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Liminal relationalities: on collaborative writing with/in and against race in the study of early childhood

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative writing is well established in the humanities, but with little focus on how the writing relationship comes into being, including the power and relational dynamics at play. This is especially pertinent both when Black and "white" (sic) authors collaborate in writing about race, and in the process of writing collaborative autoethnographies. In this article the authors narrate, or rather "enact", the movements of their coming together in order to write about race in the context of early learning and childcare. Linking their collaboration to the Deleuzian theory of becoming and Bakhtin's dialogic imagination, they present a manifesto for anti-racist inquiry which decentres colonial tropes of individuation in favour of 'staying with the trouble' of identity and race. Throughout, they connect the inception of their research relationship to the politics of childhood and early years education in Scotland today.

Introduction

Doing collaborative research matters. As a mode of bringing together people with distinct expertise and experience for the purpose of working toward a shared goal, it is an endeavour that can often prove fruitful in terms of the production of new knowledges for practice. Yet we also recognize that the process of *coming to do* research, before the polished journal articles and research reports, is one that typically happens without comment or any deep level of analysis. What gets cut out? How exactly do researchers end up working together? What are the often-unspoken tensions that can emerge throughout this process? And how do these relations affect (and reflect) our encounters with our research subjects, specifically young children, and ultimately our findings?

This paper is a prelude to a forthcoming research project intended on the theme of whiteness in early learning and childcare (ELC) within a nursery setting in Scotland. Over the next two years, we intend to explore: the current policy and political context for addressing racial inequality in Scotland's statedly "progressive" ELC provision; the narratives that ELC practitioners construct to accommodate, or resist, anti-racist practice; the ways that whiteness is (re)produced in

children's play; and how our research setting's "alternative" pedagogy intersects, for good or ill, with race and the historical-present characteristics of colonialism. Finally, we intend to consider the affects that our findings are having on us, the setting and other stakeholders that engage in this work. This article describes and indeed enacts an entry point to that journey, intentionally attempted prior to any research undertakings. In the act of us writing it, and *it writing us*, we seek to describe, and enact, the liminal, both-and-other, space of co-authorship and to theorise its contours as we are experiencing them, both on and off the page.

We are drawn to this effort by a shared, general philosophical commitment to sensing and naming our intersubjectivity (and various intra-subjectivities). We entered into our dialogues curious about the intersections between, for Shaddai, what may be loosely termed *Deleuzian becomings* (Deleuze, 1988; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Lapoujade, 2017) – considering relational movements prior to signification and coding – and, for Simon, *Bakhtinian multivocality* (Bakhtin, 1981) – on the co-constructed foundations of seemingly individual experiences. Secondly, we are compelled to this work by the demands of our subjectivities as a Black man and a "white" man writing together about race and whiteness. Generally, Black is capitalised in our writing to signal our association with (and in particular Shaddai's conferred identity within) overlapping movements driven by Black activists toward liberation against the forces of racism and colonialism. For Shaddai being Black, rather than African, powerfully but temporarily claims race as a heuristic device while refusing its arbitrary impositions in a long-term commitment to dismantling the binaries that sure-up racism (Andrews, 2018; Keeling, 2019; Kwoba et al., 2018; Touré, 2011). Conversely, the naming of Simon as "white" using quotation marks elevates the hidden construction of whiteness in order to *dis*empower its fabrication of the world within (quasi-Cartesian) binaries. This sits in contrast to our current use here of "White" or "whiteness" to denote the very real, material and hegemonic structures that are concretely, though often invisibly, and often affectively, rendered into our contemporary Western societal and economic relations.

This fluidity of terminology, which has emerged in our writing-together, also matters. It intentionally allows for degrees of interpretation. Whilst this is academically precarious, it is politically rigorous in that it seeks to trouble the reification of categories which, by insisting on only one way of knowing, have anchored and fuelled colonialism for more than four hundred years (Akomolafe, 2017). Even as we hold these terms fluidly, however, there remains in their reproduction a sense of uneasiness – that we risk "linguistic incarceration" (Dabiri, 2021, p. 66) within their boundaries, however shape-shifting. Throughout this work, we anticipate, tentatively, that Black and "white" may eventually *both* be placed in quotation marks, as a staging-post on route to new forms of anti-racist (dis)identification and socio-political organisation.

In the context of this paper, then, we must (we find ourselves doing and we choose to) bring into focus our play with and examination of the various assemblages of "we" that show up and take shape in our work and writing. This matters for three reasons. Firstly, to hold ourselves to account, as "we" write and research, for any abuses of White, colonial power which might seek to co-opt or assimilate our experience at material or interpersonal levels; secondly, to trouble the binaries of our racial and other identities ("white"/Black, practitioner/academic, working/middle class): binaries which empower, constrain but also potentially springboard each of us (and our enquiry) into new forms of liberation; finally, to empathically site ourselves alongside the young children that we will write about, who, in regard to their own being and becoming, typically experience forces of symbiosis and reification more vividly than adult selves, from one moment to the next (Moss, 2014; Punch, 2001).

To those primary ends, our writing has gravitated towards three main areas of focus.[1] This paper weighs up the potential capacities and limitations of writing-as-inquiry in the realm of co-authorship. It describes our personal journey towards collaboration and the imbalanced tensions and vulnerabilities that are present for each of us. Ultimately, it argues that the specific opportunities of attempting this work in the context of race are worthwhile. Throughout, we seek to

challenge our neo-colonial capitalist subjectifications in favour of a relational ethics: one which privileges the experience of *movement through* us over *meaning in* us, thereby affording the possibility of new ways of knowing and, crucially, organising our practices. Bayo Akomolafe (2017, p. 04), invoking childhood lore (or rather that fabulous warning repeated for generations by anxious parents), recalls for us the story of The Three Little Pigs (where "the moral of the story seemed to be that what one needed was a house of bricks [rather than tentative straw] … "). He emboldens us to welcome in the wolf of unknowing.

A last word here on our approach before we set off – for as may be clear by now there is a seriously-playful intentionality to the words that we use. We employ footnotes as an "unmowed corner of grass where [we] can let [our] proverbial hair down" (Sword, 2012, p. 140). Affectively, we hope that our writing *touches* (Wyatt et al., 2011). That it produces us, as much as we produce it. We are attempting to bring the text to life, challenging the boundaries of academic convention in ways that honour play and experimentation.

Collaborative inquiry and its resonances with childhood

The traditional façade of knowledge production as cleanly emergent from an individual thinking self, or individual selves, is a central pretence that we wish to subvert in this paper. We situate the "individual" within the historically-present legacy of humanism. That is, within what Braidotti (2013, p. 26) so clearly identifies as "a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination". Such logic, a product of colonialist thinking, remains firmly entrenched in the epistemological and ontological cornerstones of how we perceive the nature of experience itself in contemporary society. For example, in early childhood, phrases such as "the child as an individual", "the child at the centre", and the fundamental underpinnings of the term "development" itself are ubiquitous and axiomatic. We ask, tentatively, what constitutes the child? Development toward what? What happens when we think-otherwise from these phrases? There is a well-documented history of notions of agency in indigenous cultures that metaphysically reject individuality to incorporate the non-human, relational, elements that compose (us, in) experience (Mignolo, 2012). Even within certain strands of Western philosophy, such as Spinoza's (2002) monist metaphysics, there are openings for resistance against the doctrine of humanism. By no means do we write entirely against these terms, however we do seek to unsettle their seemingly natural and objective status.

In turning to collaborative inquiry, then, we join others in pursuing a potentially generative line of flight against individualism (Alexander et al., 2018; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Gale, 2018; Gale et al., 2019; Wyatt et al., 2014). Collaborative inquiry opens a "bloom space" (Stewart, 2010a) for us to unsettle singular authorship and challenge the seeming fixity of our individual selves. The thoughts and feelings that we lay down on the page acquire new meanings in this context where the strains of individuality are (contingently) forsaken, so that the production of this paper might enable us to individuate-together. Somewhat incredibly, this continues to present a cultural challenge to the prevailing logic of academic research and writing in the humanities which, in order to sustain competition in supposedly resource-scarce environments, prioritise, count and reward "individual" achievement and authorship over collective endeavour (Gannon, 2018; Henderson et al., 2016). Perhaps then, we consent to becoming non-sovereign (Cvetkovich, 2021; Gale & Wyatt, 2009; Moten, 2018). We desire toward an experimental and affective practice in relationality that may produce new modes of being and becoming-otherwise.

Indeed, drawing from our experience within practice, we make the claim that collaborative inquiry resonates closely with the relational inscriptions made by children within the nursery. We understand from our own experience as former (Shaddai) and current (Simon) ELC practitioners,

as well as from the research of many others who have come to challenge individualism, that childhood and childhood spaces remain unstoppably polyphonous (Alanen and Mayall, 2001). Children enact multiplicity – both within their "individual" bodies, but also as they continuously create, disrupt and *adjourn* alliances from one minute to the next.[2] They do this "autotelically" (Rautio, 2013) – that is, for the sake of play itself in its most ludic sense; but also to actively and collectively assimilate, subvert, resist and transform the violence they experience, however "lovingly" (Punch, 2001), via adult-led, deterministic structures, discourse and even spoken language itself (Kristeva, 1980; Richardson, 1990). Lechte, reflecting on Kristeva and the carnivalesque space which ideally describes children's childhoods, writes that:

> To understand exactly what is at stake in carnivalization, we must recognize that all monological discourses – discourses which operate according to the laws of representation and identity – *cannot* assimilate otherness, negation, opposition – contradiction, in a word. Such discourses include: theology, science, philosophy, 'everyday' language – all those depending, in fact, on *definition* and the exclusion of falsity. The discourses are bi-valent (either one or the other), homogenous, and subject to the law of 'One'. (Lechte, 1990, p. 109; our italics).

Pedagogy must also be listed among these deterministic discourses. For the most part even outlier attempts at open-ended or experiential learning remain nearly always instrumental, with desired ends in sight from the beginning (Thompson, 2002). Nevertheless, as Yeats (1989, p. 189) understood (but sadly feared), in life as in poetry "things fall apart, the centre cannot hold". Childhood, being in still-close proximity to the "communicative musicality" of postnatal embodiment (Trevarthen and Vasudevi, 2017), is "tentative" not because it marks "a stage" on the way to somewhere else but because children retain the capacity to embrace or rather inhabit *contradiction* in ways that governments simply cannot tolerate (Rose, 1999). As ("fugitive") practitioners working in the institutional margins, we see and celebrate the ways in which children, beneath becoming "school ready", are making the world ready for *them* by subverting adult expectations.[3] Not all children do so equally, of course. Social, cultural and material determinations of gender, sexuality, race, class and ability circumscribe children's representations by varying degrees through and into their technical (legal) incorporation at the "age of majority".

The Curriculum For Excellence (CfE) (Education Scotland, 2019) dictates the predominant set of expectations in Scotland, with its emphasis on "capacities" that relate not only to what children should learn, but *how they should become* (Priestley & Biesta, 2014; Watson, 2010). CfE was implemented after several years of consultation in 2010. It is the national curriculum for Scotland and covers children aged between three and eighteen years old. It is replete with compulsions that children should develop an "enterprising attitude", "resilience" as well as a "determination to reach high standards of achievement" which all prefigure the child as *homo oeconomicus*, appending their potential to the processes of market value. This interpretation aligns closely with other critiques of curricula conceptions in the West, especially within early childhood, as becoming ever more interlaced with the now almost unfathomable processes of capital (Giroux, 2014; Mccafferty, 2010; Priestley & Biesta, 2014; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Dubious and normative "measurements" of developmental progress, clouded within a discourse of "school-readiness", have been identified as the Trojan horse by which the child continues to be appraised (Apple, 2019; Biesta, 2013; Bradbury, 2019; Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Noticing how "what counts" is governed in the CfE through experiences and outcomes – combined with the imperative for children to "achieve" certain levels of "development" – enables further understanding of the curriculum's disciplinary function. That is, the *neurotypical* tendency that provide the grounds for this logic. Neurotypicality names "a central but generally unspoken identity politics, that frames our idea of which lives are worth living, and which lives are worth saving … Neurotypicality tells us what is in our best interests, and we tend to accept it wholesale" (Manning, 2016, pp. 3–4). Insofar as educational curricula shapes children's identity formation, it does in a way that excludes difference and radical expression.

Language itself, and specifically the CfE's fetishization of the three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic), is once again implicated here, as the obligation to express and communicate more or less wholly within a prescribed and fixed symbolic structure is pursued to the significant cost of non-verbal, musical and other forms of constructive and relational expression – such as those often centred within Black cultures and marginalised elsewhere (Back & Ware, 2002). Indeed, a salient limitation of our own work in writing this first co-authored piece has been the constraints on movement imposed by Covid-19 for two researcher-practitioners who work on different sides of the country. While technology has offered important new ways of connecting and sharing information, embodiment, the non-verbal aspects of our dialogue, has been significantly limited on Zoom or Teams. Words have too often drowned out the silences, breath, shifting and dance that support other, outlier modes of expression and knowing in the margins of conversation. Thankfully, in this respect at least, young children have continued to *gather* (when schools and nurseries have stayed open), embodied, with fewer restraints; to meet in person, touch, push against each other and the world and, as a result, remain sentient and relational (Frank, 2021). This is not to discount the huge impact of Covid-19 on young children's lives, including its disproportionate effects on families of colour (Razai et al., 2021). Adult control over children's bodies, vast prior to the pandemic – disembodying them through continuous stipulations about how to dress, eat, sleep, play – have extended into a continuous policing of the boundaries of their skin and breath. While the epidemiological reasons for such interventions may be more or less justified, the absence of a popular critical awareness about the ontology they feed – the child as individual; disease as foreign/racially cast (Mitropoulos, 2020) – mean that our slide towards pedagogies of whiteness/separation have only been extended.

To repair and make reparation for these disenfranchisements, now ours, soon theirs, requires an ethical "response-ability" (Barad, 2012; Manning, 2006; Springgay & Truman, 2018) among researchers committed to stemming this adult-eration of the promise of childhood. Specifically, as practitioners and writers on early childhood we have a duty to uphold the rights and lore of contradiction; to upend *knowing* – about and with them, the world and ourselves. To that end, we consider the generative potential of collaborative inquiry in close parallel to the childhoods we are privileged to witness. Neither realm offers ordered, idealised or evolutionary (developmentalist) representation. Instead our praxis, as writers and practitioners, is increasingly to gesture to the tensions, the movement and the ungraspable (the counter-colonial) spaces of our knowledge-experience – however much what you are currently reading may mask our endeavours by appearing "finished".

This is not to abnegate meaning, but to reclaim it within what Brian Massumi (2002, p. 9) calls a "pure sociality". Through decentering the individualist "I" and writing *in media res,* in the midst of our assemblage of always-ongoing relations, collaborative writing makes possession of a singular perspective impossible. Conversely, it makes envelopment within multiplicity and transformation possible. We are not blind, however, to the additional tensions this introduces in the context of anti-racism. As Manning (2020, p. 51) asks, considering this stance:

> How to problematize identity while remaining sensitive to the fact that for some the loss of a sense of a stable identity may feel like the very same gesture as the colonial act of exclusion from the category of the human? … How to create an affirmative politics of a production of subjectivity that does not ignore that alliances are crucial in the face of systemic violence of oppression?

Such questions play with us as they diffract through the stickiness of our individual racial and gendered identities. We feel anxious. We "stammer" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007). We feel keen, in the high stakes work of racial justice, to "get things right", as if that were indeed possible. These are cultural, economic and social materialities we cannot sidestep, and so we stay with this trouble (Haraway, 2016). Vitally, Manning reminds us that, in coming together as we are, in our collective sociality, we are not *less than* the subjects that we are accustomed to being, as if our identities suddenly disappear. Rather we become *more-than* our individual subjectivities could

ever be. At the same time, against adult-child and self-world binaries, we have not entered into our individuality as Shaddai *or* Simon simply because we have legally "come of age" and bare responsibility for so-called *individual* acts. Indeed, the "or" between our names in this context demarcates a fictional separation (Steinby & Tintti, 2013). In *this* work, this inscribing, this middling, we are co-being Shaddai *and* Simon while we channel a polyphony of other perspectives, omissions, negations, acts and voices.

For Simon, Mikhail Bakhtin has been a central influence: the theorist of linguistic and social polyphony who laid much of the groundwork for the contemporary pedagogies which guide our subject nursery. Bakhtin – himself inspired by Dostoevsky as well as his own understanding of the human body, refracted through his experience as a disabled man – writes:

> Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, rather it emerges *between* people collectively *searching* for truth, in the *process* of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110; our italics)

In fact, one of our subject nurseries is part of a growing movement within alternative international early years practice (White, 2015) which traces its pedagogic roots back through Paulo Freire and Bakhtin to the anti-imperialist Friedrich Froebel, who founded the kindergarten movement in early nineteenth century Prussia. In this view, one which we intend to scrutinize more closely in our further work, Froebelians see the kindergarten as a unique space where children co-create learning and community with their teachers, with little regard for external neo-liberal expectations and didacticism.[4]

For Shaddai, meanwhile, it is the stimulus within Deleuzian (1992, 1988) and both Deleuze and Guattari's (1983, 1987) philosophy that motors an interest in "becomings". Importantly, becoming does not imply a movement between two states of "being" because this presupposes being as the *a priori* state. Rather, it is more accurate to say that there is nothing other than becoming, in which being is simply "a contraction of the flow of becoming" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 126). In this sense, the experience of life is dislodged from a humanist perspective and has no fixed destination or final state of being outside itself. Further, their "individual" work, and as a collective, probes the insidious binding of human desire to the production of capital(ism), such that the individual self is now principally figured as a unit of "human capital" in contemporary post-Fordist societies.[5] A feeling of "political depression" (Cvetkovich, 2012), the sense that new (affective) ways of relating to the world are needed, stays with us.

Against this, for Shaddai, Deleuzian and DeleuzoGuattarian philosophies provide sustenance. They ask of us, researchers, to maintain a deeply ethical and affirmative commitment to preserving futures as *indeterminate* through becomings. The undercurrents of process philosophy are salient at this point, since it is not that our individual selves are prior to processes of becoming, but rather that the actual metaphysical experience of life itself, beyond the human, means that becoming is the only constant in which we, humans, are caught up in the flows of. Recognizing these flows that we, humans, are subject to is therefore a gesture toward producing new ways of being with each other in the world. Understandings the world processually, then, means that "who we are" and "what we can do" are questions constantly put to us in anew in encounters. Traditional notions of agency are reconfigured away from the individual toward the event, signalling a new sociomaterialism in which the human, however corporeally defined, is even further displaced from Yeat's "centre". Crucially, Deleuzian and DeleuzoGuattarian philosophies allow more room than Bakhtin for realms beyond what is "between people". This marks a difference in emphasis (or concern) that offers a powerful provocation for our collaborative inquiry. It is a difference which begs among other questions: what is *ours* to name and do, in navigating the tensions we sense both for co-authorship in general and anti-racist collaborations between "white" and Black activists more specifically. Conversely, what is *beyond* our consciousness, influence and language? And rather than being a threat to our own or indeed children's individual

"agency" – that lynchpin of the new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 1990) – is that "beyond" and our/children's acceptance of unknowing potentially generative?

For childhood researchers such as ourselves, as we look ahead to our proposed inquiries into themes of whiteness in ELC, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) offer up the value of "methodological immaturity" as an attitude or disposition towards decentering knowledge acquisition itself. "If all being is becoming, then 'we' (adults and children) are all constitutionally immature – and this is not to be seen negatively, as something lacking, but rather in terms of *potential*" (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 511, emphasis in original). In naming a position of immaturity, then, Gallacher and Gallagher undermine both the adult-child hierarchy, where the former is seen to "know" the latter, and the tyranny of methods that posit knowing in advance. They ask us to stay with the indeterminate potential of events that may enable the becomings-otherwise from the already-known.

Experiences of "us"

It is these fractal and fractious interplays of human experience – within our subjectivities, between them and *beyond* them – which provide the structural basis for the next section of this article. Our original hope here was to convey something of the "data" of our coming together as co-authors (or one joint co-author), pre-sensitised and committed to attending to our experiences of whiteness. As argued above, in attempting to access these inter- and intra-plays we are trying to perceive and gesture towards the ground of our co-being in this work and, at the same time, seeking greater familiarity with the children who may *already* be playing at the margins of (trans)individuality. As our dialogues developed, we began to articulate a growing need for a form or forms of writing which might enable us to signify the multiplicity of "voices" situated in our co-being: those at hand, latent, emergent and other. Specifically, we found ourselves drawn to and riffing on the techniques of heterogeneous writers such as Sellers (2013), McKittrick (2021), Mol (2002), and Speedy et al. (2005) who all cite the need for novel frameworks of meaning through which to articulate multiplicity. The latter of these authors, for example, utilises a landscape multi-column narrative approach in order to offer multiple ways of sense-making, in a way that stays *un*faithful to certitude (Speedy et al., 2005). Yet, how such an approach may be mobilised for writing with/in and against race is an area that remains unexplored. Therefore, in our own act of "research-creation" (Manning & Massumi, 2014), we produce a multi-column narrative approach that facilitates both our opening up to and reflections on the prism of our identifications. We draw from practice with children in our subject nursery, whereby children's views on a question that has emerged from their play are communally solicited. In being transcribed faithfully, folding in their own physical markings and non-verbal expressions, the question – rather than being answered – grows larger. Their patternings are radically intersectional, not through a proliferation of demarcations between children's expressions and identifications, but by their mutual generativity.

In our table, the four columns we have used below overlay our own experiences as:

- Authorial (Shaddai *and* Simon, using "We" to gesture towards a corporate identity and language at the moment of writing – shown in column 1);
- Subjective (Shaddai *or* Simon, operating *as though* we were two "I" voices or individuals – in columns 2 and 3); and finally:
- Liminal (both the Bakhtinian "in-between" which draws us into being-relationship *and* the Deleuzian becomings which elude us – in column 4).

As we attempted this, we were aware of the critique in whiteness theory of the risks of centering Simon's voice (Engles, 2006; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Shaddai's voice comes first in

the tabulation. Yet we have tried to capture the dialectic of our conversations and experiences, both the originating moment and our emerging responses to what each has offered in the writing, *without* setting up a call (Shaddai) and response (Simon) structure which that privileges Simon with closing commentary. Multiple iterations have shaped our understanding. At the same time, we have not tried to reach resolution. Our "positionalities" have shifted but remain open-ended, full of potential energy and committed to our futurity. The final column, Liminal, is therefore perhaps where we really see the work, or rather life – not as a precursive step or set of challenges guiding us to clearer or fairer subjective relations or authorial confidence, but as the poetic space we wish to channel, on and off the page, and keep moving in. As Rainer Maria Rilke (1934, p. 35) writes, this is perhaps an anti-colonial commitment to "love the questions themselves … the point is, to live everything".

We	Shaddai	Simon	Liminal – becoming and beyond
Although the exact moment that we decided to write together is unclear, we can trace the seeds of our relationship back to a conference in 2019, where we both shared our personal histories on the role of men in early years. Days later, Simon wrote an email to the organiser, copying Shaddai in with a line on bold text: **I was really glad to hear the minister's endorsement and … Author 1's inputs – in particular around the concept of gender flexibility.** The original motivations for Simon's reaching out like this are unresolvable. We entertain a generous perspective about it. Networking was present for us both, and it has not dissolved or expanded, but entered a "more than" state. The unsettling point remains though that the possibility of such appropriations always stand to benefit those with the most social capital – invariably the White man.	I wonder why Simon felt the need to write this line in bold text. I am pleased that something I said seems to have resonated. Indeed, it was clear from our first meeting that we were on a similar page and journey … something sparked in my first impressions … something had an affect. Reflecting on Simon's reflection (right), I am conscious that I was also in an opportunistic networking mode when we met. I was "Critical Early Years"Shaddai, on show as a keynote speaker keen to present myself as a friendly outgoing academic. Outside of this self, I rarely seek centre-stage. We speak about first impressions and consider Jung's introvert/extrovert dynamics, which carries some utility for revealing aspects of our individual personalities. However, I struggle with the overall reasoning of Jungian thought. How the notion of a primordial "collective unconscious" tethers our identities to already-known and antiquated archetypes (Braidotti, 2002). I refuse to determine myself in such a way. Simon's reflections on tokenism were not present for me at the time. Being one of few visibly non-white men in a space predominately constituted by white women is more often the norm rather than the exception. I am a "space invader" (Puwar, 2004). Nevertheless, I share with Simon that it feels vulnerable to hear this now – I wonder if we are sidling the limits of our friendship here due the vulnerability I have felt. Yet I wish to stay with this trouble (Haraway, 2016), something keeps me here …	I don't find it easy to cast back in time. As I hear Shaddai's recollection of my bold email text now, though, I have to wonder: was this simply a *tokenistic* pushing of allyship? Why didn't I elucidate what I had appreciated? (Instead my email – copying various others in – goes on to foreground my *own* concerns about Scotland's policy direction – though brief conversations with Shaddai at the conference suggested confluence). It's true that I network opportunistically – self-servingly perhaps – but I did have good reasons for being drawn towards Shaddai: another man working in early years with a strong critical/ theoretical lens on its politics and more materially a Bristolian abroad, a city where I locate many warm memories and friendships. Shaddai struck me as thoughtful, smart and kind. At this stage, I don't think *anti-racist* allyship – tokenistic or otherwise – had consciously entered my thinking. My focus was very much on gender, and finding "like-minded" folk who were critically engaged. To be nakedly curious though, I *must* allow the (troubling) possibility that I was subconsciously reaching for a token Black acquaintance in the early years space. I am not naïve about the "social capital" that alliances with men and women of colour represents in this moment, both for white individuals and white majority institutions.	*What language do we use to hold the liminal? Questions suggest themselves … fragments … scratchings/markings … not my uncertainty, or your uncertainty, but our becoming … Hmmm … this section might best emerge in conversation and with poetic licence.* How important are our beginnings? "Culture" suggests *very* … but do such linear narratives overplay the hand of (Westernised) sequencing, order, evolution and psychology? In race theory – who wins most from the notion of "origins"? (Akomolafe, 2017, p. 12). As we become, do our histories gain or lose significance … ? (Later on, out of a duty of candour, we will interview each other about our "origin" stories, but in this moment they feel less alive than the here and now). We wonder … did masculinity bring us together … were we being "bro-social"? What overlaps between patriarchy and Whiteness could obscure our research? Do we cut across equalities by amplifying our male voice? By bequeathing the written word? Yet we are also drawn to queer studies … and to questioning our affected masculinities. What does it take to become more-than ourselves? How do we come to notice not what happened but *what else* happened? Already, we are beginning to feel-out the boundaries of our identities, playing with the thresholds of ourselves …

Continued.

We	Shaddai	Simon	Liminal – becoming and beyond
A month later Simon travels to Glasgow to meet Shaddai for coffee. We pick up threads from our first meeting and speak with congruence and confluence about practical ways we might challenge the Scottish Government's gender-essentialist push to "level up" the early years profession. Two months later Simon invites Shaddai to speak at a Play Festival he is organising. Then Covid hits, and the murder of George Floyd, and we find ourselves suddenly pulled in different directions. Four months pass. Simon connects Shaddai with a colleague also working on gender. Shaddai tells Simon he is increasingly being called on to speak on anti-racism in early years ("I'm pleased and also frustrated that it's taken this long to be recognised as a salient issue"). In turn Simon relays that he has convened some anti-racist educators & activists, and is "pondering what useful action research might look like in my nearly all-white nursery". In the weeks that follow Simon shares a plan and eventually a finished essay he has written on "exploring whiteness and colonial legacies in young children's play" and invites Shaddai to comment on the draft. Shaddai shares some of his writing on the affective experience of race in ELC. This begins a series of iterative encounters between us during which we start to uncover further shared perspectives as well as critical limitations and biases (primarily Simon's). We each feel drawn in different ways to collaborate on a broader piece of writing on whiteness and early years. We take stock of the risks and vulnerabilities for each of us, but ultimately decide to progress.	I leave our catch-up in high spirits. We further disclose our individual histories and feel open enough to share our political motivations. We note that we are both committed toward social justice in the widest sense and drawn to the early years as vehicle for change. We end by again gesturing toward collaborative futures. Covid hits. Several months pass. Discussions on race and racism come to saturate both my personal and professional selves. The intensity of this forces me to consider the role of whiteness as it impresses upon me, everywhere (Tembo, 2021). Out of the blue, one of my white friends "checks in" on me. I feel tired. Simon reached out to me at a time where the felt rawness of the preceding months seemed to have simmered down and the public conversation had shifted toward asking "What now? What next?" Questions were being levelled at white people about what they could meaningfully do to challenge racism in their everyday lives. (Non-performative) Allyship is rife (Ahmed, 2004). I was sceptical of Author 2's use of "progressive" in relation to certain ELC pedagogies and all too aware of the good intentions of white people that can end up reproducing the very issues they seek to challenge. I read Ahmed's (2004) paper which resonates heavily around the non-performativity of anti-racist claims. I have seen too many performative statements from so-called "progressive" nurseries over the past few months. *I still feel tired.* I could reject Simon's offer. Noting my concerns above would be sufficient. I ask myself whether working with white people on anti-racism is ever a fruitful endeavour. Yet what would turning away from this kind of work achieve? Taken to its conclusion, I must believe that white people can *never* aid the effort toward anti-racism. I pause. I consider the racial fault lines I have built up for myself. How I have come to understand my own Blackness through a framework of knowing which is rooted in coloniality and the white gaze. How I have come to understand my race in the logics akin to a property interest (Harris, 1993; McKittrick, 2021; Osterweil, 2020). I desire liminality, errantry. Modes of knowing-otherwise (Glissant, 1997; Lapoujade, 2017).	When we meet again, I feel energised at the possibility of achieving something *practical* with Shaddai on gender. I leave Glasgow with a stronger sense of him as an activist as well as academic. Covid intervenes. When George Floyd is murdered – despite my previous career in human rights media – the footage triggers an unprecedented wave of grief and anger. Specifically: towards cynical politicians whose culture wars continue to feed such vile dehumanisations, keeping communities divided and segregated, them in power and their racist policies free from scrutiny. Sadly the conversations I co-initiate with several anti-racist activists in the hope of doing something practical within Scottish ELC soon run onto the rocks of the same culture wars and power struggles. I want to understand what is going on for the collective and refuse to take sides – but become embroiled (and clumsy) in the difficulties of speaking out as the sole white male. At the same time I have started an anti-racist reading group with some of my colleagues in the nursery where I work, and begun to undertake a small research project on how whiteness shows up in colonial traits which children may have inherited and/or be resisting. I begin to see children's interactions and environment through a new lens, particularly shaped by Jones and Okun's (2001) *Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture.* All this runs in parallel to and informs my emerging relationship with Shaddai. Frustrated by my fumbling in other spaces, I hesitate about stepping into collaboration. Yet I am learning so much from our exchanges. Shaddai challenges me, generously and clearly – but above this, he seems genuinely committed to forging something *new* in the relational sphere between "white" and Black writers/practitioners. I recognise that this is a luxury which not all Black colleagues feel they can afford. Yet I am drawn to stay on the journey with Shaddai and be as honest as I can be about my limitations.	We are weary, spent, digging into precious little reserves. There is no rich embodied memory of post-racial or pre-capitalist experience to embolden us. We must craft our own techniques for survival. Colonial thinking is the sea we have been born into, the fundamental element of our existence … and yet to quote George Floyd's epitaph *we cannot breathe here*. We *must* push out, breathless, into something new … sinewy, tarnished, flailing … demanding – can our companions be trusted? Do we have a choice? Are we one and the same? … *something* about the shared weariness of antiracism … … *something* about how we turn to those we trust in moments of vulnerability … How do we write against the constraints of identity without, at the same, replicating the systems of knowledge that created identity in the first place? How do we move beyond critique towards creativity? How do we come to establish the criteria of who gets to speak on oppression? What happens when we *don't* police the boundaries of thought? How do we get free of ourselves? What if we valued individuals beyond their corporeal representations? *What if our individual selves are always-already more-than our corporeal representations*? In this liminal space, we wrestle at the boundaries of our identities, eager to produce spacetimes beyond the limits of the known. We desire the process, not the stasis, inherent in relational identities.

Continued.

We	Shaddai	Simon	Liminal – becoming and beyond
We start to work together. Our "individual" subjectivities begin to unfold and shape-shift in the comments passed back and forth in various documents. We are starting to tune into and define the terms of our emergence as a collaborative unit. Here, liminality starts to surface and become an implicit focus of our engagement, of our "We". Our questions become more enlivening than our answers. What matters? What are we able to stay silent about, for now, and what might that enable? How might we question, challenge, even relinquish certain reified aspects of our identities – as we co-construct a temporary anti-racist framework – yielding in ways that neither replicate toxic modes of colonial/racist relationality (Black serves white – e.g. Shaddai co-opted to Simon's virtue signalling and accumulation of "cultural capital") *or* merely inverts them (white serves Black – e.g. Shaddai pedestalled; whiteness in hiding)? We proceed, cautiously, each sensing that there is much at stake emotionally, reputationally, ontologically. It is a critical, tentative stepping stone on the way to our current collaboration. We search for intimations of the ground we share – specifically when it comes to our understanding and experiences of racialisation – and the tectonic fractures we straddle or are separated by. The tone, set by Shaddai's comments/questions of Simon's initial research proposal, is one of curiosity and openness, rather than judgement or defence. Key mutual thematic interests emerge such as: the possibility for the co-creation of new forms of knowledge; resistance to inherited categories; an abhorrence of tokenism; and the romanticisation and positivism both conversely associated with early childhood. The same common ground enables critical debates: about the value of consistency in terminology; the "progressive" claims of certain alternative pedagogies; and the limits of humanism. We round off these first exchanges more assured of the fruitfulness of our emerging voice-interplay within a sector whose early forays into anti-racist pedagogy have too often been reductive. Yet we are still far from naïve about the personal risks, particularly for Shaddai.	The sharing of Simon's prototype research proposal on whiteness in ELC provides an entry point for us to develop the conversations we had started around broader anti-racist commitments. The theoretical nature of this writing excites me, for an emergent affinity is felt in the relation of our commitments towards thinking-otherwise, away from the stasis of critique in certain strands of scholarship on racism (Brown, 2021; McKittrick, 2021). Critique, as I have come to learn and have engaged in myself (Tembo, 2020b, 2020a), is both essential and indispensable for the project of challenging the various modalities of racism. Yet, I also recognize that it might (always) be insufficient. How many times, and in how many ways, do we have to say that "racism exists" and "it is bad" before (white) people decide to listen? With Simon, I feel relief in his desire, which exists and existed outside of my presence (though, is perhaps brought to the surface much more palpably through our intra-relation), to examine difference affirmatively, without overlooking the historically-present, unequal, distributions of power coded upon difference accorded by race. What begins to emerge, then, is an exercise in knowing and be(com)ing differently. Or perhaps an exercise in *not knowing.* Be(com)ing conscious of the potential of our racial identities to in-form unequal practices (of my voice being tokenised, of Simon's being centered, or of us both to remain diminished by individualism) and still refusing to let these determine the terms of our relation. There is danger in not knowing the direction that this may take us. The force of our past habits and desires has a way of reterritorializing us back into the realm of the already-known. We have to keep trying, holding open the possibility of futures unthought (Grosz, 1999).	I am aware of the imbalance of power on my side in asking Shaddai to comment on my writing. In sharing my research proposal, I claim the initial voice and potentially the power to set the terms of discourse, debate and reference – on a White footing. Further: I have the power to ignore anything Shaddai might share or ask of me. I have access to the research setting which he does not, and – being "further on" in my career (conventionally speaking) – less to lose, for example, financially, my taking a professional mis-step. I also possess the many advantages of being white in discussing, even appropriating, anti-racism in an economy increasingly built on virtue signalling. ("White man bends over backwards to empathise with Black people's problems"). Finally, I am, as I enter this collaboration, hyper-aware of these potential dynamics and I know I am capable, despite my best intentions, of centering myself with them. From the outset, Shaddai is gently persistent in resisting being framed as the Black foil for my "white man's burden". "I don't represent Black people", he insists, and more generously "You aren't the enemy". In his comments on my text, he is generous: asking open questions, sharing his reading, speaking with a sense of futurity which, ironically, allows us to *stay with* the tensions without rushing to answer, alleviate or absolve. For example: he challenges my (intentional, anti-colonial?) fluidity around terminology; while he, like me, seeks a post-racial society, certain precisions of racial identity still matter. At the same time, we begin to unpack these terms adventurously – speaking about "what feels important" rather than "what is". I do not explicitly name my reservations about academic practice and its relations to colonial modes of thinking and relating. While I know that Shaddai is embarking on an academic career and working within academic conventions I trust in his underlying commitment to queering (or troubling) these, and feel confident that there is a space ahead of us – which we are now perhaps in the foothills of – where we might explore this more fully together.	Our official, carefully negotiated "we" has started to feel not less exacting, but less "bankable", hard-edged and narratable – and more contingent with our liminality. Uncertainty is decreasingly confined to a footnote or the margins, and embraced as the life-force of our academic and personal relationship. Perhaps one day our footnotes will be where our "facts" go until they are ready to ease off their manacles. The until-now carefully held distinctions between We, Shaddai, Simon, and liminal feel more a sleight of hand. They are all in there, but less distinguishable, less … safe. *And again, we wonder: do we define the terms of our engagement … or is our engagement defining these terms?* Even so, we sense that while there is a liminality we can name and embrace there will always be a liminality that is still-always beyond us. Children's expressions continue to discipline us in this. Can we avoid becoming comfortable or complacent in our new-found "voice"? Can we remain radically open to the insurgency of the material world as we move forwards in our research? To what extent do we risk recreating an intellectual melting pot (with echoes of Britain's failed/racist projects of colour-blind multiculturalism)? Or "will we happen upon colours that we might not yet see?" (Akomolafe, 2017, p. 34).

Coda

The habits that we have formed throughout this process of collaborative inquiry have enabled us, experimentally, to play with the boundaries of individual selves. A level of porosity between the initially distinct categories of "authorial", "subjective" and "liminal" has emerged.

As we move toward collaboration in other contexts, we hope that our experiences here snowball outside of this text into our approaches with the children in the nursery. This essay has set (us) in motion (toward) a potentially generative and ethical praxis of engagement, whereby "adult" and "child" may be reconceived on more-than-subjective, more-than-human terms. We anticipate – indeed hope – that this may suggest or spotlight affordances within early years "practice" itself which privilege indeterminacy. Indeed, we hope to move further still and engage all manner of relations in our research environment, the better to decentre our own perspectives and decolonise our thinking.

In relation to race, many studies continue to begin with the raced subject as anterior, perpetuating a crude analytic framework where bodies are known only according to prior significations and codings. We wish to begin elsewhere, emphasizing a metaphysics of movement and process that examines how characteristics of whiteness (Okun, 2021) as affective formations of power (Tembo, 2021) may be brought into being in ways that restrict the capacities of some (typically, but not always, non-white) bodies more than others (typically white bodies). Put differently, we are not starting with a representation of Black and "white" raced children, but rather keen to consider how *the very categories of race thinking*, including Black and "white", are brought into being through sociomaterial practices of subjectification (and subjection) in play. Further, by paying attention to *practices* rather than individuals, we hope to produce a more expansive reading that is open to the ways in which human bodies rarely end at the skin (Haraway, 1991; Shildrick, 2015).

It matters that we examine the coming-to of subjectivities in ways that enable us as researchers to understand how racialised determinacies can be challenged. Yet parallel to this effort, we recognize the equal significance in beginning to "tune in" (Ash & Gallacher, 2015; Stewart, 2010b) to the ways that *children may already be resisting and transforming the violence of individualism and whiteness in their experiences*. As Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 512) write, we as researchers "are not simply reporting a world that exists 'out-there' but are creating and experimenting with an emergent one".

Loosening our analytic framework away from critique and the imperative "to know" is a gesture made in the name of creativity and the production of the "new". In turn, it further destabilises our thinking about the logic of curricula, generating more questions about Scotland's CfE specifically and its imperative to position the child within predefined "experiences and outcomes". We intend to revisit this as our enquiry progresses. All of this places us on precarious grounds. As Manning (2020, p. 177, emphasis mine) reminds us, "To practice new modes of encounter, to invent the cracks of existence where individuality schizzes, is necessarily to be without bearings. And where there are no bearings, *the first temptation is to presume to know*". Of course, we sense that it is this precise tension between (and desire towards) knowing and unknowing that has been the "*élan vital*" (Bergson, 1944), the life force, of our collaborative inquiry. In opening ourselves up to liminality, we have (cautiously) embraced indeterminacy and productively affirmed its value in generating new knowledges around issues of race and identity. Ultimately, it is this middling, and the knottiness that comes with it, that propels us forward, together. We leave the final word to Akomolafe (2017, p. 12):

> There are no beginnings that appear unperturbed, pristine and without hauntings. And there are no endings that are devoid of traces of the new, spontaneous departures from disclosure, and shimmering events that are yet to happen. The middle isn't the space between things; it is the world in its ongoing practices of worlding itself.

END.

Notes

1. In earlier drafts we spoke, classically, of our "aims" here, but such language belies the fundamentally emergent and open-ended nature of this work (Manning & Massumi, 2014; Manning, 2016). We have not – as *inalienable, Cartesian actors* – been in control of our trajectory. Broad intentions were established, but in the writing process they have taken on such shape, weight and resonance as to render them wholly otherwise from our original expectations.
2. The notion that children are born as discrete individuals is a highly contested area. Early psychoanalytic theory, informed by certain developments in the neurosciences, suggests that infants are initially unable to recognise a clear distinction between self and other (Brownell et al., 2007; Bulgarelli et al., 2019; Neisser, 1993; Stern, 1985). Conversely, others support the idea that foetal subjectivity is displayed through certain motion patterns in utero (Delafield-Butt & Gangopadhyay, 2013; Trevarthen & Vasudevi, 2017). The polarisation of such theories is problematic, since the pressure on the child to display certain affects (of either individual character/agency or conversely biological harmony with an adult/mother) skews our perceptions of young children towards certain neurotypical or social standards. This risks the suppression of other forms of being and expression that do not meet perceived developmental norms.
3. In *Stolen Life* (2018, p. 131), Moten writes, "Fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It's a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument." We sense that we are not alone in our motivations to transgress the increasingly neoliberalised early childhood profession, which remains perpetually sidelined in political discourse (in England, the recent news that ministers within the Department for Education have been *knowingly underfunding provision* for providers is a damning case in point (Lawler, 2021)). We also recognize our own privileges here, for such an explicit naming of our fugitive inclinations is an affordance that is not available to most practitioners.
4. "If I had announced that I would educate [children] specifically to be servants, shoemakers or tailors … then I should certainly have won praise. But I wanted to educate them to be free, to think, to take action for themselves." Froebel, 1826 (in Lilley, 1967, p. 41).
5. The outcome is nothing less than "generalized subjection … in which each person does no more than obey, in which slaves give commands to slaves, since everyone is in the service of capital" (Lapoujade, 2017, p. 185).

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