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# Attuning to Processes of Affective Sociomaterialisation: Exploring Subjectivity and Identity in Outdoor Early Childhood Provision in Scotland, UK

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the formation of children's subjectivities, related to the metaphysical conditions of being and becoming a subject, within outdoor early childhood provision in Scotland. It applies a sociomaterial metaphysical framework to propose an alternative way of understanding how subjectivities come to form in early childhood environments, bringing together Spinozist (2002) monism in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of the assemblage and affect. Methodologically, an ethnographic approach inspired partly by the postqualitative field of scholarship is employed to gather data on children's subjectivities at Wood Fire, a primarily outdoor early childhood setting. The data produced in this study affords an opportunity to understand the materiality and relationality of primarily outdoor early childhood provision through which subjectivities are in-formed. Thus, they demonstrate a more expanded understanding of how we, humans, are produced as individuals in specific encounters through processes of 'affective sociomaterialisation'. Practically, this carries implications for how researchers might attune to the child's sense of self on more expansive terms through processes of affective sociomaterialisation.

**Keywords:** early childhood, subjectivity and identity, sociomaterial, affect, ethnography, affective sociomaterialisation.

## Introduction

Questions around the nature and formation of subjectivity and identity have long dominated the early childhood field. Whereas the former relates to the metaphysical conditions of 'being' and 'becoming' a subject, identity is said to denote the more legible representation of a subject on terms aligned with social classifications, such as gender or race. Thus, it may be interpreted as consequential from subjectivity. This paper intends to examine the ways in which children's subjectivities and identities are formed. Predominantly, it is an area of inquiry that has been approached from the perspectives of social constructionism (Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 1980a; Foucault, 1980b), Judith Butler's (1993; 2004; 2006) performativity theory, and developmental psychology (Piaget, 1948; Piaget, 1957). While each have contributed in different ways toward questioning how the child comes to form their sense of self, it is argued that all three do so on the basis of foregrounding *epistemological* concerns that give primacy to the human over and above the non-human world. In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of scholarship seeking to understand how ontological, non-human, forces may shape the ways in which subjectivity is understood (Fox and Alldred, 2017; Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012; Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013). For these writers, the argument that subjectivity is primarily social or located within the human body alone has significant implications for how resistance might be possible against such ways of being. This is because, it is argued, these perspectives remain rooted within a Cartesian worldview and the philosophy of 'humanism' (Braidotti, 2013).

Applied to the context of early child outdoor nursery environments, this paper aims to establish whether a metaphysical framework of 'sociomaterialism' might enable a more creative exploration of children's identity formation. The role of outdoor play has been made central in recent years by the Scottish Government as part of the broader expansion of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision (Scottish Government, 2017a; Scottish Government, 2017b; Education Scotland, 2019; Care Inspectorate, 2020). Indeed, the importance of outdoor play has long been enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). However, even with all the acknowledged benefits and qualities of outdoor learning, questions still remain with regard to exactly how the material nature of outdoor environments work to shape subjectivities. At present, justification for more outdoor learning opportunities appears

more rooted in economic discourses, where it is made clear by the Scottish Government (2020a, p. 6) that it is “cost-effective in meeting the expansion of funded childcare”. However, elsewhere, this claim is downplayed in light of anxieties about the role of digital technologies in children’s lives. The notions that these are eroding children’s ability to ‘think, learn and behave’ are central to Palmer’s (2015) argument in her text *Toxic Childhood*, which has been widely celebrated within the media and is noted as an ‘influential’ text in the Care Inspectorate’s decision to make outdoor play an integral part of their ELC expansion (Mathias, 2018), Nonetheless, both economic and digitally-pessimistic arguments elide the case for grasping the ontological affordances of such spaces.

Structurally, this paper begins by advancing a sociomaterial approach toward understanding children’s identity formation. This theory is then applied in practice with Wood Fire (name pseudonymised), a primarily outdoor early childhood setting where I will consider how the sociomateriality of the children’s play encounter might force us, adults, to reconsider how children come to in-form their senses of self through outdoor environments.

## **Introducing sociomaterialism**

### *Untangling terminology*

The overall body of scholarship that I work with in this section might feasibly be referred to in a number of distinct ways with histories that are far from straightforward to trace. Terms such as ‘new materialism’, the ‘posthuman’, the ‘more-than-human’ and the ‘sociomaterial’ are often used to refer to, on the surface, very similar theoretical fields. Having reviewed each, I have made the decision to avoid the term ‘new materialism’ where possible. Primarily, this is because I am wary that this apparent ‘newness’ will not last. I also recognise that many of the ideas presented are only new in the sense that they have recently regained traction in Western academic scholarship. There is a documented history of ideas around agency and materiality in indigenous cultures (Mignolo, 2012), and within certain historical strands of Western philosophy (i.e., Spinoza, Nietzsche).

A more difficult decision has had to be made regarding my usage of the terms ‘more-than-human’ and ‘posthuman’ as either distinct or interchangeable that is worth some discussion here. More-than-human is a phrase usually attributed to Whatmore (2002)

within the field of human geographies and has generally retained its meaning as expressive of an inherent relationality between non-human and human worlds. Notably, Whatmore introduces this term to challenge perceived limitations with Donna Haraway's (1991) argument for 'posthumanism' in the figure of the cyborg. For Whatmore (2002, p.160), Haraway is unconvincing in establishing the precise nature of how human and non-humans relate to each other insofar as her notion of the cyborg ontologically presupposes individual beings which then come together in hybrid, cyborg, form. Haraway (2008, p. 17) has since come to distance herself from the posthuman label, stating that she "never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than [she] wanted to be postfeminist". Yet she is still widely associated with the use of this term (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018, p. 7; Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018, p. 95) and has since articulated her interpretation of relationality following Karen Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action (Haraway, 2016)., Further, for many authors (Taguchi, 2012; Walker, 2014; Sheldon, 2016; Murriss and Bozalek, 2019), although not all (Hein, 2016), Barad's conceptual framework can be read productively with the metaphysical framework of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). This is notable because Whatmore's attempted resolution to the perceived limitations of Haraway's original position is a turn to Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of affect and becoming. Therefore, it can be said that while more-than-human and posthuman are initially presented as distinct, Haraway's recent articulation through Barad indicates a theoretical resonance between both *vis à vis* Deleuze and Guattari.

Given the entangled lineages of these terms, one may be sympathetic to a lack of distinction in usage within the literature. An additional consideration is that, for one who is unacquainted with this research field, in wider culture the notion of the posthuman is often conflated with the 'transhumanism', which itself refers to scientific and technological developments that attempt to enhance the human - rather than, fundamentally question what human is (Åsberg and Braidotti, 2018). In an attempt to evade the muddiness of terms, I work with a 'sociomaterial' proposal and speak in terms of 'affective sociomaterialisation' to indicate an epistemic association with other dominant theoretical frameworks used in early childhood. For instance, whereas it is common to say that 'childhood is a social construct', this paper advances the argument that childhood might rather be constructed socially *and materially*. Whereas childhood is often understood through processes of socialisation, I argue that it be understood in

terms of *affective sociomaterialisation*. The term sociomaterial also is uncuffed from any latent initial association with the human as *a priori*. As I will come to examine, it is through the social (in terms of epistemology) and the material (through processes of ontogenesis) that the subject then emerges, in contrast to the position that there is the human from which we then become 'more-than' or 'post-'. Further, sociomaterialism is already used within the educational research field where I am partially situated (Kervin, Comber and Woods, 2017; Postma, 2012; Henderson, 2015; Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk, 2011).

A sociomaterial framework involves grasping three key interrelated processes: a Spinozist metaphysics; the role of assemblages and affect. Each of which will be discussed in the following sections.

### *Spinozist metaphysics*

Following the motivation within scholarship to unsettle humanist thought, research on sociomaterialism first challenges the perceived nature/culture and matter/mind binaries (Gatens, 2000; Kirby, 2017). This is a shift away from conventional ways of understanding the world, namely the transcendent Cartesian belief that humans exist in a hierarchical relationship, above all matter, including animals, plants, and objects. Contemporary interpretations of this view posit the active thinking human self (the cogito) as more important than, and in control of, the passive body and wider environment. However, underwriting this paradigm are a number of implicit presuppositions about what counts as human in the first place, implicating power dynamics around claims to rationality, subjectivity and agency that continue to affect how humans perceive the relation between minds and bodies, as well as nature and culture. From a sociomaterial position, the dualistic nature of Descartes' metaphysics that has led to this parsing of nature and culture is considered to be a fundamental oversight insofar as it perpetuates notions of human mastery over the non-human world (Kirby, 2017). Against this, scholars writing in the vein of a sociomaterial approach shift the focus away from "Man" as the measure of all things toward more relational kinds of subjectivity (Deleuze, 1988; Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012; Braidotti, 2013). Sociomaterialism moves toward a monist metaphysics theorised by Baruch Spinoza (2002), a Dutch philosopher of Jewish and Portuguese ancestry in the seventeenth century whose contributions against Cartesian logic remain crucial today.

Whereas, as discussed, Descartes' position would advance a theory of mind, Spinoza disavowed the binary nature of this logic on the basis that humans cannot separate thinking about the mind from thinking about the body. In his view, neither reason nor emotion emerges solely from the individual thinking mind, as the implications of such an idea have resulted in a false consciousness leaving us ignorant of how we perceive and interpret the body. Therefore, in contrast with Descartes, Spinoza (2002, p. 281) believed that "mental decision on the one hand, and the appetite and physical state of the body on the other hand, are simultaneous in nature". Positing the body as simultaneous with the mind has vital implications for how agency is understood. There is a move away from the cogito and a transcendental mode of thought, toward an ontological foundation of immanence whereby priority is given to neither the mind nor the body, neither nature nor culture. Nor are they considered binary. In a later proposition it is possible to comprehend how Spinoza (2002, p. 284, original emphasis) conceives of these as inextricable from each other:

Whatsoever increases or diminishes, assists or checks, the power of activity of our body, the idea of the said thing increases or diminishes, assists or checks the power of thought of our mind.

What Spinoza posits here is that external forces within the environment can directly affect human bodies, which therefore directly affect the mind, as the two are simultaneous in nature. This brings us to the monist aspect of Spinoza's view which challenges anthropocentrism and therefore implicates how humans perceive the role of matter in experience. Rather than an understanding of matter as being inert, passive, and in need of human agency to do anything, matter is now understood as having the capacity to enable, constrain and mediate the body and mind to differing degrees. Thus, contra Descartes, Spinoza actively increases the significance of the knowledge that human beings have always, and continue to, depend on material relations to make culturally specific lives possible. Contemporary scholars have found significant value in Spinoza's ontological position (Gatens, 1995; Braidotti, 2006; Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012). Applying Spinoza's thought and the liveliness of matter in the early childhood context has several implications. It firstly offers a challenge to human-centric perspectives of the world, as can be observed in *Realising the Ambition* (2020:15), where the primacy of the human over the non-human world is visible in their second aspect of development: "We often talk about the environment in terms of

physical spaces, but the key part of the environment for children is the human, social environment of positive nurturing interactions”. That this pedagogical focus on the environment pays less attention to a discussion of physical spaces in favour of the ‘human, social environment’ is an implicit sleight rooted in a Cartesian metaphysical presumption. The material environment is treated as subordinate to children. Yet following a Spinozist metaphysics means no longer considering the (active) child, the (active) practitioner, the (passive) nursery environment, and the (dumb) material resources as hierarchical and discrete entities. Materials and things often found in early childhood spaces, such as paint, a climbing frame, a princess dress, or a football, can be treated as active and participatory as far as they ask questions of us (humans), produce ideas and invite processes of curiosity (Jones et al., 2011; Rautio, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind and Kocher, 2017; Hargraves, 2020).

### *Assemblages*

As I have detailed elsewhere (redacted, 2020), the term assemblage was introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to conceptualise the way in which heterogeneous elements come together in a non-homogenous groupings as the “minimum real unit” of experience (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007, p. 51). Assemblages challenge the logic that there is a pre-existing world that sits anterior to events where individual components subsequently interact with each other. Whereas Foucault saw apparatus of power as primary and constitutive of norms and disciplinary subjects, Deleuze by himself (1992c; 1997) and with Guattari (1987) resituate power within the assemblage as a consequence of desire, which for them has ontological priority. This is important because it resituates the capacity for resistance not in response to power, but prior to the sedimentation of it. Their aim here was to subvert the already-constituted and locate flows of desire between bodies as the starting point. Put differently, this position argues that there is not a pre-existing world and then assemblages where individual components interact with each other, rather assemblages produce and are constitutive of worlds through intra-action (Barad, 2007). No anterior significance is given to either the human or the non-human, both emerge through each other in events or encounters to produce us as individual subjects - insofar as individual subjectivity is recognised as the axiomatic state of being. On this basis, it is possible to argue that assemblages have an ontogenetic status of their own, “a being of the middle” (Massumi, 2002, p. 70, emphasis in original) rather than a “middling being” (ibid.). This enables the

potential for subjectivities to be conceptualised outside the typological scheme of the already-constituted. The often unstable, immanent, and non-totalisable nature of assemblages might provide insight into how more creative subjectivities can emerge in certain interactions. If repetition occurs through assemblages, but in new ways each time, then it is therefore the motor of difference (Deleuze and Patton, 1994). Vitality, what stabilises some assemblages more than others are the capacities of these relations to affect or be affected, which I turn to next.

### *Affect*

Affect refers to one's felt capacity to act in any encounter (Anderson, 2006; Stewart, 2007; Massumi, 2015; Simpson and Brigstocke, 2019). It is an ontogenetic force that mobilises subjectivities in composition with elements of an assemblage. Affect unsettles a notion of subjectivity as produced throughout conscious perception, in the mind, and instead facilitates an understanding of the human body's visceral, or felt, sensibility, through sensations that occur at a "sub- or just- conscious level" (Anderson, 2014, p. 26). Indeed, crucially with this, it is possible to assemble an argument for understanding the human subject not as a pre-constituted discursive formation as in the social constructionist model, but instead as an assemblage of affects: Identity itself as an effect of affect. As Ahmed (2014) argues, partially borrowing from a Marxian critique of capital, the more recognisable social and cultural determinations are, the more habitual that they feel, the more affective they then become.

Further, recalling the function of assemblages where bodies are not known prior to their relation (Massumi, 2002; Barad, 2007), it becomes possible to understand how a binary distinction between where human bodies end and where non-human objects and signifiers begin can no longer be maintained. In the early childhood context specifically, thinking in terms of affect also works to disrupt the linearity of developmentalist approaches to children's learning, and provides a means to think otherwise beyond individualistic approaches toward the child. By way of illustration, in their paper on element affects, Rooney (2018) describes the ways in which particular weather conditions affect children's experiences of walking and of place, as a part of broader effort to consider how children might come to experience the scales of human-induced climate change. Adopting a similar approach, Nxumalo and Villanueva (2019) turn to 'Educator-Child-Creek Encounters' in their research on decolonial

pedagogies to understand the affective relationalities that emerge out of children's play with their environment. For them, mobilising affect at a time of wider precarity with regards to the ecological climate is a necessarily ethical gesture away from human-centred practices rooted in notions of mastery and extraction.

*Summary, what does a sociomaterialist philosophy do?*

A sociomaterial approach extends the ambit of inquiry beyond a primarily socially humanist perspective about how experience is produced, toward what I believe might be coined a process of 'affective sociomaterialisation'. On this view, identities are not anterior to one's contextual surrounds but are rather continually produced ontogenetically according to the body's visceral sensibility, often at a "sub or just conscious" level (Anderson, 2014, p. 26) level. These are stabilised through habitual social and cultural determinations that orient desire in particular ways and material things that augment and diminish capacities in any given encounter. The implications of this approach are that the 'child' is continually produced through social and material, natural and cultural, assemblages in events that affectively augment or diminish their capacities to act. Identity itself can therefore be reconsidered beyond the individual alone and instead as an assemblage of social and material meanings and practices, rather than an overriding structural formation. Agency is no longer attributable to any single person. It is distributed through epistemological and ontogenetic knowledges as a 'posthuman performativity' (Barad, 2003). Thus, this enlarges the scope for research on children's subjectivity and identity beyond the discursive (linguistic) domain.

## **Methodology**

This studies applied an ethnographic approach toward children's subjectivities within outdoor environments, widely recognised as a particularly useful approach for gathering data with children as a means to become embedded within, and gain closer proximity to, their lifeworlds (Farrell, Kagan and Tisdall, 2016; Christensen and James, 2017). Hence, a single nursery setting in the vein of a 'case study' approach was deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2013). A case study approach enables the researcher to gather in-depth qualitative data within a single bounded system (a nursery setting) and go into greater detail than if they were to cover multiple cases (Creswell, 2013). My intention had been to spend four to six weeks "hang(ing)-out" (Rosaldo, in Geertz, 1998) at a single setting, which I believed would provide ample opportunity to generate

sufficient data. Therefore, I make no explicit claims to the generalisability of this study across more than one setting. Rather, the intention was to study an example which carries value in own its right (Massumi, 2002; Gale, 2018, pp. 168-169).

Practically, I carried a pen and notebook to write about encounters of interest in the moment and also used a roving rather a fixed camera. My preference for a roving camera allowed me to pay attention to the ways that bodies move through spaces and be responsive to fleeting moments, body movements and happenings that may occur. A higher quality video recording would also produce better still images. Mengis, Nicolini and Gorli (2016, p. 307) draw a similar conclusion in their overview of video recording practices. They point out that “aiming to further a processual or sociomaterial account of organizational practices (e.g., in strategy), the scholar will be better served by the Roving Point-of-View pointing to the continuous unfolding and relationality of activities, material artefacts, and human actors”.

I adopted a purposive sample strategy that involved deliberate selection of people associated with potential settings that could facilitate my research (Flick, 2018).. Wood Fire nursery, the setting I came to choose, was advantageous since conversations during my initial visits led to me believe that I would be able to have a strong relationship with the manager who was aligned with the intentions of the project and keen to support with further challenges that may arise. Creswell (2013) notes that a strong relationship between the researcher and the lead gatekeeper can be crucial in maintaining important ethical values of trust and integrity. Ethical approval for this study, including my methodological approach, was granted by redacted Ethics Committee. Consent was initially granted by gatekeeper of the settings, then subsequently from participating staff and the primary caregivers of the children. Assent was gained in the moment, where I following techniques from others who have used video recordings to ensure my filming remains grounded in ethical practice (Fleer and Ridgway, 2014; Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff, 2010). This took the form of avoiding any situations when the children did not appear to have noticed my presence and responding to any situation when it was clear my presence was unwelcome or imposing. I drew on my experience as a nursery practitioner to remain alert for such moments.

The call for objectivity within research inquiry is the principle that there should be a level of distance between the researcher and their object of inquiry, and that the researcher should aim to conduct the researcher free of personal prejudice, or any moral or cultural values (Payne and Payne, 2004; Williams, 2016). Yet what exactly this level of distance should be, and how the researcher might go about separating themselves from their research is a contested issue. Granted, most researchers today believe that true objectivity is impossible, where claims to this effect might be best understood through what Haraway (1991, p. 189) terms the illusory “god-trick” of seeing everything from nowhere. Acknowledging the need to challenge claims to objectivity, then, necessitates a mode of ethical accountability that refuses the principles of distance and flattens the binary separation between researcher and researched. As an element in the research, I recognise myself as both affecting and affected by the research process. It therefore matters to note that I myself am not free from the constraints of identity that I am writing against. My personal and professional history, the social categories of which I am part of and those to which I lay claim, as well as my values and beliefs, inform the construction of my subjectivity as a socially and materially mediated process (Braidotti, 2002). I am defined through the relations I form with others, which in-form the production of this paper.

With regards to my presentation of the written field notes that detail my time at Wood Fire in the following section, I have written in a style that I feel best captures the experiences that I witnessed, choosing to present my time as an assemblage of encounters, a coming-together of things, of minor gestures and major tendencies. I digress in places, taking lines of flights toward the unexpected, letting myself get caught up in the flow of writing in the hope that the examples I share induce life into the concepts I am working through, with Massumi (2002, p. 19), “more or less violently”.

While the visual data I present in the following section are sociomaterial assemblages of the particular play events that took place, crucially they can and perhaps should also be read as a new layer of the relations, as re-presentations rather than an attempt to accurately mirror the truth. The purpose here is, with Vannini (2015, p. 15), to “enliven rather than report, to render rather than represent, to resonate rather than validate, to rupture and reimagine rather than to faithfully describe”. For this reason, some of the still images I share are re-presented through affective techniques within

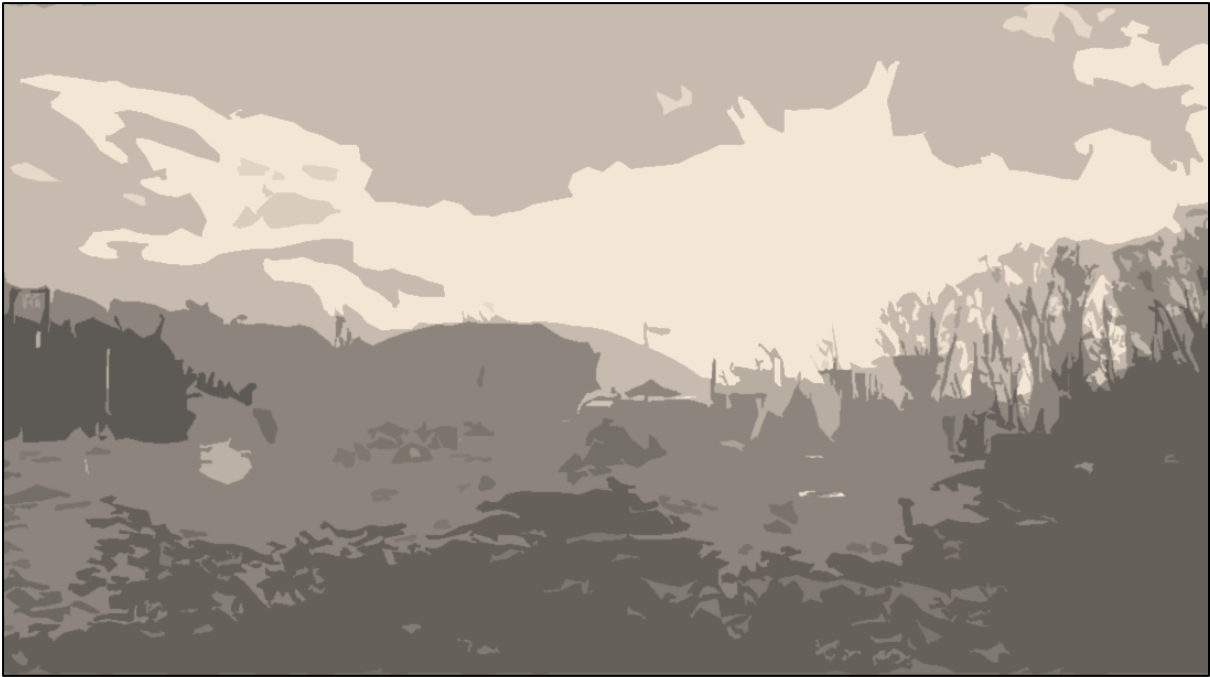
artistic practice intended to induce haptic perception. For example, in De Freitas' (2016) text on creative practice in still image and video footage, a software tool called *Doodl* is introduced to the reader. This is a web-based program where an online drawing robot writes over a given image at different speeds and with different intensities. This affects the tonality of the image through the alteration of colour and, more importantly, disrupts conventional ways of perception: In viewing a Doodl colouring sensation, the eye is no longer the usual optic device, looking for resemblance, looking for the line, but becomes haptic. In other words, the eye touches the image, and the sense of sight behaves like the sense of touch (de Freitas, 2016, p. 328). In blurring the contours of the image, then, research inquiry might challenge our relationship with the fixity of human subjectivity and induce haptic perception. This resonates with the broader monist metaphysics introduced earlier which aims at bringing concepts to life and thinking of theory-as-practice. There are also close similarities with the writings of Tim Ingold (2010), who thinks-with a tree to question the external boundaries that are placed on subjects and objects and instead foregrounds the way that things leak, "forever discharging through the surfaces that form temporarily around them" (Ingold, 2010, p. 4). This matters because it highlights other ways of knowing about bodies and illustrates how subjectivities come to be informed in relation to our material environments. Regrettably, however, Doodl was built using Adobe Flash Player software, which was no longer supported from December 2020. Hence, the re-representation of still images in this article makes use of editing software within Microsoft Word and Adobe Photoshop.

This is an act of research-creation with the intention of expressing data on more creative terms (Manning, 2015; Springgay, 2018; Harris and Holman Jones, 2022). Of note, however, is Colebrook's claim that for those unfamiliar with this mode of inquiry, an expectation looms for artistic practice to serve a functional purpose. For instance, it might be expected that the viewing of a particular image or video may make one a 'better' practitioner in terms of supporting children. This is plainly the intention for using image or video in some circumstances (Meager, 2019). However, for Colebrook, fundamentally the intention is instead to move beyond the forms of presentation as serving a precise function or strict use-value and instead elaborate other ways of knowing beyond what life is, toward that which it might be and become. In short, the purpose can be said to be affective rather than effective. However, insofar as this

paper has precise aims oriented toward attuning to processes of affective sociomaterialisation, my rationale for research-creation differs from Colebrook as it is intended to be effective, in meeting those aims, as much as it is intended to be affective, in elaborating subjectivities on more creative terms. For these reasons, in places I will refer to the affective and effective implications of my artistic practice. In blurring the contours of the image, then, research inquiry might challenge our relationship with the fixity of human subjectivity and induce haptic perception. This matters because it highlights other ways of knowing about bodies and illustrates how subjectivities come to be in-formed in relation to our material environments.

My engagement with artistic practice raises questions about claims to truth. However what counts as 'truth' is always a value judgment and I am not interested in an account of experience that operates according to the value of the dominant order, of some kind of 'neutral' or 'objective' truth. Rather than considering whether this is true or not, then, it is better to consider this as an extension of what is rarely interpreted through humanist perception. One might additionally read this as an attempt to overcome the binary logic of truth according to the Aristotelian principles of identity (where something is that thing) and the excluded middle (where something is either that thing or not that thing, such that there is no thing in between, in the middle). This has long been a central concern within the realm of artistic practice. For instance, Keane (2013) discusses the work of the artist Marcel Duchamp, whose installation *Door: 11, rue Larrey* is intended to produce the excluded middle against Aristotle's principle. Given the identity of a door that must be either open or shut, Duchamp's door is sited within a corner that opens one door at the same time as it closes another, it opens and shuts. This aesthetic and material unsettling of the excluded middle (a door either opens or closes) is essentially affective, such that the installation "dilates the suspension of judgement while amplifying attention and perception" (Keane, 2013, p. 49).

## **Wood Fire Nursery**



*Figure 1 Wood Fire nursery*

Wood Fire nursery (see Figure 1) is a primarily outdoor environment for children from two years of age. It is set on grounds comprised of field, meadow, and woodland areas, with a small indoor space for the children which provides warmth and shelter if needed. This space is not one that is exclusively occupied by children or staff alone. During my time there, we searched together for traces of mice who would race through the setting from time to time; worms and slugs, too, were assigned a non-human personhood in many encounters (creatures became teachers), as well as the birds, steam trains, ambulances, real digger trucks (from the ongoing construction of a restaurant next door) who all populated the space and composed the affective texture Wood Fire as a whole.

In Figure two below, for example, I follow the children as they become caught up in the frenzy of a group search for slugs (a). The atmosphere is lively as one child asks, “where’s the slug gone?” while another child shrieks uncontrollably “It’s slippery! Hahahahaha”. The screaming catches on as children nearby join in with the ludic gesture. In the midst of this, Rupert finds and gathers up a slug into his hands before walking over to me (b, c). “redacted, I’ve got something yucky!”. “Show me?”, I responded. “Slug.” Rupert replies plainly as he carefully opens his hand out to me, “it’s a good slug” he continues. He then turns away and raises his palm up to the other children while shouting “SLUG!” at the top of his voice (d). Human and non-human

assemblages of this kind produced affects of excitement and care in the children. Many more unexpected moments akin to this occurred during my time at Wood Fire. These were thoroughly ordinary encounters that occurred outside conventional human-animal interactions insofar as notions of ownership and domestication were challenged (Ingold, 2000; Braidotti, 2013; Singh, 2018). To the children and staff, this environment belonged as much to the slugs and worms as it did to them.



*Figure 2 Slug!*

Wood Fire nursery is distinct from other primarily outdoor nursery settings for a few reasons. There is not a closet ban on plastic toys, and contra to popular cultural imaginaries it is hardly ‘tucked away’ deep in a forest. Conor, the setting manager, encouraged me to consider it as more of a junk yard-esque adventure playground. This felt apt. I recall that during my very first visit to this setting, on a notably warm and sunny day, that I described it as a ‘mini Glastonbury festival’, an event which affectively structures my own perceptions of freedom, joy and escape. On mentioning this to Conor, he recollected their yearly picnic and sleepover that they would hold and explained the broader relation to the wider community that Wood Fire tried to produce through these events:

I've always said that the intention here was that well, and I always say to parents, they're not signing up for nursery, you're signing up for community. So, I think for me, it's the community coming together. The original intention of the picnic was to kind of celebrate the year we just had and acknowledge the children that are moving on.

Notably, these were intended not only for those currently attending, but for *all* children and families who had *ever* attended. Typically when children leave nursery provision there is little reason, besides a young sibling also then attending, for them to return. Yet as Massey (2004) has noted, the construction of local practices such as these events can work to situate and bring individuals together in tandem with material spaces, fostering relational networks of care and as productive of communities. Emotional feelings of celebration shared between bodies therefore might be said to organise not only the social but also the material space within this assemblage. A sociomaterial reading of community in this vein might be constitutive of what Eckenwiler (2021), drawing from Massey, refers to as the 'inter-subjectivity' of place.

### *Material matters*



*Figure 3 Tyre-hill assemblages*

Turning the materials themselves, I arrived in the midst of a new structure being built: the 'tyre-hill' (see Figure 13). This had been created from a surplus of old car tyres and was held together by solely mud left by the builders in an adjacent site as they installed a new electricity pole. Car tyres, formed of natural and synthetic rubbers and a range of other materials, are ubiquitous objects in modern society. Here, their elastic

and malleable qualities produce opportunities for play with balance and mobility to emerge. The combination of the tyres gave form to a wide-based and multi-layered structure with a tube in the centre as a focal point. This space drew my interest continually as it attracted the children to hang out here throughout the day. I understood it as exemplary of what Ahmed (2010) describes as a 'happy object'. Bodies oriented toward these objects because the relation produces happiness.

It was clear early on that these large climbing frames and the freedom with which the children could use them augmented their own sense of self and subsequent capacities. There were few orders to 'get down', to play 'properly', or to 'be careful'. Such discursive statements of this kind are commonplace across educational settings (Cole, 2013). They can operate as habits of thoughts that, in their expression, foreclose bodily capacities. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 107) make this point in relation to the affective nature of language. For them, 'order-words' are "little death sentence(s)" that designate the ways in which certain statements effect a power relation. Order is meant in both the sense of a command and in the sense of establishing order onto bodies, whereas death is related to differing modes of judgement and punishment dependent on the assemblage through which the language is used. Free of these order-words, then, the materials both produced and helped to shape how they could present themselves to me.

Many assemblages were produced with/in the tyre-hill, however the initial novelty of this structure in relation to the novelty of my video recorder provoked shouts of "take a pic, [redacted]!" from the children before they leapt off on to the ground. In moments like these, it can be said that they were not talking to me as a bounded individual in the Cartesian sense, or rather the distinction between me and the video recorder was irrelevant for them, my subjectivity was an assemblage of these things where my own body did not end at my skin (Haraway, 1987; Barad, 2003). Further, it would be easy to analyse the opportunities for physical development that a child was learning. However, that would fix in place and limit an understanding of what else is possible in terms of capacities during these encounters. At times there were so many bodies atop the tyre-hill that it became futile to focus on any single child. This enacted a group subjectivity: a hive-like sociomaterial assemblage of activity enabled in relation with the tyres, the mud, the wind, and the freedom to jump, leap, roll and wobble. To paraphrase Rautio and Jokinen (2015, p. 8) and their remarks on snow piles within

these multiple encounters, “(The tyre-hill) can be thought of as generating life, as generating a “voice” which is always more and other than the sum of the individual (human) subjects. It is rather that the human subjects take part in one more-than-subject voice and become one clustered (tyre-hill) subject in the event of climbing and being with a (tyre-hill)”. In thinking through the capacities produced by the tyre-hill, it becomes possible to go beyond a focus on the development of any single child and instead consider the trans-individuality at the heart of experience: subjectivity, distributed. In other encounters, the children with becoming-with the tyre-hill as its indeterminate status shifted from volcano, a home, a volcano-home, an ice cream van, a hide-and-seek den, and a house for dumper trucks.



*Figure 4 Clustered*

In my fieldnotes I questioned whether the desirability of the tyre-hill was because it was ‘new’ to them, but the semi-permanent nature of all of the play spaces meant that no area ever remained exactly the same for an extended period. In my previous experiences within ‘purpose built’ sites, I clearly remember the affective pressure of having to maintain such a space, with often unspoken rules implied by management on how frequently material things have to be ‘tidied up’, how and where to position my physical body in relation to the room, how to ensure that resources are played with ‘properly’, and how to ‘set up’ a room, often specifically for the purpose of a

parent/carer show-around. Similar affects were experienced by Mohandas (2021) in their auto/ethnographical account of Montessorian early childhood practice. While always intended, to use the tired-out aphorism, with ‘the child at the heart’, these spaces and spatial practices are inevitably productive of particular subjectivities that determine the child’s capacity and potential. For example, from my experience in practice I remember the implicit rule that in changing an environment around within a room, long open spaces where ‘children might be tempted to run’ were discouraged. The visibility of particular spaces was often seen as important, too, as a means to ‘control any bad behaviour’. Implicitly, as others have noted, this led to a panopticon-esque policing of boy’s play (MacNaughton, 2000; Lyttleton-Smith, 2017; Martin, 2011). The indeterminate nature of the material spaces that I witnessed at Wood Fire tended more-often-than-not toward smoothing spaces where such forces were not felt in the same way.

## 2.1 Becoming-with the world



*Figure 5 Becoming with the world*

What happens when nothing happens? I thought about this on many occasions where seemingly nothing in particular was going on, when children were simply hanging out or pausing for a moment, or when they were not doing anything that would typically merit an observation to document their ‘development’. I felt these temporalities to be incredibly generative for the children. Given what is known about the ways in which

conventional nursery settings space time and time space, for instance through the conformist nature of the routine or through the rarely neutral arrangement of particular materials within an environment (Lyttleton-Smith, 2017; Knight, 2019), these moments of freedom from routines and the space that they had to simply wander about felt thoroughly life-enhancing. Far from doing nothing, a sociomaterial reading suggests that the children here were in fact *experiencing, attuning-to, and becoming-with the movement of the world* in all of its multisensory modes (Barad, 2007). The actual experience of being outdoors was significant with all its multisensory happenings: the feel of wind rushing by, the grassy and gritty surface textures, the noises of bird song. Hence, even when children do not speak, they still find ways to express themselves. This freedom from the tyranny of interruption that so often interrupts the times when we wish for our minds to wander, to let thought and the world flow through us, to move our bodies however we wish, is a rarity in early childhood spaces that foreclose desire according to the fixity of spaces and times (Lyttleton-Smith, 2017; Knight, 2019).

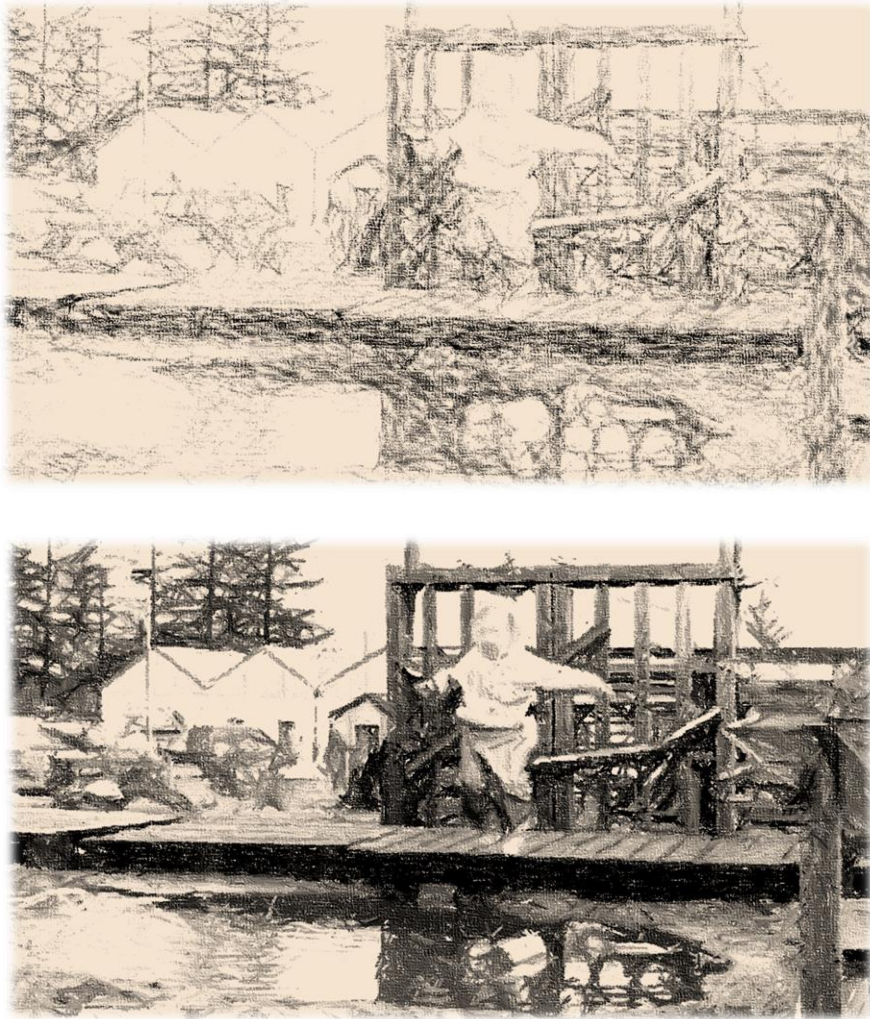


*Figure 6 Puddling*

As an example of children-becoming-with-the-world, or the world-becoming with children, I turn to the puddle. As I briefly touched on above, the elemental affects at Wood Fire were both ordinary and remarkable. Rain and cold weather are far from unusual in Scotland, of course, yet they still produced marked affects with the children and the materiality of the space. The colloquial naming of the ‘sand-pit’ by the staff, for instance, was largely a ruse. I quickly discovered that there was no sand. Once

made with an intention, it is now the plaything of the elements. On my visits, it became a large puddle-esque pool for children to play with, sometimes with more mud, sometimes with less. Always populated with various things: tin pots, buried toys, diggers.

Children desire splashing in puddles. This claim is nothing new. From a curriculum perspective, puddle splashing is conventionally determined to be beneficial for mobility and physical activity skills linked to better overall health, as well as being beneficial for an understanding of the scientific properties of water in a mathematical sense tilted toward future 'life-skills' (Education Scotland, 2020). I do not contest any of this in a retrospective sense, but for the present child in the moment, in situ, the intention for jumping into puddles appears otherwise. These developmentalist views maintain the presupposition that humans exist in a hierarchical relationship, above animals, plants, and things, as if the puddles were made *for us*, individuals. A sociomaterial attunement indicates that puddle jumping is an expression, but not solely of the child. Instead, child-puddle-rain-splash-wellies-mud-ripples-smile assemblages are an affective practice, produced in the intra-action of the encounter where conventional distinctions between subject and object lose traction. In the relation, puddles orient bodies, bodies orient puddles. They induce movement, displacement, motility, and force. Puddles direct the flow of play and 'produce this data as much as the video and the researcher' (Somerville, 2017). Culturally, the relation to puddle splashing seems quintessential to childhood itself, as a joyous activity without any end goal. These intra-active practices that I witnessed oriented toward such joyful subjectivities.



*Figure 7 experimental puddle-body subjectivities*

Nobody told the children how to splash in puddles, or to keep splashing in puddles, but they did it anyway often when no one was watching as an autotelic practice. That is, a practice that children, “repeatedly engage with for no external reward or motivation such as money or outside recognition” (Rautio, 2013, p. 394). Olsson (2009) makes a similar point when they examine a child learning to walk, an activity that is fundamentally about the child increasing their capacities to move through joining their (human) body with other (non-human) bodies. This encounter transforms and softens the boundaries between the child and the puddle, creating experimental subjectivities, new modes of being and becoming that disconnect and reconfigure individuality. In shifting analysis away from the individual child alone, we become alert to the creative entanglements that compose experience. This is what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are referring to when they talk of a Body Without Organs (BwO),

insofar as a body does not automatically designate a human body but is rather an assemblage of relations, of un-organised (human and non-human) bodies. The child-puddle-rain-splash-wellies-mud-ripples-smile assemblages gained a ludic ontological status composed of heterogeneous elements that increased individual capacities to 'be'(come) (within)in and the world, differently.

## **Conclusion**

My use of sociomaterialism within this paper has enabled a number of opportunities for me to unsettle conventional Cartesian knowledges around how children come to form their identities. Rather than beginning with a representationalist figure of the individual knowing child, I have used sociomaterialism as a heuristic to develop new knowledges on the processual and relational nature of how such representations come to be in-formed in practice. The relationality at play here is crucial in overcoming the Cartesian parsing of mind and matter and foregrounding a way of knowing that unsettles a conventional notion of agency. I have sought to extend the logics of individualism and consider the wider role of all kinds of materiality and things as they come to affect how identities are in-formed. This has been more expansive reading in which subjectivity is never given in advance. It has been the assemblages themselves that I have endeavoured to situate as my units of analysis, in the same vein as Deleuze himself argued in an interview with Claire Parnet (2007, p. 51): "The minimum real unit is not the word, the idea, the concept or the signifier, but the assemblage. It is always an assemblage which produces utterances. The utterance is the product of an assemblage which is always collective." Deleuze's use of utterances in this quote resonates with my own exposition of a sociomaterial form of performativity. I have attempted to demonstrate how a sociomaterial metaphysics can be put to use in practice enabling a refiguration beyond the constraints of the Cartesian subject and therefore provide an alternative means of understanding the ways in which environments can shape bodily capacities.

As mentioned, my intention for choosing the fieldwork site was to study an example that carries value in own its right (Massumi, 2002; Gale, 2018, pp. 168-169). Hence, any critique of the lack of generalisability of these findings would not be appropriate as this was not my original intention. Yet these findings should produce feelings of relatability. Especially for those who have worked directly within early childhood as

practitioners and are familiar with the weariness of trying to think differently about questions of identity in educational spaces. One may consider the broader trend toward new materialist scholarship as indicative of the shift away from human-centric research inquiry with young children. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008, p. 504), suggest that the anxiety to 'know' about children and produce practical, policy-relevant implications regarding subjectivities and identity is perhaps intimately related to adult anxieties about the production of ideal future citizens. This paper sits as a contribution toward other ways of sense-making in the face of the hegemony of developmentalist and individualist approaches toward education. Privileging material spaces that continually enable children to experiment with their subjectivities in more-than-human ways then is a gesture toward indeterminate futures. Hence, while I am deeply concerned toward justice within a world saturated by inequality, any implications of this study not intended to respond to the ways practitioners might 'improve' children, but are rather about considering how we, adults, can improve our own response-ability toward a less exclusionary way of knowing about subjectivities. It therefore offers insights into how we, as researchers, might come to witness children's interactions with the outdoors in new ways through sociomaterialism. Herein perhaps lies the value of 'alter-childhood' spaces (Kraftl, 2014) that may be more open to subverting epistemological foreclosures of potential and the habituation of particular modes of being (and becoming) through standards of 'normal' development. Given the increase of primarily outdoor settings in Scotland, there is potential here for these environments to advance a more radical, more-than-human, pedagogy that truly recognises the value of materiality in producing not-yet-known ways of being with and in this world.

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