclear if and how they had made sense of what the workshop had made possible. There was also minimal engagement from teachers when the fabricated figures were displayed at Green City School for Safer Internet Day 2019.

Rather than celebrating the cut-up poem and fabricated figures as powerful examples of youthful expression, these texts and objects prompt further questions and responses. For example, how would differently positioned young people and teachers relate to the juxtaposition of an animated figure unencumbered by body pathologies and bearing a crown asserting its ability to 'be anything' compared to an inhibited figure weighed down with pejorative and pathologising comments? While it is beyond the scope of this article to map how the participants' creations might travel to affect others and provoke new reflections and connections, this paper has illustrated how co-productive arts-based practice can transform the normative script of online safety education and engage with the complexity of young people's digitally-networked body cultures in generative ways.

## References

- Albury, K. 2015. Selfies, Sexts and Sneaky hats: Young people's Understandings of Gendered Practices of Self-Representation *International Journal of Communication* 9(1), pp. 1734 – 1745.
- Anderson, B. 2006. Becoming and being hopeful: Towards a theory of affect. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24(1), pp. 733-752.
- Bennett, J. 2009. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Blackman, L. 2008. *The Body*. Oxford: Berg.
- Borovica, T. 2017. Dancing the Strata: Investigating Affective Flows of Moving/Dancing Bodies in the Exploration of Bodily (Un)Becoming. *Qualitative Inquiry* 25(1), pp. 26 – 36.
- Bragg, S. 2007. 'Student voice' and governmentality: The production of enterprising subjects? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 28(3), pp. 343-358.
- Braidotti, R. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chenhall, R., Davison, B., Fitz, J., Pearse, T., Senior, K. 2013. Engaging youth in sexual health research: Refining a "youth friendly" method in the Northern Territory Australia. *Visual Anthropology Review* 29(1), pp. 123–132.
- Coleman, R. 2011. *Transforming Images: Screens, affect, futures*. London: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Dobson, A. 2015. *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media and Self-Representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Driver, S. and Coulter, N. eds. 2018. *Youth Mediations and Affective Relations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duggan, J. 2020. The co-productive imagination: a creative and eventful process to co-producing research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*  
DOI: [10.1080/13645579.2020.1799638](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1799638).
- Evans, J., Rich, E. and Holroyd, R. 2004. Disordered eating and disordered schooling: what schools do to middle-class girls. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25(1), pp. 123–142.
- Facer, K., & Enright, B. (2016). *Creating living knowledge: The connected communities programme, community university relationships and the participatory turn in the production of knowledge*. University of Bristol/AHRC Connected Communities.

Fields, J. Gilbert, J. and Miller, M. 2015. Sexuality and education: Toward the promise of ambiguity. In: Delamater, J. and Plante, R. eds. *Handbook of the Sociology of Sexualities*. New York: Springer, pp. 371 – 388.

Francis, B. and Skelton, C. 2005. *Reassessing gender and achievement: Questioning contemporary key debates*. London: Routledge.

Gallacher, L. and Gallagher, M. 2008. Methodological Immaturity in Childhood Research: Thinking through ‘participatory methods’ *Childhood* 15(4), pp. 499-516. DOI: 10.1177/0907568208091672.

Gallagher, M. 2008. Power is not an evil: Rethinking power in participatory methods. *Children’s Geographies* 6(2), pp. 137 – 151. DOI: 10.1080/14733280801963045.

Halberstam, J. 2018. *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. California: University of California Press.

Haraway, D. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hickey-Moody, A. 2020. New Materialism, Ethnography, and Socially Engaged Practices: Space-Time Folds and the Agency of Matter. *Qualitative Inquiry* 26(7), pp. 724 – 732.

Holland, S., Renold, E., Ross, N. and Hillman, A. 2010. Power, agency and participatory agendas: A critical exploration of young people’s engagement in participative qualitative research. *Childhood* 17(3), pp. 360 – 375. DOI: 10.1177/0907568210369310.

Kofoed, J. and Ringrose, J. 2012. Travelling and sticky affects: Exploring teens sexualised cyberbullying through a Butlerian-Deleuzian-Guattarian lens. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 33(1), pp. 5 – 20. DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2012.632157.

Krane, V. ed. 2018. *Sex, Gender and Sexuality in Sport: Queer Inquiries*. London: Routledge.

Leavy, P. ed. 2019. *Handbook of Arts-Based Research*. London: Guildford Press.

Mallan, K., Singh, P. and Giardina, N. 2010. The challenges of participatory research with ‘tech-savvy’ youth. *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(2), pp. 255 – 272. DOI: doi.org/10.1080/13676260903295059.

Manning, E. 2009. *Relationscapes: Movement, art, philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Markham, A. 2013. Undermining ‘data’: A critical examination of a core term in scientific inquiry. *First Monday* 18(10), pp. doi: 10.5210/fm.v18i10.4868.

McGeeney, E. 2017. Possibilities for Pleasure: A Creative Approach to Including Pleasure in Sexuality Education. In: Allen, L. and Rasmussen, M. eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 571 – 589.

McGeeney, E. and Hanson, E. 2017. Digital Romance: A research project exploring young people's use of technology in their romantic relationships and love lives. London: National Crime Agency and Brook.

McRobbie, Angela. 2008. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Los Angeles; London: SAGE.

Mirza, H.S. 1992. *Young, female and black*. London: Routledge.

Nicolini, A., Zarabadi, S. and Ringrose, J. 2018. Spinning Yarns: Affective Kinshipping as Posthuman Pedagogy. *Parallax* 24(3), pp. 324 – 343. DOI: 10.1080/13534645.2018.1496582.

Ollis, D., Coll, L., and Harrison, L. 2019. Negotiating Sexuality Education with Young People: Ethical Pitfalls and Provocations. *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 14(2), pp. 186 – 202. DOI: 10.1080/15546128.2018.1548317.

Oziewicz, M. 2017. Speculative Fiction. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.78> [Accessed 30 April 2021]

Parkour UK. 2020. *What is Parkour?* Available at: <https://parkour.uk/what-we-do/what-is-parkour/> [Accessed 25 Feb 2020].

Quinlivan, K. 2018. *Exploring Contemporary Issues in Sexuality Education with Young People: Theories in Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Renold, E. 2017. 'Feel what I feel': Making darta with teen girls for creative activism on how sexual violence matters. *Journal of Gender Studies*, pp. 1 – 20. DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2017.1296352.

Renold, E. and Ivanson, G. 2019. Anticipating the more-than: working with prehension in artful interventions with young people in a post-industrial community. *Futures: the journal of policy, planning and future studies* 112, pp. 1 – 14. DOI: 10.1016/j.futures.2019.05.006.

Ringrose, J. 2012. *Postfeminist Education? Girls and The Sexual Politics of Schooling*. London: Routledge.

Ringrose, J. and Barajas, K. 2011. Gendered risks and opportunities? Exploring teen girls' digital sexual identity in postfeminist media contexts. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 7(2), pp. 121 – 138.

Ringrose, J. and Harvey, L. 2015. Boobs, back off, six packs and bits: Mediated body parts, gendered reward and sexual shame in teens' sexting images. *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 29(2), pp. 205 – 217. DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2015.1022952.



Ringrose, J., Whitehead, S., Regehr, K., and Jenkinson, A. 2019. Play-Doh Vulvas and Felt Tip Dick Pics: Disrupting phallogocentric matter(s) in Sex Education. *Reconceptualising Educational Research Methodology* 10(2-3), pp. 59 – 291. DOI: doi.org/10.7577/term.3679.

Safer Internet Day. 2020. *About*. Available at: <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/about> [Accessed 25 Feb 2020].

Springgay, S. and Truman, S. 2018. On the Need for Methods Beyond Proceduralism: Speculative Middles, (In) Tensions, and Response-Ability in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry* 24(3), pp. 203 – 214. DOI: 10.1177/1077800417704464.

Truman, S. 2019. Feminist New Materialisms. In: P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J.W. Sakshaug, & R.A. Williams eds. *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. DOI: 10.4135/9781526421036808740.

Wang, Q., Coemans, S., Siegesmund, R. and Hannes, K. 2017. Arts-Based Methods in Socially Engaged Research Practice: A Classification Framework. *Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 2(2), pp. 5 – 39. DOI: 10.18432/R26G8P.

Young, I. 2005. *On Female Bodily Experience: "Throwing Like A Girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.