

# (dis)orientating commonplace transitions In early childhood and beyond: non-linear encounters WITH babies

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## Author's Note

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Dr. Schofield brings a diverse background in early childhood education, care, and midwifery, with experience spanning the United Kingdom, the Middle East, and the United States. Her work is informed by feminist new materialisms, which shape her community collaborations, research, and pedagogy. Through speculative and performative inquiry, she critically examines issues of motherhood, babyhood, and childhood, advocating for the urgent need to rethink and reconceptualize early childhood education to support culturally sustaining programs for marginalized families and young children.

Her research and scholarship explore historical and contemporary constructions of motherhood, babyhood, and early childhood, as well as early childhood policy reform, teacher education, and post-qualitative methodologies.

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## Abstract

The transition from home to Early Childhood Caring and Education (ECCE) centres/environments and the process of moving between these places and spaces can be considered one of the most important aspects in early childhood. Young children entering caring and learning environments for the first time must continue to feel loved, cared for, safe and confident. As such, these environments should be viewed as an extension of the world that they already inhabit. Therefore, being open to how early childhood teachers, practitioners, families and young children navigate such transitions is not only essential in supporting thoughtful, attentive and responsive caring and learning spaces but further develops the understanding of what transitions may look like within early childhood. The paper reflects upon a study in an ECCE setting and a Higher Education (HE) Childhood Studies classroom in the United Kingdom (UK). As a way to explore the multiplicities and ambiguities of transition, research journal entries, images, things and objects themselves not only become works of theory but produce data threads. Working within a (post)qualitative paradigm shifts the focus of observation and analysis in the paper to the impersonal flows of affect through an ethics of care. The paper argues for the early childhood personnel/workforce (teachers, assistants, paraprofessionals, professionals, directors, lead teachers, and nursery practitioners) to acknowledge the importance of

a child's belongings, in the form of objects and things, to allow babies and young children to move between different caring environments with love and care, rather than, something that needs to be policed, managed and controlled.

### Introduction

Developmental psychology remains the dominant discipline in Early Childhood Studies (ECS), policy, practices and curriculum design globally, when considering topics such as transition, attachment, attunement, responsive caregiving, parental participation, and engagement. This paper commences with child development constructs, specifically child developmental psychology and psychological theories of attachment which influence intimate early childhood encounters to further understand the affective role of heterogeneous entities connecting to early childhood which inform early childhood transitions.

Guided by the Early Childhood Studies subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2019), all curricula of United Kingdom-based Early Childhood Studies degree programmes have to incorporate knowledge and understanding of child development and the implications for practice, neurological and brain development, cognitive, communication and language, physical, personal, emotional and social development. Thinking with Karen Barad (2007, p. 140), the phenomena of the observed baby and reality 'is not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena'. Therefore, Early Childhood phenomena and the knowing-in-being is much more than the *measuring* of development (e.g. cognitive, language, emotional, physical) against predetermined outcomes, but of assembling knowing as complexities of affect and embodied experiences... connected to the actual reality of experience and possibilities and potentialities... previously unimaginable... deriving from the experiences of lived as well as imagined and invented life (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 162).

Framing childhood within the understandings of cartesian abstractions, the mind as a *thinking thing* and search for certainty and normative constructs, often consisting of unchallenged and overlooked 'widely held truths about children's learning and development' (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 7) (normal, healthy, over-achieving, and good, versus, abnormal, unhealthy, underachieving and bad), induces a way to frame and fix bodies. Where babies, children, students and families are evaluated, governed and explicitly remediated, through the use of reductionist educational policies and practice, which remain dangerously simplistic (Burman, 2017b, p. 118); rendering some bodies as somewhat 'lacking intellectually, socially, emotionally, linguistically. (Holmes and Jones, 2016, p. 113). As MacLure et al. (2012, p. 467) infers,

Perhaps the most intransigent problem, for educators and researchers alike, is the strength of received notions of 'the child'. It is difficult to see children outside the frames provided by normal development, professional practice and liberal humanist views of the proper person.

The process of measuring through observations, and being with the child, is not a separate entity; it is always an entangled affair (Murriss, 2016, p. 120). Giving up the concepts of the ideal, normal, perfect and the search for, and, 'fantasy of finding the 'true' child' (Dahlberg and Moss, in Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. xiv), towards what bodies may become, requires a desire, a speculative and imaginative thinking, extending through and puncturing of dominant child developmental trajectories, which perpetuate norms and repetition through what Burman describes as 'portraying white European middle class men as their pinnacle' (2017a, p. 51) - thus placing knowledge in the hands of a selective few. "The child works to establish race as a central shaping element of ostensibly raceless Western ideals. Excavating the child's importance to the development of white supremacy is urgently needed" (Levander 2016, pp. 2-6 cited in Burman 2017a, p. 51).

For example, the work on the 'theory of attachment' by the British psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1907–1990) is one of the most frequently used and continuously expanding theories, within Early Childhood Care and Education globally. Within Early Childhood development textbooks, the term attachment, highlighting the emotional component of development, is often referred to metaphorically as an emotional 'tie' or 'bond' of the mother-child dyad. Sociological and feminist research describe 'attachment theory' as politically conservative and a tool to somewhat pathologize mothers, and police caregiving and families (Duschinsky, Greco, and Soloman, 2015, p. 173). Despite such wide criticism, attachment theory which is central to the theorising of Early Childhood transitions continues to influence global perspectives of child development and the concept of 'normal' child development. Mapping the concept (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of transition within early childhood, involves working dominant early childhood psychological theories, in an attempt to 'apprehend' child development perspectives, in the re-configuration and re-conceptualization of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

To contribute to the existing scholarship on early childhood transitions, this paper makes way to the mapping of Bowlby's historical and political movements, and the work he carried out with his colleagues at the Tavistock Clinic and Institute of Human Relations in the UK (1948 – 1956). As discussed, the mapping of dominant psychological concepts, including attachment theory and transitions affords a movement away from (re)producing 'a critical genealogy or discourse analysis' (Lenz Taguchi, 2016, p. 214), as a way of resisting the 'normalizing practices' (Lenz Taguchi & Palmer 2014 cited in Lenz Taguchi 2016, p. 214) and allows for transition to be opened up to be dissected, dislocated and disrupted.

### **Historical Political Work on Families**

It is not surprising that during infancy and early childhood, these functions are either not operating at all or are doing so most imperfectly. During this phase of life, the child is therefore dependent on his mother performing them for him. She orients him in space and time, provides his environment, permits the satisfaction of some impulses, restricts others. She is his ego and his super-ego. Gradually he learns these arts himself, and as he does, the skilled parent transfers the roles to him. This is a slow, subtle and continuous process, beginning when he first learns to walk and feed himself, and not ending completely until maturity is reached. . . . Ego and super-ego development are thus inextricably bound up with the child's primary human relationships (Bowlby, 1951, p. 53).

Theorisations like the one above underscore how babies and children's bodies are conceptualised and associated within 'modern European thought' (Burman, 2017a, p. 44); notions of 'the child', 'good child development', 'good mothering' and 'good parenting' (Burman 2017b, p. 113; Morelli et al. 2018; Murriss 2016, p. 3). Although I am reluctant to regurgitate Bowlby's theorisations it is extremely important to acknowledge them as well as the historical and political context of his work, including psychoanalytical influences on the theorisation of the problem child, child and adult delinquency and maladjusted. Theorisations that remain firmly rooted in early childhood studies and have material consequences for babies, children and families (McCarty 2015, p. 70 cited in Burnett et al. 2020, p. 112).

During the 1920s, psychoanalytically informed approaches to the education and socialisation of children began to infiltrate the educational system within the UK. Following Freudian theory of personality development (conflicts among the id, ego and superego of the human mind) international influences (Bernfeld's *Kinderheim Baumgarten* in Vienna by Anna Freud and Vera Schmidt and Sabina Spielrein's *Hermine Hug-Helmuth* in Moscow), psychoanalytically oriented schools then termed progressive schools were founded in the UK, e.g. the Malting House School in Cambridge, founded by Susan Isaacs, Summerhill School founded by Alexander Sutherland Neill, and the Priory Gate School (van Dijken et al., 1998). At the end of 1928 and early 1929, Bowlby spent some time within Priory Gate School, a school for children labelled maladjusted or a problem, in response to what Bowlby

described as deprived parenting. As Riley (1979, p. 96) asserts, at this particular time in history 'the theoretical stress was firmly on the mother as the psychic agent. This tendency in psychoanalysis readily joined the similar tendency in developmental psychology'. Adding weight to this argument, in 1944 Bowlby published *Forty-four juvenile thieves: Their characters and home-life*, claiming delinquency as a product of early separation from the mother (Riley, 1979, p. 95). As an historical pioneer of maternal deprivation and separation, despite Bowlby's research being 'notoriously methodologically weak' (Riley, 1979, p. 95), he went on to hypothesize the early anxiety situations experienced amongst the children (male) were a direct result of maternal deprivation and how such deprivation contributes to anti-social behaviour in adolescence (Bowlby, 1953, p. 15). As a result of Bowlby's political work on families, in 1950, he was appointed consultant in Mental Health for the World Health Organisation (WHO), for whom he published *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, where he continued to concentrate his political efforts in secure attachments and the 'dangers of mother-child separation' (Riley, 1979, p. 96). Bowlby's attachment theory infiltrated early childhood studies with the notions of normal, healthy and secure child development at international and global levels.

As discussed within the introduction of this paper, guided by the Early Childhood Studies subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2019), all curricula of UK-based Early Childhood Studies degree programmes must incorporate knowledge and understanding of child development and the implications for practice; neurological and brain development, cognitive, communication and language, physical, personal, emotional and social development. Higher Education Undergraduate Early Childhood Studies students coming from Diplomas in Childcare and Education (previously National Nursery Examination Board), Council for Awards in Child, Health and Education (CACHE) and Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) programmes, most often refer to core texts such as Mary Sheridan (birth to five textbooks) that present knowledge and understanding of child development as abstract, including attachment theory, maternal deprivation and separation in relation to transitions; 'go-to' and 'how to' guides for anyone working or studying in health, social care and education, that include how to document and record delay and abnormality (Sharma and Cockerill, 2014). Despite the well-documented critique (e.g. Denise Riley in particular), Bowlby's theorising of attachment theory is one of the most frequently worked perspectives within early childhood Studies (Murriss, 2016).

This paper is not suggesting Higher Education Undergraduate Early Childhood Studies programmes in the UK do not unsettle this sense of normativity enough, on the contrary. Some students will go on to push boundaries, become advocates, and grow in confidence. However, some students will face monolithic structures, processes, and practices in settings on placement and when employed. Resisting early childhood norms, which are usually set in stone through policies, benchmarking, guidelines and frameworks, can seem a somewhat impossible task for some early childhood teachers and practitioners when early childhood care and education practice is predominantly shaped by cartesian views of child development, including but not exhaustive of child development psychological theories.

### **Theorising Transition in Early Childhood**

How humans connect and bond can be studied from an array of anthropocentric perspectives. For example, biologists will focus on the biochemistry of human affection; sociologists may examine communities, groups, and nations; and psychologists focus on dyads and families. Predominantly, the research on early childhood transitions focuses on the attachment between parent-child and subject-subject relations, which goes on to dictate early childhood caring and learning policies. However, in 1969, Bowlby began to discuss the role of what he describes as 'inanimate' objects. In discussing such he recognises elements of attachment behaviour directed at times towards non-human objects, for example clinging, sucking (non-nutritive), cuddling, and stroking. Bowlby (1969) states clinging and

sucking tend to be directed towards the mother's body, as do in other species, however, non-nutritive sucking may also include objects such as the soother or thumb, and for some, this may include a blanket, cloth, or a cuddly toy. Again, Bowlby relates such research to animal studies (Harlow et al., 1965), and the attachment behaviours demonstrated by monkeys towards a dummy figure. Bowlby suggests that such objects invite elements of attachment behaviours purely in the absence of the primary figure (mother), and instead of the child finding comfort in the mother's body, comfort will be sought through such objects, 'ultimately a figure persisting in time and space' (Bowlby, 1969, p. 372). However, Bowlby argues that the 'so-called' transitional objects (Donald Winnicott), do not have any role or impact on a child's development, and a more appropriate term for such objects is 'substitute objects', very different to that of Donald Winnicott's transitional object theories.

### **Winnicott's Objects**

Winnicott's theorising of transition is often referred to as transitional objects, and transitional phenomena (1971), and sometimes as 'transitional space' (although Winnicott did not coin this term). Further theorising of the term 'transition' led Winnicott to conceptualise the term 'space', and non-human things (transitional objects). Through his research on the mother-child dyad, Winnicott began to develop his notions of space between the mother-child, as a crucial aspect of transition. As such, Winnicott claims he contributed to paradigmatic shifts within early childhood, moving from binary models (this is heavily criticised) of thinking to trinary models of thinking. The following section works with Winnicott's theories of transition, space, and objects, to further induce the undoing of distinctions, to explore 'sticky' attachments, in terms of rethinking developmental psychological theories of transition, through experimenting with the leaking, blurring and smudging of boundaries within early childhood.

Winnicott conceptualises the term object-relational to that of transition as a space (separateness) between the mother and child. As previously highlighted, through his research, he claims such objects somewhat act as a replacement for the absent mother, and have a special status for the child, for example, a plastic car, teddy bear, blanket, marble, feather etc. In terms of attachment, he argues, such 'transitional objects' create both a secure place for children, in which comfort and safety are experienced and distress, if the object is removed. Winnicott, went on to develop his research further by utilising psychoanalytical approaches and began to investigate subject/object in relation to inner and outer, me-and-not-me, and spaces between (bodies). Who is the subject (child), what is taking place in the child's world, and why is this particular object important to the subject. He believed a way to understand the importance of such transitional objects, is to understand the subject, and the notion of 'inside' and 'outside'. Despite such binary theorising as problematic, for Winnicott, his transitional object theory relates to boundaries (a 'resting place'), developmental timelines (measured patterns of behaviour in early childhood), and coping mechanisms (stress, anxiety, depression) in early childhood.

Working with alternative theories such as posthumanism, as opposed to object-relational theory, motherhood and early childhood could be understood as, 'the actualization of the immanent encounter between subjects, entities, and forces, which are apt mutually to affect and exchange parts with one another' (Braidotti, 2002, p. 68). For example, thinking-working with ethology as an attachment to the world, as opposed to the psychological theory of 'attachment'. Furthermore, the following sections of this paper will work-think with assemblage theory of mother-child-practitioner-bodies-materiality, as a result of a continuous coming together of human, non-human, and more-than-human bodies, to support a re-configuration of transitions in early childhood caring and learning environments.

### **(Re)Imagine, (Re)Modify, (Re)Vitalize, (Re)New**

Following the mapping of dominant early childhood developmental-psychological theories, the subsequent part of this paper goes on to work with Feminist New Materialism (FNM) and posthumanist theories. More specifically assemblage, vitalism, and affect theory, in a way to (re)imagine, (re)modify, (re)vitalize, and (re)new some of the dominant early childhood developmental psychological theories, specifically John Bowlby's theory of attachment in the shaping of normative transitional theories.

As a mother, midwife, pedagogue, professor and researcher I am often drawn to the intimacies, intricacies, and the non-measurable (Schofield, 2024b). In recent years, the theoretical lens of Feminist New Materialism (FNM) and reconceptualizing the "human" as a more-than-human ensemble has enabled different and new ways of understanding the complexities of early childhood. Alongside, drawing on mothering and midwifery encounters, working in the field of childhood studies, education studies, and early childhood education across and through an array of education institutions over the last two decades leads my continued preoccupation with the materiality of pregnancy, childbearing, babyhood and early childhood, and anchors my work firmly within feminist studies.

The reimagining of how babies emerge in a relational field through the folding and pleating of child development abstractions, the visceral bodily experiences of being with the babies, and the implications of early childhood studies and early childhood student placements, remains a political endeavour. MacLure et al. (2012, p. 467) point out how difficult it is, 'to see children outside the frames provided by normal development, professional practice and liberal humanist views of the proper person'. This political endeavour requires persistence, academic resilience and a creative and experimental early childhood studies programme of study that at the same time adheres to, and challenges early childhood studies subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2019) that currently govern the standard, delivery and facilitation of UK early childhood knowledge attainment. As Marks (2000, p. 31) infers, '[j]ust as we can only speak in the language that surrounds us .....we can only feel in the ways we have learned it is possible to feel' and to facilitate the alternative, sometimes, new ways of thinking, feeling and doing early childhood with early childhood studies students, 'means turning away from learning as a technical process of representation, reproduction, categorisation and normalisation....which offer no certainties and predetermined outcomes' (Dahlberg and Moss, in Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. xviii).

This sense of ambiguity, speculation and uncertainty is complex to negotiate in the current neoliberal education system saturated with assumptions regarding what counts as knowledge, how knowledge should be attained, and the impact of the attained knowledge on future endeavours. This paper does not claim to fix and reify a different kind of early childhood knowledge, for example by crudely pointing out the early childhood studies and early childhood care and education assemblage components (St. Pierre, 2016). Instead, it explores the intra-relations that form such complex, moving assemblages. The data threads – photographs and image assemblages encapsulate an arrangement of sorts, students, babies, food, rugs, milk, tears, rest, play, curriculum, politics, and not only evoke 'memories encoded in senses' (Marks, 2000, p. 26) but the 'influx-and-efflux' (Bennett, 2020) of energetic forces of becoming.

To summarise, Feminist New Materialism (FNM) and posthumanist theories, such as assemblage, vitalism, and affect theory, can transform dominant early childhood developmental psychological theories, particularly John Bowlby's attachment theory. The paper continues to argue for a political (re)thinking of early childhood development, challenging traditional educational benchmarks and embracing ambiguity and uncertainty. So far, the paper is advocating for an experimental approach to early childhood studies that moves beyond rigid learning processes. Thinking with the data threads, including photographs and image assemblages, to highlight the complex, dynamic relationships in early childhood settings, the (re)imagine, (re)modify, (re)vitalize, (re)new section of this paper holds focus on the materiality and sensory experiences involved.

When thinking in terms of ‘objects’ (Winnicott and Bowlby), ‘things’ (Bennett), non-human (Braidotti), and posthuman childhood (Murriss), the following section of the paper ‘Developmental Abstractions and Spacetime-mattering’ will work with the research ‘data’ to further explore developmental abstractions and spacetime-mattering, thinking-feeling-doing (Osgood, 2019), performative intra-active agents, touching encounters, fetish things/objects/stuff (inanimate objects and transitional objects) and vibrant matter.

### **Developmental Abstractions and Spacetime-mattering**

A dominant and recurring concept in the routine practices of health, education (structures and practices associated with the UK Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum) and early childhood is a chronological understanding of time that situates bodies within the creation of routines, habits, punishments, guidelines, policies, a sense of control and order of bodies (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012) in such spaces. What ‘Heidegger (1962) called a ‘vulgar notion of time’ is the argument that, no matter what tense is added to time, it can still be measured with mechanisms such as clocks’ (cited in Tesar, 2016, p. 406). Abstractions that situate notions of ‘childhood, time and temporality’ as the time of childhood is thought of as both a ‘duration’ and an ‘occasion’; childhood is measured, tweaked, adjusted and timed’ (Tesar, 2016, p. 400). Early childhood developmental trajectories put a distance between the present and the temporal location of being touched by memories, histories, traumas and pleasures.

Karen Barad’s Quantum Field Theory (QFT) promises a queer(y)ing that destabilizes the fixed coordinates of time, place and space through an emergent ‘of intra-activity, of agential separability – differentiating that cut together/apart’ (2010, p. 244) – spacetime-mattering. This term ‘spacetime-mattering’ is not just a neologism that helps to trouble the powerfulness of linear trajectories and theoretical abstractions that pervasively entrench the workings and fixities of early childhood theory, policy and practices. Spacetime-mattering locks me in as I write and think with the motherhood, babyhood and childhood data threads. Concoctions of the old and new get pumped through the writings, things mix, bodies sometimes reject one another, and things conjoin and congeal. Spacetime-matterings can help to move the trajectories of early childhood studies away from early childhood developmental abstractions such as attachment theory, that continue to mobilise notions of transitions in early childhood, towards seeing how attachment theory, for example, is itself a spacetime-mattering of sorts. Thinking with Barad’s spacetime-mattering troubles how motherhood, babyhood, and childhood experiences (including perspectives of what ‘good’ and ‘bad’ childhoods and mothering look like) unsettles early childhood temporalities and the adult/child binary. For example, motherhood is particularly troubled by time; a time in which mothering, in all its forms, biological and social, is constructed by default. With spacetime-matterings, the concoctions, the ripples and waves, waves creating waves, new ripples producing new ripples and tides are worked with, all constituting different patterns and disturbances that extend across time and space. What takes hold of me in these moments of thinking is, it is not just that child development and attachment ‘knowledge practices have material consequences’, but that the ‘practices we enact matter – in both senses of the word’, and such practices of knowing are ‘part of the world’s differential becoming’ (Barad, 2007, p. 91). Time and temporality stir-up early childhood sediments to disturb early childhood studies further towards the (re)imaginings of early childhood entangled in Higher Education andragogy and pedagogy, keeping me attentive and attuned in the Higher Education Undergraduate Early Childhood Studies classroom. Following Tesar (2016, p. 402), ‘[t]ime and temporality’ is a formula to designate time in its circumstances; ‘time and eternity’, ‘time and motion’, ‘time and duration’, and ‘time and space’. Making knowledge is not about the production of facts but about the moments in making worlds (Murriss, 2016, p. 40). Moments of disorientation and reorientation.

### Thinkingfeelingdoing

When thinking about (dis)orientating commonplace transitions in early childhood and beyond, flat-ontologies (a thinkingfeelingdoing [Osgood, 2019, p. 86], where theory, data, research participants and researchers share equal capacities in the knowledge production process) open up a space to revise the relationality of the body-reality-socially-constructed-discourse, beyond the binary divides of human/nonhuman, material/discursive theory/practice, subject/object and reality/discourse (MacLure 2015, p. 5; Fenwick 2011, p. vii). Thinking with Barad, the materially-oriented research attended to the nature of matter within the material world and offered a distinct space when exploring the intricacies and intimacies of transitions within early childhood and early childhood studies. Transitions - as a material engagement with the world and the significance of matter in early childhood, thinking-working with feminist theorists, including quantum physicist Karen Barad is productive. Barad's philosophising is a way of contributing towards alternative kinds of empiricism within early childhood, early childhood studies and the broader field of social sciences, which involves an overarching desire to reclaim 'the creative and speculative force of experimentation, as a way of reconfiguring our concept-matter mixture' (de Freitas, 2017, p. 741). Feminist new materialist theorising moves me as part of multiple assemblages into different and unexpected thinkingfeelingdoing early childhood and early childhood studies spaces. Spaces that are uncomfortable, demanding and bodily.

As the paper proceeds to experiment more with thinkingfeelingdoing the data threads, each thread twists, swirls, twirls and whirls with other threads in a delicate and intimate dance; all relating to ideas of literal and/or figurative reconfigurations of transition.

### Performative Intra-active Agents

**Figure 1**

*At rest*



Thinkingfeelingdoing with the above photograph, it is the cotton sheets, sour milk, stillness, atmosphere, the fetal position of the babies, fabric conditioner, teardrops, hands, dribble, cotton threads, soft fluffy fabric, shiny stretched cheek skin, soft lighting, baby wipes, mashed banana, soothing whispers and singing that grabs hold of me as mutually performative intra-active agents (Barad, 2007). Each touch, smell, taste, instinct and so on, augments my body, it returns me, and I am being flung. I cannot articulate where it is I am being flung to, but it is somewhere other than here.

The library is transformed. The wooden carry holders for the books are wheeled to one side. The baskets of toys removed. Child mattresses filled the carpet area, and the library room



transformed into a giant cot for the babies to sleep. Each baby had their own sleeping space. This included personal blankets, from home, and sleeping aids. The smell of the babies' blankets is overpowering. A mixture of different washing powder and fabric conditioners. At the end of each day, the blankets go home with families to be washed and returned for the following day.

As sleep time immediately follows lunchtime. Babies are stripped down to their vests. Some of the babies have food stains and bits of food on their vests where the juices and fluids have seeped through the clothing. Some babies have food in their hair and in between the creases of their fingers. Some of the babies are teething. Their rosy red cheeks were shiny and glowing. Dribbling excessively. Biting down on plastic pacifiers, creating squeaking sounds as their teeth bite the rubber teat of the pacifier.

As babies take their positions in the room the practitioner lowers the lights, plays some music from an iPad, and whispers gently to the babies to settle down. The practitioner sits down in the room with the babies. The baby-room atmosphere(s) moved from busy and erratic to calm and peaceful (Research diary entry, 12.12.18).

Speculatively and viscerally, the auratic human and nonhuman things within the baby-room photograph (figure 1) and research diary entry above transport my body through the queering of space and time, becoming-I and 'world infusing and diffusing' as 'sight and touch intersect' (Böhme, 2013, p. 2). As Hickey-Moody and Malins (2007, p. 6) imply, becoming consists of 'both human and nonhuman affective entities that create opportunities to perceive, move, think, and feel in new ways'. The baby-room photograph and research diary entry evoke and awaken my senses and bodily knowledges of early childhood and early childhood care and education.

The return to the somewhere is provoking, sometimes my body welcomes the move, and sometimes it does not. The bodily affects of the re-turning invite different memories, struggles, complexities, and tensions. I am (re)(dis)orientated and fascinated in such moments. Following Serres's (2008, p. 3) work 'the senses are nothing but the mixing of the body, the principal means whereby the body mingles with the world and with itself, overflows its borders'. My body is in a continuous process of 'intra-acting', unsure of entering the fraught spaces and unsettling the sediments which have been anchored for a number of years. Sediments that often rise to the surface through teaching undergraduate childhood studies units such as traditional child development curriculum – including attachment theory. Where notions of deprivation, separation, insecurity, and absence permeate such theories. Facilitating (regurgitating) and unravelling somewhat sensitive, affective, and emotive concepts, such as attachment theory, through a dry scientific discourse, parses emotion out and invites uncomfortable perplexed spaces for pedagogues and students, 'a haunting and vulnerable space' (Schofield, 2024a, p. 565).

When interaction between a couple runs smoothly, each party manifests intense pleasure in the other's company and especially in the other's expression of affection. Conversely, whenever interaction results in persistent conflict each party is likely on occasion to exhibit intense anxiety or unhappiness, especially when the other is rejecting. Proximity and affectionate interchange are appraised and felt as pleasurable by both, whereas distance and expressions of rejection are appraised as disagreeable or painful by both (Bowlby, 1969, p. 242).

Thinking with notions of transition in early childhood and the above Bowlby quotation one 'slowly burrows one's way through the fissures of history' (Minh-ha, 2019, online), exposes one's senses, 'not by eyes only, but by ear, nose, tongue, and

body contortions' (Minh-ha, 2019, online). Bodies are beckoned 'in a worlding that re-organizes conceptions of space and time' (Manning, 2007, p. xiii) and emerge through 'everyday acts of resistance' (Minh-ha, 2019, online) alongside, with and through other bodies. To facilitate/teach Bowlby's attachment theory with early childhood studies students where concepts such as maternal deprivation, insecure attachments and abandonment circulate the theorising of such work is extremely difficult. Through Bowlby's theorisations, it is the mother who is the centre of such painful torment. With a career in midwifery before moving over to academia I know too well mothers who cannot stroke, caress, hold, and nurse their babies. This can be a result of trauma, mental health illnesses, and sometimes the unknown, and, it is the same in the early childhood studies classroom. Students will sometimes leave the classroom, become animated, cry, or sit in silence, holding onto the fact that to proximate unravels them.

### **Touching Encounters**

“Sat on the edge of my bed, I looked over to see my babies sleeping, so helpless, innocent, and fragile. I cried so hard. The sense of failure, I couldn't breathe” (Mothering diary entry, May 2000).

Staying with the above diary entry and following Frank (1995, p. 31), 'the body is not mute... it is inarticulate; it does not use speech, yet begets it', the materiality of bodies holding 'the memories of the traces of its enfoldings' (Barad, 2007, p. 383). The speech that bodies beget, includes mothering stories, mothering stories shared through intimate and intricate bodily touching encounters, 'what is harder to hear in the story is the body creating the person' (Frank, 1995, p. 31), and as Frank asserts, 'hearing the body in the speech it begets is never an easy task' (1995, p. 31).

The romantic tradition figures love as a disease, a cantankerous tumour, making us sick, disturbing our thoughts from within, driving us crazy. The loved object gets into us (Baraitser, 2009, p. 89).

Following on from Baraitser, my body is filled with mothering emotions. It has birthed, cried, laughed and pained. Absence fills me with nausea. Words like rejection, abandonment, deprivation, anxiety and unhappiness circulate in my body; it is Bowlb(arbar)ian (Schofield, 2024a and 2024b). The absence of my children and loss of babyhoods and childhoods is painful. My body is 'mothersick' (Schofield 2024b, p. 39). Loving being a mother and being mothered is not a fixed entity, but rather an extension of my body creating folds. Mothering as a capacity of 'overflowing and flowing over' joy, excitement, pain and discomfort, and memories; mothersick - 'estranged from your present location and long for a space that you once inhabited' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). The silent nights, breastfeeding, nappy changing, stroking, kissing, bedtime stories, giggles, burps, plastic teats, dummies, baby noises, gurgles, cries, bath time.

It is worth noting, my body is attuned to the fledgling attempt of putting bodies into words, as I continue to stutter and stammer through the writing. Mothersick is a neologism and a term employed to try and encapsulate the multiplicities, wanderings, tensions and contortions of bodies within early childhood studies. It is not a term employed as a way of defining the pining of the mother, but rather the imaginings and fantasies of 'motherhood, mothering and the maternal' (Baraitser, 2009, p. 3). This inhabited place as described by Ahmed (2006) may have only been experienced at a distance, yet to be touched, unfilled empty spaces occupied by imaginings, desires and needs for mothering.

### **Fetish things/objects/stuff**

Fetish objects can encode knowledge that become buried in the process of temporal or geographic displacement but are volatile when reactivated by memory. Fetishes get their power not by representing that which is

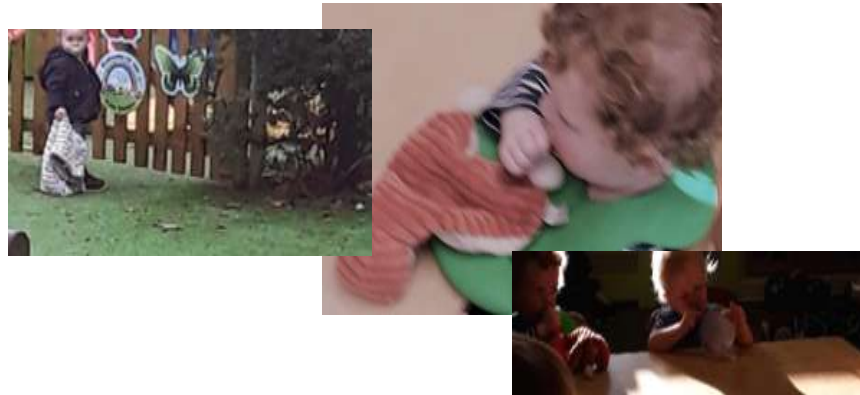
powerful but through contact with it, a contact whose materiality has been repressed (Marks, 2000, p. 86).

The following section draws on things emerging as transitional objects to open up the discussion and contemplate how matter and things become fetishized, vibrant and politically resistant. Following on from Marks in the opening quote, fetish things is a political endeavour, objects and things are fetishized, contaminated, unruly and queered, in the 'movement against, beyond, or away from rules and regulations, norms and conventions, borders and limits....it makes fluidity a fetish' (Epps 2001, p. 413 cited in Ahmed 2014, p. 152).

Fetish things/objects/stuff is not concerned with Freud's psychoanalysis of fetish objects and artefacts, which centres around 'mental representations of the object, one that is catheted with aggressive and libidinal energy'; the mother as the first love-object impacting on future love and loving encounters, missing body parts, faeces and sexuality (Baraitser, 2009, p. 130). Alternatively, I pull through and at the theoretical sinews of fetish things with Bennett's (2010) theorising of vibrant matter, 'an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness' (p. 3), the child's comforter, pacifier, blanket and the notion of 'thing-power'. For Bennett, thing-power illuminates the energetic and peculiar intensities of the everyday and ordinary things within the data and holds the capacity of these 'inanimate things to animate, to affect dramatically and subtly and that exceed their status as objects' (p. 31). Thinking about transitions into the early childhood care and education setting and the objects babies cling to, moves the writing to concentrate on the vitality of things in relation to early childhood. These everyday things and the bodily affect of things within the data invite different ways of thinking about human and non-human bodies.

## Figure 2

### *Fetish things*



Initially, the exploration of objects and things lead me to scholarly work around object-subject criticality. Following Braidotti (2013, p. 5), 'critical thought rests on a social constructivist paradigm which intrinsically proclaims faith in theory as a tool to apprehend and represent reality'. Thinking beyond traditional ideologies of transition manoeuvres me away from object-subject debates towards a vital materiality of objects and things. Pursuing to engage in object-subject debates would render the work banal. As such, Bennett's vibrant matter (2010) and influx-and-efflux (2020) breathed new life into research data. Furthermore, thinking with Barad (2007, p. 155) and the 'inherent ambiguity of bodily boundaries' - boundaries become instilled through aspects of early childhood practice and theory. Towards gnawing away at such discursive boundary-making practices, thinking with objects (Winnicott, 1951), albeit psychoanalytical and psychoanalytic constructions of the mother, things (Bennett, 2010), and 'the dilatation of our being-in-the-world' (Barad, 2007, p. 157), the baby room data helps to explore the significance of matter in early

childhood, to further induce the undoing of distinctions and explore the idea of 'sticky' and 'contingent attachment[s] to the world (Ahmed, 2004, p. 27).

“Babies move around the room, some walking, some bum shuffling, and some crawling, with their soft toys (rabbit, bear, panda, stitch), soothers (dummy, dum dum, dodie, pacifier), and blankets (blankies, blankie). Mariam holds on to her blankie (crocheted multi-coloured soft woollen blanket) tightly with her right hand...” Research diary entry, 05.12.2018).

Objects like 'soothers' and 'blankets' featuring in the research data briefly allow me to linger over the residue of psychological developmental trajectories that always already find themselves entangled in early childhood subject-object orientations. Winnicott's experiences of working within neonatal and paediatric care facilities lay the foundation towards his theoretical contributions in early childhood studies, in particular, mother-child dyads (Winnicott, 1964, p. 88) (mother and baby cannot be thought of in isolation) and the use of an *object*, and psychoanalysis concepts such as, 'holding environment', 'play' and 'transitional object' theories. Winnicott went on to claim that 'transitional objects' for example, a plastic car, teddy bear, blanket, marble, feather, and so on, act as a replacement for the absent (separated) mother and are pivotal to *healthy* transition for the child. Winnicott argues 'transitional objects' create secure and insecure spaces for children, in which comfort is experienced when in close contact with the object and distress if the object is removed. Winnicott's psychoanalytical attention to transitional objects and things needs to be furnished with a more-than-human vitality of things in early childhood studies.

Winnicott (1951) might describe these 'transitional objects' as those things 'to which children frequently develop intense, persistent attachments (Litt, 1986, p. 383) and are used to insulate [the self] from the feelings of lack and alienation that order social existence (Guattari, 2015, p. 20). Perhaps vibrant matter enables us to see a different identity for the object, rather than the soother or blanket being confined by human thinking and actions. The unsettling of clear boundaries between human and non-human allows the power of the object to affect us in vibrant ways.

Thinking with Bennetts' (2010) 'vitality' of bodies as the 'capacity of things.... not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own' (p. viii). For the babies in the data bodies mingled, *things* play, sleep, eat, walk, run, smell, crawl, talk and shuffle throughout the baby room. Bennett's theorising opens up a space to think about affect in early childhood studies, where the non-human things had 'distinctive capacities or efficacious powers of particular material configurations' (p. ix).

## Discussion

Towards resisting the historical norms and repetitions of 'patriarchal 'attachment' legacies' (Peters et al., 2020, p. 3), the paper attends to the non-human bodies and more specifically the objects or things to highlight 'the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and it slip-slide into each other' (Bennett, 2010, p. 4). Babies may hold onto the soother, blankets... the same way students hold on to their mothering experiences. 'Reverberations, that haunt student and pedagogue bodily knowledges and histories' (Schofield, 2024a, p. 559) through notions of deprivation, separation, insecurity, and abandonment. The bodily affects of inviting alternative ideologies, memories, complexities, and tensions.

The smells and tastes of objects/things/stuff record times and events - the things and babies emerge as one. Similar to Bennett's theorising, Morton (2017) uses the analogy of a train station when talking about non-human things, in which the past and future slide against each other, not touching. Morton talks about this sliding as a 'nothingness' - articulating that the [n]othingness is not absolutely nothing at all but rather a flickering, sparkling play of presence and absence, hiding and revealing. A

thing is a platform where ghosts glide past' (p. 286). As such, as boundaries of self and Other blur, through early childhood encounters with objects and things, the posthuman baby and child emerge.

The removing or even theorising of things and objects the babies carry enacts the severing of body parts. Why do we need to remove the baby from the object or the object from the baby. Is it not possible for all bodies to move around the room together. Sticky sensuous affective things, often apprehended and disciplined for being out-of-line. Objects and things prohibited from sleeping besides babies due to the dangers of co-sleeping risks and overheating, pacifiers banned from the grasp of babies until deemed appropriate and then removed when deemed appropriate. Things prohibited from crossing the nursery threshold; removal of body jewellery, trays, draws, baskets, collecting the non-conforming breach of things that cross the threshold. Extensions of bodies severed and mutilated by other bodies at work, the dismembering of babies and children's bodies.

Things were put to work in a variety of ways within the baby room and I do not want to name them all as a way of analysing them. However, what is particularly striking is how the babies' things often acted as a way to discipline the babies' bodies, in particular the pacifiers. The particular pacifier I am referring to is the plastic and often rubber or silicone apparatus in which babies suck, a tool which adults view as a thing to soothe and comfort, but yet remove when deemed enough. As Jones et al. (2012) point out, pacifiers often described as dummies in the UK context, while being viewed as a source of comfort for an unsettled baby, also carry discursive controversy due to medical theories which indicate that they can delay speech by preventing babies from using a wide variant of facial muscles and how they also signify inappropriate parenting practices. As a transitional object, Winnicott (1951, p. 54) would have us believe the pacifier as an intervention towards managing trauma and managing spaces of disorientation. Returning to the baby room pacifiers were only allowed at particular times of day – sleep time. However, as a way of 'instilling a form of docility' (Foucault, 1977, cited in Jones et al., 2012, p. 53), the rules were often abandoned; parent nursery visits, busy days and practitioner-baby ratios.

This paper delves into the complexities of early childhood transitions, focusing on how young children navigate moving between the home and Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) environments. It underscores the necessity for these environments to be extensions of a child's existing world, ensuring feelings of love, safety, and care. The study critiques conventional developmental psychology frameworks, including John Bowlby's attachment theory, arguing that these perpetuate Eurocentric, normative constructs that narrowly define what constitutes "normal" child development. Such frameworks often marginalize diverse experiences and fail to account for the complexities of early childhood transitions.

### **Summary**

Traditional theories, such as Bowlby's attachment theory, dominate the discourse on early childhood development and transitions. These theories emphasize mother-child bonds and pathologize deviations from perceived norms, often stigmatizing families and caregiving practices. This paper highlights the limitations of such approaches and critiques their continued influence on global early childhood care and education policies. By incorporating concepts like Karen Barad's "spacetime mattering" and Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter," the paper advocates for a more nuanced understanding of transitions, emphasizing interconnectedness and the agency of non-human entities, such as objects and environments.

Drawing on Donald Winnicott's work on transitional objects, the paper explored the significance of items like blankets, toys, and pacifiers in a child's emotional regulation and sense of security. These objects act as extensions of the child's identity, providing comfort during times of change. The research argues for recognizing the vitality of these items, not as mere substitutes for caregivers to

police, manage and control but as integral agents in fostering caring and loving transitions in early childhood. Such a perspective challenges the tendency in early childhood care and education to manage or police children's belongings, instead advocating for their integration into caregiving practices.

The paper highlighted the rigid developmental timelines and benchmarks that dominate early childhood education, which often measure children against fixed standards. These approaches, rooted in Cartesian dualism, reduce children's experiences to measurable outcomes, neglecting the fluidity and diversity of their lived realities. The paper calls for moving beyond binary categorizations (e.g., normal/abnormal, good/bad) to embrace speculative and imaginative thinking that considers the complexities of early childhood experiences.

Incorporating feminist and posthumanist theories allows a theoretical and conceptualized challenge to anthropocentric views of childhood and caregiving. Specifically, Feminist New Materialism, works to reconfigure the child as part of a dynamic assemblage of human and non-human entities, emphasizing relationality and affect. These paradigms disrupt traditional hierarchies and encourage early childhood practitioners to engage with the entanglements of bodies, objects, and environments in shaping early childhood experiences.

Through vignettes and research diary entries, the paper illustrates the embodied and sensory nature of transitions in early childhood settings. It describes the sights, sounds, smells, and textures that define these environments, showing how babies and their belongings co-create spaces of comfort and security. The paper advocates for early childhood practitioners to cultivate environments that are responsive, inclusive, and attuned to the material and emotional needs of children.

Ultimately, the paper advocates for a reimagining of early childhood transitions that respects the multiplicity of children's lived experiences. By integrating theories from Feminist New Materialism, posthumanism, and affect studies, it presents a vision of early childhood care and education that is dynamic, inclusive, and responsive. This approach challenges traditional norms and benchmarks, urging educators and policymakers to prioritize care, relationality, and the entanglements of human and non-human elements in early childhood care and education settings.

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