

Reconfiguring Play: material feminist possibilities to reimagine gender in early childhood.

Summary

Drawing on the work of recent feminist theorising which works with the material and affective, this chapter attempts to (re-)position children as active in processes of developing and transgressing gendered identities through play. By drawing on observations of young children at play, with a particular focus on a three-year-old girl, Sylvie, the closely monitored and regulated gendered boundaries within early childhood are re-examined to consider how we might think differently through our adult practices. Framed by the work of Braidotti (2013) I conceptualise the becoming child as a series of multiple becomings set within an early childhood assemblage comprising objects, emotions, sensory incidents, social interactions and un/intentional events. Approaching gender and play through this lens opens up opportunities to observe the various ways and means by which children negotiate, resist, celebrate, indulge and transgress gendered ways of being through their play (with people and things), through verbal, non-verbal, physical becomings in early childhood contexts. This refocusing enables new ways of observing, sensing and engaging with the everydayness of young childhoods lived at home and in the nursery, and offers a means to re-engage with debates about the persistence of gender inequity in society more broadly. This approach invites us to question our world views and make space to reconfigure the becoming child.

Introduction

Play remains a central focus in the field of early childhood education and care and there continues to be debate about its various forms and potentialities. There is a wealth of literature that offers guidance on how best to facilitate play, to regulate and assess the value of play and so on. However, I would suggest that there is less debate about stepping back (as adults: practitioners, parents, researchers) and critically observing the generative possibilities that play affords young children to develop and transgress gendered identities through play that occurs in the 'in-between spaces'. There has intermittently been a preoccupation in early childhood to put/keep gender on the agenda. But this gender agenda has tended to take the form of intervention and regulation (MacNaughton 2000, Holland 2003). In its place I would like to put forward the idea that it is imperative for children to play with gender, to allow space and opportunities for children to negotiate, resist, celebrate and queer gendered ways of being through their play with people and things. This requires a de-centring of the adult

subject and calls upon a need to view the becoming child as a series of successive becomings (Braidotti, 2013) as having rights to explore and transgress (Robinson, 2013) and to pay attention to their engagements with matter (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

This chapter focuses attention on reconfiguring play so that we (adults: practitioners, parents, researchers) might reach fuller understandings of children as gendered beings who actively and un/consciously play with gender within and through early childhood encounters and contexts. By highlighting interwoven events in the lives of young children's play such as rough and tumble, superhero, and nature, I endeavour to illustrate the means by which the becoming child encounters a series of multiple becomings. These becomings are formed within early childhood assemblages comprising objects, emotions, sensory incidents, social interactions and un/intentional events (Renold & Mellor, 2013). Applying such a lens to seek new understandings of the gendered lives of children in early childhood education provides an opportunity to challenge our taken for granted assumptions about childhood, gender and our (adult) roles in making space to play.

This chapter builds upon the work of key feminist theorists such as Judith Butler (1990; 1993) who theorises gender as performative and highlights the significance of everyday routines, performances and interactions that shape gendered behaviours and contribute to the formation of gendered identities. Recognising that gender is socially constructed; fluid and shifting and hinges upon the context in which it is performed is important when considering how gender is negotiated by young children in the context of early childhood settings – particularly through play. Taking Butler's ideas as a starting place and extending them by considering the work of Braidotti (2013) it is possible to consider post-humanist ideas around embodied experience that stress that play in early childhood forms an assemblage – made up of objects, feelings, sensory encounters, interactions and events.

“She’s usually so girly, with her sparkly shoes and fairy wings and the next minute you see her throwing herself across the room....And she can be so loud sometimes [laughs]. She certainly surprises us every day.”

This quote from an Early Years Teacher provides reflection on unexpected displays of gender variance that challenge normative ideas that abound in early childhood. The three year old girl in question, Sylvie, in many senses can be understood to embody hegemonic forms of femininity through her investments in wearing princess outfits, and other aesthetic investments in hyper-femininity – a desire for long flowing hair, pretty clothes, and a

seeming obsession with all things pink. Yet, observations of Sylvie (at nursery, at home and in other contexts) - engaging with matter and through interactions with her peers reveal that she also, readily performs masculine-femininity (Halberstam, 1998). Her place within the early years assemblage is shifting and reworked on a minute by minute basis.

Physical 'rough and tumble' play is a common feature of early childhood, and it is typically associated with rowdy boys taking up space in the heterosexual matrix through displays of hegemonic masculinity (Davies 1989, Walkerdine 1999, Epstein 1998). It is variously tolerated and regulated by parents and practitioners. However, observations of Sylvie illustrate that gendered becomings are generated relationally by objects and senses of all kinds. Through her boisterous physical displays and through the material production of femininity that rupture molar lines (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) we see that agency is exercised in surprising ways that transgress what might otherwise be read as heteronormativity. By allowing space for such play and further space for critical engagement it becomes possible to reach different conclusions about gender and the becoming child.

Despite her usual choice of 'girly' clothes, and displays of complicity with what it is to 'do girl' Sylvie engages in subversive acts that challenge and unsettle and allow us to see her deterritorialised from striated spaces. Borrowing from Deleuze & Guattari (2004) girls can become constructed as hyper-feminine based upon simplistic gendered assumptions about the minority, marginal or excluded position of women and girls in society more generally. This in turn invokes a notion of deficiency and establishes the foundation for territorialisation into striated spaces. As Tamboukou (2008, p.360) explains 'striated spaces are hierarchical, rule intensive, strictly bounded and confining, whereas smooth spaces are open, dynamic and allow for transformation to occur'. Through un/conscious subversive acts Sylvie is seeking deterritorialisation from striated spaces of gender conformity or heteronormativity to the smooth spaces described by Tamboukou (op cit) to play with gender in fluid, dynamic ways and as this occurs through her daily interactions with people and matter. As such, we witness the important transformations that occur in respect of our understandings of young femininity as enacted by this three-year-old.

I will attempt to illustrate moments where such deterritorialisation occurs in the routine events of Sylvie's life lived at home, in the nursery and elsewhere. As is the case for many young children, dressing-up is a key feature of Sylvie's childhood at nursery and home. She regularly arrives at nursery dressed in any one of an array of outfits from fairy princess, to

Easter bunny, to superhero; and quite often a hybrid of several outfits. Observing her arrival to nursery on one occasion she was dressed as Sportacus. Sportacus is a fictional character from the children's television show LazyTown. The name is a portmanteau of the ancient figure Spartacus and the word sport, which represents the character's athleticism. Sportacus describes himself as a "slightly above-average hero". There is also a young female character in LazyTown, Stephanie, who dresses from head to toe in pink and is equally as athletic as Sportacus – it is Stephanie that Sylvie most readily identifies with through her play; this perhaps explains the puzzlement at Sylvie's enactment as the male superhero upon arrival at nursery. Often Sylvie is greeted with coos of excitement, most typically by the practitioners, at the fairy wings/sparkly slippers/princess dress that she might be wearing. On this particular day, the arrival of Sylvie-Sportacus (albeit with sparkly slippers peeping out from beneath the spandex superhero costume) was greeted with bemused stares and questioning looks. One of Sylvie's peers, Stanley, was eagerly awaiting her arrival so that she might join him in playing dress-up. He was dressed in a red flamenco dress, over the top of his combat trousers, t-shirt adorned with a truck, and heavy boots. He had reserved a similar dress in yellow for Sylvie to wear. On hearing that Sylvie had arrived Stanley held the dress aloft but upon recognising that Sylvie was already in a costume, and that therefore the yellow flamenco dress was redundant at this moment, Stanley retreated towards a far corner of the room – apparently dejected, confused and taking time to reconsider his play options. En route Stanley quickly becomes engaged with another storyline being enacted by his peers nearby, this illustrates the ebb and flow that so readily characterises children's play in early childhood settings. Often play(ing) is subverted or dying in one place but erupting elsewhere. As Sellers (2010) highlights children feed off their collective imaginings for/with/in their storyline and feed off imaginings of games and children nearby. We see how the forces of play and interrelationships affect and are affected by other play and relationships and the physical materiality of the setting.

It is interesting to note the momentary affects that Sylvie's transgression of gendered expectations evoked, particularly as Stanley was adorning a brightly coloured, frilly dress and was therefore also complicit in transgressing binary gendered ways of being, but also how quickly Stanley is able to overcome the space of misunderstanding and to merge/ fade away into another storyline. This in-between event is useful as it provides opportunities to go beyond heteronormative understandings of how young children negotiate gender through hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine performances. Whilst Sylvie and Stanley are unsettling

gendered ways of being the various reactions and dis/engagements to their embodied states is noteworthy. Both Stanley and Sylvie play with gender through various subversive and complicit acts, in multiple ways and through enactment with objects (dressing up costumes, role play, weaponry, dance and so on) how gender is understood through lived performances of bodies and the gendered inscriptions which act to frame and contain 'boy' and 'girl' in early childhood are brought into sharp focus. Taking up the post-humanist invitation to decentre the subject and to make the familiar strange allow us to transcend what we think is being signified (Jones, 2013). This emergent assemblage simultaneously regulates and ruptures molar lines, where agency is exercised in ways that trouble what is thought of as normal. Below are further visual representations of the contradictory, multiple, inconsistent and shifting embodied performances with matter that challenge gendered inscriptions which act to contain and limit the possibilities to do 'girl' in early childhood: Viking-swimming costume-sword wielding- girl; and bunny ears-caped crusader- spiderman/superhero-lip balm- fairy wand-girl. I want to retain a focus on space, time, matter, interrelationships and the chaotic, rhizomatic nature of children's play and the possibilities to reconfigure gendered understandings by identifying de-territorialising moments.



Mummies and Daddies?

Domesticity and family life provide a re-emergent, familiar and customary focus of Sylvie's play. Sylvie is often found playing with dolls at nursery, often in 'home corner' seemingly taking on the role of mummy in providing care and nurturance, however, closer attention to the minute occurrences within her enactments provide alternative means of engaging with

conceptualisations of gender in early childhood. Sylvie is also Doctor to sickly babies; the dolls are deployed by Sylvie and her peers as ventriloquists' dummies, and engage in conversations with each other about a whole array of topics – some of which are thought taboo (Robinson, 2013), and are deployed in magical, superhero and other fantasy games. Doll's play takes many forms that diverge from those that are readily anticipated, if and when read through the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 2005) characterised by heteronormativity – girls playing with dolls can be read as problematic and limiting to what girls can 'do' through their play. Yet microscopic mapping of play reveals a far more complex and multi-layered assemblage at work. This ebb and flow of doll-play highlights the interrelationships between a multiplicity of materialities and highlights the performative aspects of matter (i.e. how things function within a particular context and in relation to the bodies they encounter (see Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

In an attempt to continue to recast humans and human agency within heterogeneous assemblages alongside other entities (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) I draw attention to other play events. At home Sylvie is the proud owner of a four storey, bubble-gum pink Doll's mansion (a gift from her grandparents). From psychological and sociological perspectives this space/object might be read as highly feminised and therefore interpreted as providing the means by which gender stereotypical behaviours and heteronormativity might become reinforced. Like the doll play described above, a close examination of play with/in and stemming from the doll's house reveals complexity, uncertainty, ambiguity and transgression. Sylvie plays with the doll's house differently, on different occasions and with different playmates. As Renold and Mellor (2013) remind us, dominant systems of power (class, race, gender, age and so on) are omnipresent – they are the mechanics which provide the 'conditions of possibility' for certain subjectivities to emerge, whilst others are less possible. In early childhood these conditions are deeply embedded at the molar level of sexed subjectivities – i.e. dominant ideas about what it is to be/do boy/girl; but where gender circulates in multiple ways at the molecular level; through and across bodies. So when at home with her older brother the conditions of possibility for Sylvie to play with the doll's house in particular ways are mediated differently to the play that occurs with the nursery dolls house with her nursery-peers, or when she has 'playdates' at home with her cousins, or peers from nursery for example. At home, Sylvie mostly plays with her older brother (Noah who is six). Sylvie and Noah rarely play with the doll's house but on the few occasions that they do fears that it might reinforce heteronormativity are called in to question. Typically the

chimney stacks are removed - adorned with keyrings and Lego figures so that they become transformed into spaceships at the centre of subterfuge and battle, which are flown around the adjoining rooms as the storyline is narrated, to Sylvie's room, to Noah's room, to the sitting room then it fades away and morphs into an alternate storyline. Upon coming to rest on various surfaces in Sylvie's bedroom (steps, bookshelf, chest of drawers, bed) the spaceships come to land on the fire engine. Soon the doll's house is reassembled (the spaceships revert to chimney stacks albeit with the weaponry still attached) and a fire-rescue-scenario is embarked upon. The fire engine (complete with six firefighters) sets out on a rescue mission to save the family inhabiting the doll's house but this storyline then merges into another and another. As Sellers (2010) usefully illustrates through a Deleuzian lens - children's play is full of activity and energy and the physical territory of the game as well as the surrounding environment including natural resources and material artefacts are already chaotically becoming with/in/through the multiplicity of storylines. Sylvie is at the forefront of orchestrating and narrating these playtales with the imaginative (gendered, aged) input of her brother.

Liberal-feminist fears and anxieties that a large pink doll's house might limit and contain gendered ways of be(com)ing appear unfounded. I would suggest that concerns to closely manage or excessively regulate young children's lives, particularly girls so as to protect/empower them are rendered obsolete when a close examination (or rhizoanalysis following Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) is undertaken to reach alternative understandings. By taking a step back to more closely observe the assemblages, moments of de- and re-territorialisation it is possible to see the becoming child reworking and negotiating gendered ways of being and transgressing what is thought knowable/doable/acceptable. This raises important questions about what happens when young children transcend/complicate practitioners'/parents' gendered expectations (Renold & Mellor 2013, Blaise 2013, Jones 2013) – what do we (adults: practitioners, parents, researchers) have a responsibility to do? I would suggest that we have a responsibility to observe the transgressions. Deconstruct and reconfigure alternative readings (and which present a challenge to dominant ideas encapsulated in the EYFS and developmentalism that implicitly promote ideas around normativity and biological determinism which justifies the measurement and regulation of childhood; see Osgood, 2014 for further discussion). Instead we need to make space for children to play with gender. Braidotti (2013) stresses that sensory encounters – that is movement and touch – are important ways of being in the world but that they are inextricably

embedded in wider social, political and economic contexts – shaped by hierarchies and injustices. However, this refocusing on the minute happenings within particular early childhood assemblages, which I have outlined provide the means of engaging in everyday happenings within early childhood that recognise young children as agentic and relationally interdependent to the worlds in which they are located and the assemblages of which they form part.

Rossholt (2012) draws attention to children's bodies as more than simply inscribed by external, societal discourses (about how to do child, do gender and do play for example). Rather children participate in the material production of themselves and others as doing bodies. It is to these corporeal, material and affective practices that I want to draw further attention to by focusing on Sylvie's engagement with objects, subjects, matter on a recent trip to the woods. Upon discovering a makeshift treehouse in the woods Sylvie became very purposeful, unusually disaffected by getting dirty, intent on further constructing the dwelling, wielding sticks in boisterous fashion and entering hunter-gatherer mode. Following Jones (2013) I raise a number of post-humanist inspired questions about play, nature and gender: what does becoming treehouse make possible? What are its foundations and connections with other things? What does it transmit? What intensities does it induce, condone or negate? I go onto explore some of these in the next section.

Nature's Playground

A further key area of debate surrounding play and the early years is borne of a concern that children are losing touch with nature, spend too much time indoors, are overly engaged with the virtual world and that there is therefore an urgent need for them to reconnect (Save Childhood Movement, 2014). This is promoted in the plethora of books that promote 'nature's playground' through supported or structured outdoor pursuits for young children (for an example see Danks & Schofield, 2005). And there has been a steady growth in popularity of forest schools implanted from the Scandinavian context. Forest schools are framed by naturalist discourses which promote the idea that children develop in rich natural environments with few pressures and are consequently less stressed, more confident (especially in the area of taking calculated risks), have better communication skills, are more creative, and demonstrate emotional well-being. It rests on the belief that children can be active and learn through movement and use all senses. Taylor (2013) in her recent book offers a critical assessment of the conflation of nature and childhood which promotes ideas of

purity and innocence. Rather she recasts childhood as messy and implicated; situated and differentiated; and entangled in real world relations rather than protected in a separate space. Braidotti (2006) urges us to take account of the vitality of non-human bodies and life forms and their intersections with discursively produced and politically governed human bodies. She promotes a nomadic subjectivity that seeks multiple belongings. Haraway stresses that:

‘We must find another relationship to nature besides reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia...all the partners in the potent conversations that constitute nature must find a new ground for making meanings together’ [2004:158].

Such feminist re-therorisations of nature emphasise the relation between human and more-than-human worlds and is increasingly being taken up by scholars working in the field of early childhood to reach new understandings – of childhoods as relational and formed of assemblages (for example, Lenz Taguchi 2010, Jones 2013, Renold & Mellor, 2013) and how we (as practitioners, parents, researchers) can recognise this relationality and support children to grapple with the challenges of the assemblages of which they form part and which are inevitably shaped by inheritance and coexistence. Taylor (2013) suggests that this encourages inquisitiveness about the asymmetries of relations related to the conditions of possibility (i.e. gender) and would support children in reflecting upon how best to deal with differences and to situate themselves within the worlds in which they live.





The photos above of ‘Sylvie in the woods’ could be read as reinforcing dominant naturalistic discourses which celebrate the freedom of nature and the innocence of childhood, which Taylor (2012) usefully unsettles. However, the woods are a small oasis in central London, with red buses visible through the trees, a café and manicured lawns and playground within a few hundred meters. Furthermore, romanticised ideas of childhood innocence and escape to nature are further troubled when a closer examination of the event is undertaken. Sylvie was required to negotiate her engagements with the objects, people and wider conditions of possibility when she encountered a family inside the tree house. Two children in the hut were considerably older girls (approximately seven and ten years old) and they appeared to have taken temporary ownership of the treehouse. Sylvie was faced with negotiating access into the house, negotiating shared (mis-)understandings of the rules of the game, and subsequently engaging with matter to demonstrate her competence as a worthy and useful member of this temporary community. She became immersed in collecting sticks to further strengthen the structure in an attempt to make it water tight. There followed a lengthy role play where she took on the hunter-gatherer role and collected ‘food for supper’. Within the treehouse stumps were designated specific functions including a sink, toilet, beds and one entrance was nominated for adults, another for children. Through this unstructured and serendipitous event Sylvie was afforded space to play, and play with her gendered, aged and embodied relational interdependence to people and matter.

This event demonstrates that when children are afforded space to explore the worlds in which they live in supported and enabling ways, they are able to generate knowledge about the people, places and the events in which they are immersed. This includes un/conscious

recognition of the relational interdependence that human beings have with places, spaces, and matter, and the shared contribution that this interdependence generates (Taylor and Giugni, 2012). Children's knowledge of and relationship with their environments, and with the world more generally, become critical. This is precisely what the events in Sylvie's world, outlined in this chapter have sought to demonstrate. Her critical engagement with the places, people and objects in her world enable negotiation and transgression.

Conclusion

Considerations such as these will clearly have implications for the learning opportunities that connect with these issues – including the approaches taken by adults (practitioners, parents researchers) and the learning materials, resources and research methodologies that are selected, and the 'politics' associated with them. It may also include attention being given to the kind of environments that are created, accessed and provided with and for children's learning. Following Sellers (2010:557) such informed professional/adult choices should recognise:

'Young children's understandings are equitably expert to those of adult worlds; children are embodied within their life-living experiences of their negotiating (their) childhood(s) in ways that adults cannot be, yet also in ways similar to adults working from/with/in their experiences, past and present of life and living.'

So to conclude, approaching the becoming child through the lens applied in this chapter highlights that everything surrounding children matters. How children come to understand themselves (as gendered be(com)ings) is inextricably about the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, that occur within environments which aide children's learning and development. Play (and the in-between chaotic lines of flight that characterise children's play) occurs through un/conscious engagements with people, places, objects, matter and emotions. It is incumbent that we (as adults privileged to be involved in early childhood in some sense or another) recognise this and make space for children to play (with their multiple be(com)ings). The generative possibilities of spontaneous play characterised by the ebb and flow of ideas, innovation, creativity and imagination allow children to explore and transgress and to make the familiar strange. It is our responsibility to make space for this and crucially to learn from their expertise and experiences as children living and negotiating childhood.

Notes:

1. Sylvie is my daughter. I chose to focus on these events from her childhood-lived as they afforded the opportunity to explore her becomings through and within early childhood assemblages at home, at nursery and in other contexts. She has given her informed consent to be the focus of this chapter.
2. “Stanley” is a pseudonym and his informed consent and that of his parents has been given.
3. ‘Becoming’ in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense is markedly different from psychological and sociological perspectives of being and becoming, which view the child as always being in states of development towards an ultimate end point of actualised adulthood. The Deleuzo-Guattarian imaginary of becoming affords opportunities to view children as embodied be(com)ings.

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N.B. – Janet – below were other images of Sylvie I thought I might use but decided not to take the chapter in those directions. I am/Sylvie is happy for you to make use of them elsewhere in/on the book if you want to.

