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Abstract

This paper explores the intra-actions between and assemblages among classroom materials, a teacher's chair, and a seven-year old boy during a second grade literacy workshop. I consider the ways in which the relationships between the human and more-than-human produced multiple ways of being and, in particular, new modes of competence for a child whose classroom literacy practices were often considered illegitimate or unremarkable. Drawing on posthumanist and more-than-human philosophies of difference, I suggest that the child's affective relationships with materials and his teacher's willingness to engage in a nomadic pedagogy produced new opportunities for him to experience and demonstrate his literate selves and, subsequently, created a not-yet-experienced and unanticipated sense of belonging.

It is independent reading time in Mrs. L's classroom. While some students lounge on the carpet or sit in their chairs to read self-selected texts, Track Star sits on the floor underneath the table that is created by a small group of desks being pushed together. His book lays closed on the floor beside him and he shoves his pencil – a seemingly unnecessary accessory, considering he has no paper with him – through the small hole at the center of the table. Jack occasionally looks up from his book and pushes the pencil back down, though Track Star and the pencil do not seem to intend to cause a distraction, nor does Jack appear particularly engaged with the ephemeral appearance and disappearance of the pencil. I watch Track Star for ten minutes and never saw him actually read the book. (from my fieldnotes: September 30, 2014)

Introduction

Track Star¹ was one of many children in Mrs. L's classroom who gained my attention over the course of the academic year that I spent thinking with Mrs. L about teaching and learning. More specifically, we inquired about how she maneuvered around pressures and mandates to create a specific type of learning environment with specific types of encounters in the classroom she shared with her students. Neoliberal pressures for standardization and accountability continue to bear down on early childhood educators and their students, thus, curriculum is be(com)ing increasingly scripted and, often times, less relevant to the lives of those whom it purportedly serves (Apple, 2005, 2015; Eisenbach, 2012; Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2014; Stremmel et al., 2015). Early childhood educators like Mrs. L are left to make decisions about the extent to which they will demonstrate fidelity to such programs, the extent to which they will emphasize test scores over culturally relevant learning and teaching,

¹ The children created their own pseudonyms.

and the extent to which they will disrupt and resist what neoliberalism purports *counts* as curriculum.

In this paper, I examine the literacy encounters that emerged in this American second grade classroom, particularly those encounters that manifested during a two-hour block of time each day known to the children and teacher as the literacy workshop. During this time, the students engaged with a variety of texts independently and with the teacher's support as they developed skills and strategies for reading and writing. Specifically, I examine the encounters of one seven-year old boy, Track Star, his classmates, and the ways in which the human and nonhuman objects, or the more-than-human in the classroom, assembled to produce new ways of be(com)ing and new ways of learning. In doing so, I draw on the Deleuzoguattarian philosophies of difference, which function to consider familiar curricular structures as both productive and always emerging as something new and potentially transformative. Specifically, I think with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of *affect*, *rhizomatic be(com)ing*, and *nomadism* and Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of *thing power*. I suggest that it was the intra-action between the teacher's chair and Track Star, his classmates, texts, and previous literacy encounters that were at once lived, meaningful, and that created opportunities for him to belong in a classroom that might have seemed unfamiliar due to the constraints of neoliberal expectations.

This paper involves a careful consideration of a glow in the ethnographic data (MacLure, 2010) that emerged when Track Star co-opted his teacher's carefully orchestrated small group guided reading session as he sat in the teacher's chair and began facilitating the group on his own. What one might initially read as a representation of rule-breaking or defiance emerged as a moment filled with intense possibility, in which Track Star demonstrated his competencies that were largely unacknowledged in previous literacy encounters.

Before I tend to the particulars of Track Star and the teacher's chair, I will elaborate upon the theoretical concepts that inform this work and offer a bit of context for this study. Then, after sharing a vignette from my field notes, I will attend to the possibilities of intra-action amidst the Track Star-teacher's chair assemblage.

Theoretical Frameworks

Informed by Deleuze and Guattari's positive ontology, the questions that guided and emerged alongside this study moved away from interpretation and reliance on generalizable themes and toward nonrepresentational thinking; so rather than asking *what do these encounters mean*, I inquire, *what do these literacy encounters generate for learners, teachers, texts, and spaces?* In the case of the teacher's chair, in particular, and its encounters with Track Star during the workshop reading group, Jones's (2013) simply stated, albeit complex question, *what does the chair do?*, directs the analysis away from representational discourse and towards something more uncertain and generative.

The More-than-Human and Difference

I appreciate the ways in which philosophies of the more-than-human can help us to [re]consider and [re]think the relationships in early childhood classrooms; this work is not about generalizing or drawing easy conclusions about what those relationships are, how they might function, or what they might produce. Rather, posthumanism, as it is taken up by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Bennett (2010) and the more-than-human as conceptualized by Barad (2007; 2012) and others decenters the human subject in order to take into consideration the multiplicity of relations between the human and the nonhuman. This is meant to, as MacLure (2010: 279) writes, "defamiliarize, complicate, obstruct, pervert, and proliferate." Engaging with posthumanist concepts disrupts what we believe that we understand about childhood, teaching,

and learning, “ruptures our habitual modes of being” (O’Sullivan, 2006: 2) and helps us to “see and think this world” - and classrooms, teachers, children, and competency in new ways.

Deleuze and Guattari conceptualized these new ways of be(com)ing as embodiments of difference, though not difference as opposed to something recognizable or representational. Rather, difference is a matter of how the human and more-than-human, including the expectations of the literacy workshop, “continue to evolve beyond the boundaries of the sets they have been distributed into” (Williams, 2003: 60 in Davies & Gannon, 2009: 17). Difference involves the constant coming-into-relationship with bodies and materials and the inevitable change that emerges in those encounters.

Affect and rhizomatic be(com)ing, vibrant materialism, and the concept of nomadic spaces help me to think about difference in the intra-actions between human and more-than-human in the classroom. The notion of agential intra-actions, as described by Barad (2003: 815), purports that “the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful.” That is, humans and the more-than-human do not preexist their relations but emerge in specific contexts; they emerge in relationship to one another, contingent upon the qualitative specificity that is exchanged in an encounter. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) described the concept of be(com)ing as one that disrupts the notion of fixed or linear or stable identities and considers multiple ways of being that are uncertain and contingent upon the rhizomatic relationships or assemblages of which we are a part. The multiplicities of the human and non-human comprise the and...and...and..., which speaks to the rhizomatic and limitless possibilities for transformation as new and often unexpected connections are made across and within the contexts in which we live, learn, teach, and play.

Be(com)ing

Be(com)ing deals with the processes of difference and transformation that rely on the assemblages - as ephemeral as they may be - and the flow of affective intensities that create change not in the sense that something is changing from one thing to another, but in the sense that something is in a constant state of be(com)ing different (Davies, 2014; Jackson, 2010; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010). Braidotti (2011: 210) suggests that be(com)ing is a process of resistance, “in that [it] aims at empowerment and enhancement of what subjects can do.” This latter point of resistance is particularly compelling when considering children’s encounters with texts during the literacy workshop as the possibility for children seeing themselves – and others – as readers and writers or *different kinds* of readers and writers emerges (or does not) in that curricular space. Thinking with be(com)ing helps me to consider the ways in which Track Star might push back against reductive definitions of *what counts* as reading and writing in his second grade classroom.

I pause here to note that my use of parentheses in writing *be(com)ing* is intentional as the punctuation attends to that which already is and that which is always in transformation. While the focus of this paper is on Track Star and the teacher’s chair’s be(com)ings, it is not lost on me that I, too, was entangled in the intra-actions of the literacy workshop. As Davies (2014:19) writes, as a researcher, I am engaged “materially, conceptually, and ethically.” She elaborates that be(com)ing researcher involves a kind of “emergent listening” which “is always in tension with a tendency to make things solid, to classify them, to territorialize them.” (Davies, 2014: 20). Indeed, while I engaged in a project that sought to move away from representational or generalizable ways of being, be(com)ing researcher involved a constant willingness and attempt to see beyond the familiar. In the case of the literacy workshop in Mrs. L’s classroom, this meant

recognizing my own entanglement with the human and more-than-human, being affected by that entanglement, and seeking new ways – different ways – of understanding the emergence of what it meant to be literate in that space.

Affect

Affect - and the transmission of affect - considers the ways in which there is potential for transformation in these assemblages as traits of qualities of things are shared in encounters.

Deleuze described *affectus* as “an increase or decrease of the power of acting, for the body and mind alike” (in Cole, 2013: 97). Affect is separate from emotion; it is the change, or the difference, that is produced when one body, human or more-than-human, engages with another.

Stewart (2007: 2-3) explains that affect is that which

can be seen as both the pressure point of events or banalities suffered and the trajectories that forces might take if they were to go unchecked [...] their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance.

In the classroom, affect is what both emerges in between children’s encounters with texts and materials and it is what propels encounters further. In thinking with affect, I am able to come into relationship with the ways in which Track Star, his classmates, Mrs. L and the more-than-human were in constant processes of be(com)ing in the constantly changing classroom assemblages.

Thing Power and Nomadic Spaces

Thing power, as it described by Jane Bennett (2010), speaks to the vibrant materialism - the aliveness and agency - of matter. Bennett's theories are informed by Barad's (2012) conceptualization of a more-than-human ontology, a *thingification*, which recognizes the ubiquitous entanglement of the human and more-than-human. Barad writes, "The inanimate is always being shoved to the side, as if it is too far removed from the human to matter, but that which we call inanimate is still very much bodily and lively" (in de Freitas, 2017: 743).

Recognizing that inanimate things have the capacity to affect difference is a means of disrupting the human and nonhuman dualism and noticing the ways in which classroom entanglements function to produce new ways of being for objects, students, and teachers. Thing power attends to the notion that the more-than-human acts upon the human and can initiate change. In this way, thing power understands that classroom objects - like the teacher's chair - are productive. They can do things.

Smooth spaces are where all of this production, where generative encounters between the human and more-than-human, happen. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) characterized smooth space as that of the nomad, who maintains the potential for movement in order that life and subjectivity might be emergent, relational, contingent, and indeterminate. Smooth space functions in conjunction with striated spaces, where things are overly structured and rigid and planned in advance. Striated spaces often dominate early childhood classrooms, where emphases on lesson plans, standards-based curriculum, and reductive and essentializing notions of teaching and learning inform the ways in which classroom interactions are organized. Smooth space is where the unanticipated happens and where new possibilities for being materialize.

The Literacy Workshop in Mrs. L's Classroom

This ethnographic study unfolded over the course of eight months in a public elementary school classroom in the Southeastern United States. At the time of the study, sixty-six percent of the children at the school qualified for free or reduced lunch. Seventy-five percent of the children attending the school were black, twenty percent were white, and five percent identified with another race. The classroom reflected these demographics as nineteen of the 23 students were children of color and twenty-two students qualified for free and reduced lunch. These statistics are notable as frequently children from marginalized groups, poor children, and the teachers who learn alongside them are those who are subjected to neoliberal policies and pressures that limit the notions of what *counts as appropriate* in terms of curriculum, classroom teaching and learning, and, more to the point of this paper, what counts as competence in childhood (Dyson, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2009, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2014; Tatum, 2006, 2008).

Mrs. L, the classroom teacher, sought to strike a balance between the school administration's expectations for her to use particular types of prescribed curriculum in particular ways and her desire for the children to engage with materials and texts in ways that mattered to their own lived experiences. Indeed, she articulated late in the study (after she was required to integrate additional reading assessments into her curriculum) that her efforts for responsiveness were trumped by administrative control. All to say, Mrs. L's commitment to cultivating a space where her students could make choices about their experiences with reading and writing materialized in the ways in which they engaged with her, with one another, and with materials during the literacy workshop.

During each of my visits, which occurred once or twice a week, I engaged in participant observation (Corsaro, 2003; Powell, 2006) as I read with the children, sat with small groups of writers, helped troubleshoot in the listening center, and listened in as Mrs. L facilitated leveled

literacy intervention, guided reading groups, and reading groups. Frequently, I listened and asked questions as T-Rex, the unofficial tour guide of the class, described the latest projects the children had been working on. Early on in the study, the students learned about biographies and created paper bag puppets that helped them tell the stories of people who have impacted the world in important ways. Throughout the study, I was drawn to one child in particular: Track Star, whose paper bag puppet and biography depicted none other than Jesse Owens.

There were traces of Track Star – and T-Rex and the other children – all over the classroom. Track Star’s comic strip based on the cartoon Breadwinners hung above the computers. “Two ducks deliver bread,” Track Star told me one day. “But the bread makes them switch bodies.” There was also a party and a rocket ship, a monster and “fancy people,” skis that were ripped off, and a pet frog. I was having a hard time following the narrative, quite honestly (see Figure 1).

A slate – sanctioned for use during word work time – was co-opted by Track Star one morning after the teacher reprimanded him for distracting Peter Pan. Tears streaked Track Star’s face as he was made to sit apart from his tablemates to read his book during independent reading time. When it was time for independent writing, Track Star grabbed the slate and dry erase markers, rather than his writing notebook, and using hash tags and illustrations, worked through his sadness and frustration at being rebuked and his anxiety about Peter Pan being angry with him (see Figure 2).

In these ways and many others, Track Star and his classmates used classroom materials during the literacy workshop to construct and share their experiences, their interests, and their competencies. Dyson (2003) examined such relationships between young children and their workshop compositions as she described the ways in which children appropriate images and

language from popular culture and other texts to position themselves and take up certain identities in the classroom. Similarly, Paley (1998) suggested that young children become captivated with stories through play with texts and with one another as they inquire into real world problems and engage in critical thinking that allows them to reimagine themselves and one another through their literacy experiences. Mrs. L understood the transformative potential that Fletcher and Portalupi (2001), Miller (2013), and other educational researchers (Five & Egawa, 1998; Mills, 2014; Samway, 1992; Sherbine & Boldt, 2013) recognize in the literacy workshop and she held the space for Track Star and his classmates to make choices about the kinds of texts they read and wrote and to use materials available to them in ways that might not necessarily have been planned in advance.

I would like to turn my attention now to Track Star and his relationship with one material, in particular - the teacher's chair (see Figure 3) – during the meeting of a reading group. After sharing a brief vignette, I will map new ways of understanding the ways in which the chair, and Track Star's intra-action with it, generated new opportunities for being, belonging, and be[com]ing in the literacy workshop.

Mrs. L directs a group of children to her table, a large kidney-shaped table customary in many early childhood classrooms. There is a sudden clang of metal chair legs (some of the tennis balls have fallen off) scraping across the floor and rubber shoe soles pound the tile as children move toward the table, where Mrs. L will join them for the meeting of their reading group. Elsewhere, a buzz of quiet conversation seems to propel the children toward the texts they are reading, writing, drawing, and making.

The children sit down in the small children-sized chairs, save for Track Star, who walks around to the other side of the table and sits down in Mrs. L's chair. It is a large office chair on wheels. It rolls and spins and has levers that make it move up and down. Mrs. L is responding to Ray-Ray, who is working in another part of the room, and she does not notice that Track Star has started to ask questions of his fellow reading group members.

“So what was the message today?” asks Track Star, sounding like something between a teacher and a minister. The other children giggle as they open their notebooks and turn to the pages where they've recorded the details of their favorite parts of their books.

“The message was blah blah blah,” Million Dollar Man explains, hand over his heart, finger in the air. Both boys laugh. Nia has found her place in her reading journal and shushes the other group members to be quiet. She shares her favorite part from *The Magic Tree House*, reading directly from her journal. The other children take turns reading from their journals, too, giggling as the teacher joins them at the table. Track Star shifts his body weight and leans forward, as if he is preparing to stand.

“No, I like what you're doing. You can stay there,” Mrs. L says. She pulls out a small chair and sits down alongside the other children, her too-long legs making her appear uncomfortable and awkward. She prompts Track Star to continue to ask his classmates questions. He hesitantly obliges. “Well, I just asked the about their reading and they were telling me --“ Say-Say and Million Dollar Man interrupt Track Star as they realize that Mrs. L deems his position in the teacher's chair acceptable. They ask if they, too, can have a turn before Mrs. L gently redirects their attention to the conversation. The group, now co-facilitated by Track Star and Mrs. L, continues to talk about the books. After approximately twenty minutes, the small group reading time draws to a close. As Mrs. L stands, Track Star, who appears somewhere

between comfortable and amazed that he is still sitting in the teacher's chair whispers to her, "I thought I was going to get in trouble." He gives her a quick hug and walks back to his desk. Million Dollar Man seems to notice me watching. "I thought [sitting in the chair] was a bad thing," Million Dollar Man says. Mrs. L walks away as he moves his body closer to the teacher's chair.

As Mrs. L calls out to the children to gain their attention for the next workshop cycle, both Say-Say and Million Dollar Man move behind the kidney-shaped table and taking turns, bend their legs and quickly lower their buttocks to rest on the black upholstery. As quickly as they make contact, each pops back up, a look of satisfaction on their faces and they, too, gather their books and reading notebooks and return to their desks.

What does the chair do?

What is it about the teacher's chair that compels the children so? And what might the materiality of the chair in relation to the expectations of the reading group and its encounters with the bodies and texts in the classroom produce for Track Star and his classmates?

Liz Jones (2013: 606) theorized extensively about the teacher's chair as being one part of a sustained power relation in the classroom as part of an assemblage, in this study, of Track Star-children-teacher-reading group-classroom expectations-and-and-and. The materiality of the teacher's chair - its size and striking black cushion and upholstery, its elevated stature above where the children sit, its location *across* from the children, bounded by the wooden curvature of the horseshoe table - as Jones writes, "helps to mark out the dyadic relationship between the adults and child and in doing so contributes toward asserting the teacher's presence and power."

Even though Mrs. L. was not at that moment in time sitting in the chair, the chair was imbued with her authority - and the children knew it and were fascinated by it.

Be(com)ing Authority

While the children identified the chair as belonging to the teacher, the meanings of the chair were entangled in the assemblages of the classroom with its expectations, histories, and affective flows that emerged as it acted upon Track Star's body. The chair was, historically, part of a disciplinary discourse (Foucault, 1981; Luke, 1992) that functioned to produce an obedient literate body that participated in particular ways during guided reading groups. The position of the teacher's chair *across from* where the children were *supposed to* sit for instruction gave the chair a certain authority as it was positioned apart from (and literally above) the small chairs intended for young bodies. In its very positionality, the chair's gaze carried the potential to arrange the children's bodies into a "correct reading habitus" (Luke, 1992: 120). Track Star and the other children recognized this thingification of authority; when called to the table for guided reading, they usually followed the unspoken rule that the teacher's chair was for the teacher. It was, in part, because of this authority imbued in the chair itself that Track Star was able to, in relationship with the chair, facilitate the guided reading group as he did.

The moments Track Star spent being with and be(com)ing with the chair are what Latour referred to as the "slight surprise of action" that is not limited to humans. Could it be that the chair itself - in addition to its potential to mark authority - also carried the potential to redefine compliance and to disrupt the striated space of the reading group, the literacy workshop, and the classroom writ large?

Improvising [with] the Teacher's Chair

With the concept of be(com)ing, we can consider that both Track Star and the teacher's chair were parts of a transformative encounter, one that changed what it meant to be in the small reading group at that moment. The chair became something other than a space only for the teacher, though its status as authority in the classroom was maintained, and co-opted by Track Star in what I described as a playful encounter, but what the teacher would later define as self-directed learning that was initiated by Track Star.

In this process of be(com)ing, developmental expectations declaring what was "appropriate" for Track Star's participation in the reading group were not foregrounded. Rather, a new way of being in the classroom and engaging in literacy practices was created for Track Star; afforded by his sitting in the teacher's chair, the teacher's chair itself, and Mrs. L's recognition that permitting him to remain in the chair was okay.

Conceptualizing children's literacy encounters as be(com)ings creates opportunities for us to see children as always in process, never finite or determinate as they engage in reading, writing, and making. Developmental and behaviorist images of childhood that work to "fix the unfixable in place," as Browyn Davies (2010: 24) wrote, are disrupted when we consider that children are affecting and are affected by the relationships of which they are a part. Children are constantly engaged in processes of difference as they interact with bodies and materials and texts in unexpected ways. In a brilliant critique of the New London Group's conceptualization of literacy practices as strategic and deliberate, Leander and Boldt (in Enriquez et al., 2015: 13) "argue that children live in a perpetual state of improvisation, i.e., taking actions quickly, propelled by affective intensities, partial knowledge, *without* rational, strategic design." In a moment of improvisation, the Track Star-teacher's chair assemblage changed what it meant to

participate in a reading group, opening new possibilities for how one might engage in literacy discussions with a teacher and peers.

Be(coming) [with] Track Star, and the Teacher's chair, and...and...and...

As a researcher particularly interested in children's involvement with literacies in the early childhood classroom, my involvement in the assemblage - my own recognition that this was an event that was shifting a long-held dynamic in the classroom toward something not yet experienced - changed my relationship with Mrs. L. and her students. While I like to think I recognized the potential for be(com)ing that is always in classrooms, in between children and teacher and materials and texts, it was in the event of the Track Star-teacher's chair assemblage that my own researcherness was transformed. I took great delight in watching and experiencing Track Star, who was so frequently positioned along the margins of the classroom's established literacy culture, facilitate the small group. Be(com)ings are transformational. They change all of us - child, teacher, and researcher - from one moment to the next.

This possibility for transformation – for the transmission of affect between the human and the more-than-human (and between humans) – is always a potential across literacy encounters. As Davies (2010) suggests, these potentials enhance our specificity and expand our capacity for thought and action. In this way, Track Star's relationship with the teacher's chair – and with the other materials in the classroom space generated different ways for him to “do school.” In the parlance of Deleuze and Guattari, in these affective encounters, Track Star was simultaneously:

be(com)ing-cartoonist

be(com)ing-teacher's chair

be(com)ing-anxiety

be(com)ing-facilitator

be(com)ing-discussion leader

be(com)ing-question generator

be(com)ing-noncompliant pupil

and...and...and...

And of particular interest to my work, Track Star was be(com)ing-competent, demonstrating his interests, capabilities, and capacities in a way and to an extent that might not have been possible had Mrs. L. intervened and asked him to relinquish his position in the chair or had the chair not been available when it was time for his reading group. Track Star's competence and leadership is no small thing as often the literacies of young boys of color are marginalized or delegitimized, rather than recognized for their worth in the lives of young children and in the community of a classroom (Dyson, 2003; Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tatum, 2006, 2008). The specificity of the Track Star-teacher's chair-reading group event created a unique opportunity for multiple ways of doing literacy and, in fact, doing school.

Despite the intention of posthumanist philosophy to decenter the human subject, it is difficult to not privilege Track Star as human over teacher's chair as object. But by engaging with Jane Bennett's concept of thing power, I can readjust my gaze to consider what it is that the chair does in these affective and generative relationships with Track Star – and ultimately, with the other children. Thing power attends to the teacher's chair as, in the words of Bruno Latour (2005: 54), an *actant*, with the capacity to create, change, make and set into motion. In its interactions with the reading group assemblage, in collaboration and cooperation with Track Star, and with its histories and status, the teacher's chair has thing power. That is, it has the

capacity to redistribute the hierarchy of teacher-student and create opportunities for self-directed learning and play.

Mrs. L was adamant about describing the Track Star-teacher's chair assemblage as "self-directed learning" and while a closer analysis of that language is beyond scope of this paper, it seems as though the striated spaces of neoliberal expectations that emphasize measurable "learning" over more ephemeral, child-initiated and directed play might have been guiding her understanding. Perhaps the *academically productive* nature of the exchange between the teacher's chair, Track Star, and the other children shifted its definition away from play for Mrs. L. And then there is the question of why I, an educational researcher who claims to engage with nonrepresentational thinking, was so adamant about conceptualizing the encounter as play. Could it be that Mrs. L. and I both desired to understand and justify the assemblage in ways that could be validated by our own interests? This needs more unpacking, to be sure. But for now, I also want to point out that it seems that the teacher's chair and the vitalism of the chair-body assemblage (Taylor, 2013: 293) functioned to do other important things for the children's bodies as well. That is, it produced space for Track Star's voice to be heard and encouraged and generated new opportunities to demonstrate competencies in literacies.

Be(com)ing Nomadic

These things happen – the teacher's chair does things and literacy encounters are transformative and Track Star becomes different from one encounter to the next – in smooth or nomadic space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Roy, 2003). Classrooms, with their expectations, rules, routines, standards, learning objectives, and lesson plans are very striated spaces. But the structure of the literacy workshop, with time and space for children to engage with materials and

texts that they choose open up new spaces – smooth spaces – where unanticipated relationships like the one between Track Star and the teacher’s chair might emerge.

For many children of color, these relationships afford opportunities to participate in school in ways that they may not have opportunities to otherwise, as it is in the midst of these intra-actions that their competence might be recognized. I echo Delpit’s (2006: 17) concerns that teachers of black children might only “hear only silence and see only immobile pencils” (or, as with Track Star, pencils used only for poking through a hole in a table) and ignore the multiplicity of ways that children demonstrate how they are already engaging in meaningful literacy practices.

While we cannot know what might have happened had Mrs. L had interfered with the Track Star-teacher’s chair intra-action during the guided reading group, we can recognize that such a directive would be part of a larger discourse of classroom management that dictates how and what children are to do with their bodies and with classroom materials; a striated discourse that is pervasive in early childhood classrooms across the country. Mrs. L recognized that there was potential in Track Star’s intra-actions with the teacher’s chair and encouraged him to remain there. In doing so, she engaged with the smooth space and allowed something uncertain to unfold. Hers was a practice of social justice (Barad, 2007: x) as she moved away from the determinate and representational paradigms of what it means to be a compliant pupil to something more emergent and, for Track Star, enlivening.

These uncertain and ephemeral intra-actions in the literacy workshop are akin to what Ellsworth (2005) described as “experience in the making” – in the moment when bodies and materials come into relationship in authentic and meaningful ways. These relationships are productive in that they create new ways of be(com)ing for both the human and more-than-human

in the classroom. It is in these unplanned, nomadic moments that children's very citizenry is recognized and their competence honored as such. It seems to me that these moments are pretty important; they recognize what children are already doing, how their lives already matter, and how they are already contributing to a diverse and creative society. Perhaps we could do better to look closely and listen carefully to these moments - these intra-actions between the human and more-than-human - so that we might recognize and allow ourselves to be affected by the multiple ways in which children demonstrate their competence.

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