

Becoming through ‘the break’: A post-human account of a child’s play

Journal of Early Childhood Literacy

2017, Vol. 17(3) 409–425

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DOI: 10.1177/1468798417712104

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Abstract

In this article, we think through six-year-old Mike’s play with Lego and with his father, using Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the break. For Deleuze and Guattari, the break is thought about in relation to impersonal flows of desire that are always everywhere at work and to the refrain, which we describe as materials and energies organized into repeating patterns. The movement of desiring flows in relation to refrains inevitably produces difference; breaks matter insofar as they are the introduction of difference that might make a difference, that produces movement and momentum, the felt life in things. In this article, we take two passes at thinking about breaks and their associated movements. In the first, we come close to the action of Mike’s play to think about materials, narratives and discourses, and about the ways, both predictable and wild, that they assemble and disassemble, hold together and fall apart. In the second pass, we think about the temporal organization of play and how players mess about in time and with time, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1990) notion of *chronos* and *aiôn*. After considering the break in Mike’s play, we conclude with reflections on the differences that would be possible were we to allow movement to be immanent to our ways of being as researchers and as teachers.

Keywords

Deleuze and Guattari, post-human, material, play, early literacy

Six-year-old Mike is sitting on the floor in his suburban living room. He is gathering Lego pieces to use in his play, attaching heads to bodies, looking

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them over, then lining them up. He is aware of the front small video camera his father – Kevin Leander – has set up to record the play as part of an ongoing research project with Gail Boldt about intra-action, affect and the use of objects. Kevin adjusts the camera, then sits on the floor next to Mike and says, ‘So let’s talk about the spaceship.’ Mike gamely answers Kevin’s questions about how and why he built various creations. As he talks, he is constantly assembling, disassembling and reassembling the pieces in rapid movements.

Mike begins to crawl around the carpet; his hand is sweeping the floor but it is his knee that makes contact. He picks up the new piece, considers it and then joins it to a body. Mike looks at his new creation and launches into an explanation of how some Legos have lots of details that ‘make them look better’. Mike holds his Lego creature up to the camera to provide the audience with an up-close image to go along with his description. Suddenly, he lunges the alien towards the lens and makes a growl. He smiles, turns to his dad and says:

Mike: Another thing I’m pretty good at is making impressions. I can’t do people impressions that much. I can really do animal impressions.

Kevin: Animal?

Mike: Uh-huh.

Kevin: Like what?

Mike: Like, uh, you want to hear my, I mean, I could do like strange impressions, like this kind (indicating the alien head).

Kevin: What’s he sound like?

Mike makes a sharp hissing sound.

Mike: I mean, I can do a cat impression.

Kevin: Cat?

Mike: Yeah.

Mike makes the same hissing noise he had just made for the alien.

This kind of material, these improvisational breaks in the path of the play that had existed until that moment, typify the session. Mike is performing the role of expert interviewee when his knee bumps a Lego, which transforms the creature potential, which is then narrated for the camera audience. Perhaps the camera reminded Mike of what any alien movie aficionado knows – that the creature must lunge and growl menacingly at the camera. Mike now knows that he is ‘good at impressions’, a self that he appears to have just realized. In reproducing the growl, it turns into a hiss and now Mike is a cat impersonator. The movement, the trajectory and the energy of Mike’s play are constantly

created, repeated, broken apart and reassembled in the emergent, object-filled field.

In this article, we think through Mike's play using Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) concept of the break. In order to address this concept, we first need to flesh out notions of desiring flows and of the refrain. For Deleuze and Guattari (1983), impersonal flows of desire are always everywhere. It is not desire in the way we usually think of it, as a living thing desiring a living or non-living object. Rather, it is better thought of as the affirmative, productive force of things. As Willatt (2008) argues, *flows of desire* might be thought of as movement, as continuously picking up materials (what Deleuze and Guattari called 'partial objects') and energy. This material may or may not involve humans. In this post-human turn, desire or movement or what is happening is not dependent upon or centred upon the human. A desiring flow may involve human and/or non-human objects, actions and reactions as materials in the movement.

Some materials and energies organize into repeating patterns. Guattari (1995) describes these as *refrains*. Among other things, refrains organize patterns of expectation, behaviour and beliefs that frame daily life, identity, work and relationships as well as systems, organizations, institutions and states. As humans, among the ways we may experience refrains are the ways we are organized in the face of the always emergent flows of time, space, material and movement. Refrains tie desire to objects (which include materials, but also ideas, beliefs, feelings, expectations and so on). However, regardless of these refrains, ultimately, the flow of desire can never be captured; it is objectless.

Considering this helps us to understand the concept of the break. Because flows of desire continue, newness is always an active potential and present: patterns are not merely repeated, but also reorganized in relations to ever-emergent objects. Thus, the break arises in the relationship of the desiring flow to the refrain or the patterns. The movement of desiring flow in relation to the refrain produces a break – a relationship described by difference. Difference is a way to describe how what has been moves in relation to what is now becoming. Breaks are the interruption of difference that might make a difference (Willatt, 2008).

Thinking about these through Lego, we might imagine the break as it relates to our desire to organize the wild potential of Lego pieces – as good an example as any of 'partial objects' – into useful or desired forms through our dependence upon Lego's ability to stay together. In considering the break, we might also then recall the overwhelming tendency of Lego to fall apart

exactly when we don't want it to and to hold together in dastardly ways exactly when we want it to come apart. It is not that Legos break, but that they break the flow of our intention and expectation, bringing the unexpected to the fore in productive ways. We might also consider how readily Lego can change direction, being transformed from one thing to another from moment to moment. The brilliance of Lego resides in the way it lends itself to movement and transformation, to keeping play lively and fresh, and to creating new potentials in and for the players. This potential of Lego depends on the refrain, the desiring flow and the break. Considered this way, intentionality or agency in breaking apart or holding together becomes obviously distributed across non-human and human actors, a gathering together of bodies, materials and enunciations, what Deleuze et al. (1987) would call an *assemblage*.

In this article, we take two passes at thinking about breaks. In the first, we come close to the action of Mike's play to think about materials, narratives and discourses and the ways, both predictable and wild, that they assemble and disassemble, hold together, fall apart and become something new that keeps the play moving. In the second pass, we think about the temporal organization of play and how players mess about in time and with time. Thinking about time through Deleuze's (1990) notion of *chronos* and *aïôn* is another way of considering breaks.

Although we talk about two kinds of breaks – breaks produced in material intra-actions and breaks in time – we want to be clear that we are not arguing that there are different kinds of breaks; we are not, for example, trying to create a 'break taxonomy'. The difference, created in the movement with the refrain, is for Mike and Kevin a felt reality, the stop and go, the quick and slow. The world falls apart and the world comes together. Looking at breaks helps us to see play carried forward through the ongoing creation of difference. We see how Mike and Kevin move with the refrain and the break, depend upon it to keep movement, energy and flow in the play. These human relationships are key for us in an analysis where we clearly want to give the human world its due, but we also want the non-human world of materials to be understood, in its movements and intensities, in relation to time, stories and other dimensions of emergent (play) assemblages.

Moving with the break in data analysis

Various traditions in social science research create parallels between the experiences of the participants with one another and the experiences of the researcher with the participants. For instance, a commonplace in interaction

analysis is to consider the problem of making meaning to be the participants' problem as well as the problem of the researcher. These relationships are not asserted to be equivalent, of course; rather, the parallelism is a kind of heuristic to position the researcher closer to the tasks and problems of the participants.

Similarly, our stance relative to the data is a way of aligning our analytic and affective work closer to how we theorize that of the participant. Accordingly, we work to stay close to a sense of time that is every bit as open to difference as it is to repetition. We resist the pull to analyse the interaction from outside of time (e.g. its eventual directions and outcomes) or from some set of external themes or discourses. We attempt a relation to the 'forward-leaning present', sensing what is immanent in the unfolding of the interaction and what might be opening up for the next moments. Time exceeds the technologies and social practices that measure it and regulate it; the 'breaking of the clock' may involve 'both a moment of paralysis, loss of orientation in social space, and the realisation of a new source of energy and materials for the assembly of a space of unheard of and revolutionary action' (Willatt, 2008: 5). Thus opened up, 'next moments' are pluralities; while some directions may have more powerful energies towards the familiar or the same – what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) called territorializations – other directions may involve unanticipated movements or even radical departures or deterritorializations.

Because we are interested in the new and the different and what they bring into being, we pay keen attention to any signs of newness or difference ripening or opening. These 'signs' are not merely semiotic; rather, we experience the data affectively – the push and pull of movements as they register on our sensing bodies. Further, we take our human bodies to be sensing at least some of the interaction in an unfolding relationship to other material and semiotic bodies (e.g. words, toys); we are not the centre of the interaction but in fact continually come into being in ever-changing formations, what Barad (2007) describes as intra-action. As analysts, we continually ask, 'What formations (assemblages) are present at this particular moment of intra-action?' Breaks in the intra-action, our focus in this paper, are in this instance felt responses that are responded to; breaks are decided movements away from the last movement, shifts away, newly felt energy. While we take difference to be continually produced in and through intra-action, breaks are differences that qualitatively alter the affective charge and/or interpreted world of the intra-action. While flow is water's movement unmarked, breaks are damming up the main channel, cutting new tributaries, driving water off a new edge into a fall, backwind, water spouts. Breaks are a clear reminder that knowing the

next moment with certainty, as analysts, is only an illusion produced by our need to contain and control.

Guattari (1995) argues that the refrains of institutional life most often work to harden the roles we occupy (teacher, student, administrator, policymaker, researcher, parent) and the tasks we carry out (research, curriculum, pedagogy, administration, learning). These hardened refrains, he argues, make us dead to the social communication of others and make it seem unnecessary, undesirable or unthought of to embrace the productive powers of difference. As literacy researchers, we are interested in Mike's play because it sets our thinking about literacy in motion; our thinking picks up material and energy. In doing so, we join literacy colleagues (Ehret et al., 2016; Kuby and Rucker Gutshall, 2016; Leander and Rowe, 2006; Lenters, 2016; Masny and Cole, 2009; Sherbine and Boldt, 2013; Thiel, 2015) working with post-human, Deleuzo-Guattarian and new feminist materialist theories that argue that stories in play are literacies. These literacies, when understood as constantly emerging intra-actions, undo our confidence in what we conceive literacy to be. We share with our colleagues a deep conviction that we must move beyond the conceptualization of literacy as discrete parts – people and texts – and towards an intra-active perspective (Barad, 2007) on how human and non-human are inseparable and produced in sets of relations. This movement requires, among other things, accounting for the ways that materials matter. We also share with these literacy researchers the desire to challenge the ways that research and practice have attempted to discipline how literacy is conceptualized and enacted in the curriculum. As we consider Mike's various becomings in the intra-actions of play, this 'movement-with' produces potential for what else literacy is and can become for us. In this, we join as literacy researchers who argue that to approach those things that can never be captured – literacy included – we have to be willing to travel in unbounded ways (Leander and Boldt, 2013).

Our goal, then, is to engage the break as a way of experimenting with what happens to our engagements with data when movement and difference are immanent. We find that this way of being engaged also involves appreciating the pull and power of the refrain without being seduced by the refrain as the only energy. Simultaneous to the effects of stillness and repetition on the bodies of children and on the bodies of research, felt departures, escapes to difference, are always, already present. Thinking about movement and difference in these ways is an approach to refrains and breaks that attempts to draw closer to a human sense of immanence, to the desire of moving again in life, moment by moment. Thinking through the break is a rejection of the blind

pessimism of removing oneself from the felt, experienced reality of life in time, life in body, and life with things. This is not life without politics or life with a different politics. Rather, the break is an invitation to life with a politics of difference.

Material matters

In what follows, we want to produce a telling of Mike's play that doesn't lose touch with the connections between humans and material things – things with a particular feeling to the touch, things that fall apart and are brought together in countless ways, things that can be moved and yet move us. In order to productively open our engagement with our video recording of Mike and Kevin's playing together and talking about Lego and other things, we produce an account in which agency and subjectivity are not limited to Mike or Kevin, their desires or embodiment or intentionality, but rather are dispersed across the changing, impersonal ecological field in which they are moving. As embodied humans, they are objects among other objects moving through an ever-changing environment. The Deleuzo–Guattarian body is post-human in that 'the body and its objects are prostheses of each other and matter itself is prosthetic. It is precisely the full expression of this aspect of the body that makes it posthuman' (Massumi, 2002: 127).

Mike moves away from answering Kevin's opening questions by assigning 'guys', the alien and machine pieces each will have in his arsenal, and explaining the capabilities of each. Mike makes it clear that the alien figures and ships assigned to his father have firepower superior to his own. He calls his guys the 'City People', who are, he says, 'really really weak', having only the ability to hit people with their suitcases. However, Mike explains that the secret power of the City People is that they are really agile. He demonstrates, picking up a City Person and flying it over his head. The City Person makes several quick, darting, agile jumps that allow it to dart around the ship that Kevin is holding.

Mike tells Kevin to pick from among his guys and put out his first piece. Kevin pulls out a small rocket ship with an alien pilot and flies, with sound effects, over Mike's guy. Mike counter-attacks not through agility but by throwing a tiny missile from the alien kit which hits Kevin's ship. Kevin provides a death cry, 'Arrrrrrr', and crashes his ship into the carpet. Mike picks up the crashed ship, removes the alien who is still seated in the cockpit, and throws him to the ground. The Lego alien, however, refuses to break apart and Mike's hands step in to dismember the alien, rescuing the story that has begun.

Mike begins this play with many partial objects assembled into a familiar refrain: Legos, carpet, room, time; his dad and he, both knowing how to play cooperatively, how to play with Lego, and how space battles works; both knowing that he is the kid and his dad loves him, so he will win. The materials, however, do not always cooperate to make this seamless. The tenacity of Lego adherence and the sponginess of the carpet get in the way and sometimes no pieces break off. Damage in the first round requires Kevin to crash the ship into the floor and then, although the crash noise suggested the alien was destroyed, Mike emphasizes his victory by throwing the alien to the ground. Both ignore that Mike had to open the cockpit and wrench the alien out before his ejection from the cockpit occurred. Mike and Kevin had to make the damage by pulling off pieces to represent damage. Material either holding together or breaking apart can work to create a break in the emergence of play, creating difference and a new movement of energy. The material, if not entirely having its way, certainly had its say.

In the second battle, Mike once again launches the tiny pre-fab missiles at Kevin's ship, but they are simply too small in reality – despite what they do in fantasy – to cause any pieces to come loose and this time, Kevin doesn't volunteer to enact any damage. Mike then tries a different tactic:

Mike: My favourite people are actually the people that, that aren't, that don't have that much firepower.

Kevin: Really? How come?

Mike: Because, because the small people always win, they're so easy, they're really flexible.

Kevin: They're so agile?

Mike: Um-hm...

Mike improvises in response to Kevin's failure to follow the previous pattern, in which he hit Kevin's ship with a tiny missile and Kevin conceded his loss by crashing his ship. Now there is a break, and suddenly there are no guarantees, so Mike moves to another storyline. As he explains once again the efficacy of agility, Mike works to attach a single guy to the top of Kevin's biggest ship, apparently hoping to prompt a shared fantasy that his guy will pry the hatch off and destroy the alien pilot. It is a move that Kevin should recognize, perhaps the scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) – another Lego themed kit – in which the intrepid but bookish Indiana Jones, although hopelessly outmatched by an enormous, burly Nazi battling in and around an aeroplane cockpit hatch, nevertheless wins. Mike has earlier explained to Kevin that even

when it seems like they can't possibly win, the Good Guys always do. It goes without saying that Mike is the Good Guy: they both seem to acknowledge the David and Goliath reality that the Little Guy – both Mike's size relative to his dad and the guys he's chosen – is the Good Guy.

Regardless, Kevin ignores the appeal to a winning narrative, because again he registers no damage and instead offers two countermoves to destroy Mike's guy who is perched on his cockpit.

Kevin: So what, he jumped on here? But I'm going to start this guy spinning around. (Kevin spins the cockpit hatch with sound effects. Mike watches.)

Mike had been unable to find a way to attach his guy securely as he was talking. Instead, he is holding the alien onto the cockpit with his hand and so is able to make the guy dart agilely away from and then at the ship as the cockpit spins. Still, he is unable to find a way to re-attack the ship without sending his guy flying. Kevin stops spinning now and instead grabs the hinged cockpit hatch, opening and closing it and saying:

Kevin: But you said I could capture people in here, right?

Kevin makes sucking noises, referring to one of Mike's earlier, improvised rules that Kevin's ship had to consume his alien before it could be considered dead. Kevin signals that his cockpit hatch has indeed become a mouth. Mike counters that yes, he did say that, but he now announces a new rule to assert that Kevin isn't doing it the right way.

Mike: Uh huh, but you have to get an alien to take it off and put the person in there.

Kevin (reaching for one of his alien guys): Let's see, I could do this guy.

Mike helps Kevin's guy remove the cockpit hatch.

Mike: Now you have to capture me first.

The materiality of the play mattered, shaping, suggesting, but never determining the unfolding events. Breaks arose. Throughout the play, texts in the form of narration or storylines were a critical part of the material, forming both recognized refrains that allowed for shared social aspects that facilitated the play but that also broke apart in the face of the agencies of other materials. The Lego, the carpet, the room, the camera, previous experiences with Lego play, cultural references to known storylines from movies and TV and books, norms

of parent–child interactions, the histories and hopes of father and son, all came into play as refrains that allowed for the play, that brought excitement, or they introduced conditions in which breaks arose that threatened to bring the play to a halt if they did not give rise to a new direction and new energies. The Lego broke or refused and stories were improvised, or the players broke the materials to fit stories, all in service of keeping the play flowing.

The breaking of time

In the previous play scenarios, it is not simply that materials break and reform. Time is also worked in a way that moves beyond any singular expression of our experience of time. Mike cannot attach his man to the spaceship; a tiny missile does not explode the incoming ship; the destruction of the ship does not destroy the alien. In order for the play to continue in a satisfactory way, the players must suspend the narrative so far, the narrative existing in chronologically unfolding time, and improvise with time to make something more satisfactory happen. Mike and Kevin's narrative interventions in the trajectory of the play happen in a different sense of time than chronological story-time; their large bodies work out a forecast narrative in the silent backstage of the material matters – refusing Lego and spongy carpet.

In order to think about time 'breaking', moving from one kind to another, it is helpful to consider Deleuze's (1990) discussion of time in *The Logic of Sense*. Deleuze argues against the common understanding of time as past, present and future, preferring an understanding of time as *chronos* and *aiôn*. To offer an overly simplistic explanation of these, we might say that Deleuze understood *chronos* as the now...now...now...now-ness of time. It is time as material, as linear movement. *Aiôn*, on the other hand, is time as potentiality, the sense in which time cannot be grasped because it is always simultaneously moving into the past and the future. Tynan (2016: 102) argues that 'aiôn...is inscribed in a different time than its actualization in matter'.

Deleuze understands semiotic and narrative practices or refrains as powerful organizing or territorializing representations of *chronos*, but they are not the whole story. Their account challenges analyses that posit humans as primarily or exclusively organized through narrative or meaning in *chronos* and by the refrain. *Aiôn* breaks into *chronos*; time is bent, folded, torn and reassembled. As Massumi (2002: 26) describes it, our understanding of humans and events are '...incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, whether that level is defined linguistically, logically,

narratologically, ideologically, or all of these combined in the Symbolic'. Deleuze and Guattari offer us an understanding of the human that expands this picture, such that we can begin to recognize that Mike's play does not begin with pre-existing narratives and subject positions, and then simply articulate these, moving through time in a linear fashion. As we will argue in our analysis below, the play involves improvisational experimentation that breaks up the unfolding of *chronos*, drawing on *aiôn* as virtuality or potentiality that transforms both the past and the future, which in turn move with all that might happen in the unfolding of events.

As the play continues, Kevin's biggest ship, the one that crashed after not being destroyed by the tiny missile, is once again flying and advancing on Mike's guy. Mike's doom seems inevitable. Through the improvised action, Kevin's big ship developed the capacity to act outside of *chronos*, to be a ship that is not destroyed, even though the storyline – the story so-far – said it was destroyed. This resistance is also achieved by the blocks themselves that help hold together the assemblage of Father–ship–attack–Mike's guy rather than blowing or falling apart as in the narrative. The big ship is still the big ship; it is material in the attack scene, joined by the embodied, ever-attacking father. Human bodies produce desire with other, non-human bodies in the assemblage, serving as prosthetics for one another. Bodies resist or attract in these relations in the process of production. If we consider Bennett's (2009) argument about the agency of things, we can consider that the ship says, 'I am still big and fierce and ready to attack', recruiting Kevin's prosthetic hand to dive it into Mike's lone 'guy'.

As we have written elsewhere (Leander and Boldt, 2013), difference in Deleuzoguattarian thought is produced through movement and cannot be interpreted outside the event, after or ahead of it, *a priori*. Differences include but are not limited to differences of the assemblage (what is brought into relation) and differences of energy (ebbs and flows, speed changes, shifts in intensity). Many possibilities are available and ripe for introducing difference in this moment: the aliens could slow down the action, begging for attention or for mercy; the missiles could intensify the scene, readying themselves for launch and the possibility of claiming their earlier success; or Mike could board the attacking ship and somehow wrest control. Kevin could veer off, and only menace with the ship, could speed up the attack to produce new energy, or imagine the lone guy to be mysteriously super-strong and decide to retreat.

In the midst of all these and hundreds of other possibilities, Mike responds thusly: he lays his endangered guy behind him out of the play area, and in

a loud and authoritative voice, he declares 'Change back', as he reaches for his biggest weapon, his crane.

Here is a break in the scene: the scene is no longer father–ship–attacking–Mike–guy but a scene of 'change back'. The movement 'back' is discursively constructed – time is used as a story resource here to suggest that the 'guy' was once a crane, and that the evolution is somehow reversing. The idea of 'crane' is outside of the assemblage of father–ship–attacking–Mike–guy, but this assemblage is broken apart and reassembled as father–ship–attacking–Mike–crane, with the change in the assemblage made all the clearer by Mike removing the guy from the field of play.

The crane calls out from the sideline: 'I am big and fierce like the ship, I am increased intensity, I am adversary, I am new.' Like the ship with the eating–cockpit–mouth, the crane begins to take on a monster-like aspect, its arm outstretched in the field of relations to the ship. Mike then steps back from the middle of the action to a plane of rules, to describe after the fact the new situation that gives the crane's movement a rule-governed legitimacy. He invents post hoc a new rule as if it always existed. He attempts to pull this sudden improvisation into the refrain as if it has always been there, i.e. somehow disclaiming the endless possibilities for game moves so as to not admit his own opportunism in the service of fending off defeat.

Mike: You can change to who you want.

Kevin: Change to who I want?

Mike: Um-hm.

Kevin: I don't get it.

Mike: Like, if, if you, if someone has more firepower, and you change your mind, you can change to someone else.

Kevin: I can change my guy into somebody else?

Mike: No, you can get another thing. You can change to . . . You can get another person. Uh, like let's say you have this guy, but you want someone bigger, you cannot use that guy, just use one and put that guy back in your pile.

Kevin: Okay. I guess I understand that. That's a little complicated. So are you changing back?

Mike: Yeah, I change into this (holding his crane which, while he is talking, he has attached to a large base.)

Mike's talk here shifts away from the unfolding present – *chronos* – and first person perspective to a discussion of an unnamed 'you' and form of temporality that is outside the moment – generalized statements about what 'you' can

do. Kevin is confused by this shift and use of 'you', thinking that in the immediate unfolding of events this talk involves what he can do, when in the unfolding context it is clear that Mike is matching the rule, in post hoc fashion, to the action he has already taken. Along with the rule that one can 'change back', Mike creates the condition of when this might be: 'when someone has more firepower'. Yet another part of the rule involves what one should do with the replaced 'guy' because one wants something bigger: 'You put that guy back in your pile'.

With rule talk, Mike differentiates the plane of interaction into two time-spaces. There is the space-time of the unpredictable, unfolding fight, and the untimeliness of time moving in all directions, the possibility that 'change back' could always have happened, of change back as immanent (aiôn). Simultaneously, there is the space-time of 'settled', additive rules, rules that appear to exist outside of the interaction, that hide their own becoming, and that pose a claim to govern both the narrative of what happened before and the possibility of what comes after (chronos). As Willatt (2008: 10) argues

... time is 'out of joint' when it is at its most productive... In this sense the breaking of a clock literally challenges us in a social situation not because it shows that time does not exist but that it exceeds the technical reliability and social regulation of working technical-machines and social-machines.

Mike's creation of two simultaneous planes creates the potential for tensions and movements between a rule assemblage of enunciations and a game assemblage of playing bodies. Such friction in uses of time, Willat says, 'throws [the future] open by creating a space of action' (p. 12).

Even as the rule assemblage is being produced, the 'bigness' of the fighting crane is also being produced. The crane desires a base to become bigger in the fight, and Mike desires bigness as well. Then the crane, as cranes will do, recruits an object to hang on its cable at the end – a large block of Legos that now joins the assemblage:

Kevin: Whoa. So now I'm fighting that?

Mike: Um-hm.

Kevin: Whoa. That looks pretty scary.

Mike: But I can also put something on the end of it to hit somebody with.

Kevin: On the end of the crane?

Mike: Yeah. (He attaches a block he has built from several Legos.)

Kevin: Uh-oh. I'm in trouble.

Here, the interaction is beginning to transition away from rules alone and becomes more affectively charged – it is no longer merely about what is possible to do – to change – but how this change potentially affects father–ship–watching–crane–grow. After the response ‘That looks pretty scary’, the crane, having recruited a base and now recruiting a big, swinging payload to ‘hit someone with’, produces the intensity, in cooperation with the father–ship, of ‘Uh-oh. I’m in trouble.’

The present trouble can be seen, post hoc, as a reversal from where this part of the play started – Mike’s guy was in trouble from the ship, and now Kevin’s ship is in trouble from the crane. But such a reading overrides what has been produced across the assembled relations, their differences and their variations during the course of play. The play is not being ‘acted out’ along a narrative curve, but instead felt and acted into through emergent and evolving relations. Possibilities in the play are kept open not merely by the desire of individual actors to keep play moving, but by the interplay of undifferentiated desire – as energy – across humans and non-humans, as they resonate, resist, intensify, hold stable, reconstitute and move one another.

Mike turns to narrative throughout this play, but he never narrates a coherent story, nor does he create a ‘guy’ who has a meaningful or coherent story, other than the implied ‘guy who somehow has to win’. We might say that the agility of Mike’s guy – his capacity to adapt and change, to become something new while still in relation to the old – is readily matched to Mike’s own agility. Yet the agility does not belong to Mike or to his guy. It belongs to the desiring flow, to the breaks, and to the shifting, productive and bountiful nature of the field of which he is a part. Mike cannot invent himself but he can be invented in his participation in the unfolding moments of the assemblage with his article desiring-Mike loving-child becoming-father.

Literacy-becoming: A (non-)refrain

How does one end a time of play? Usually, movement slows down; the play runs its course, runs out of steam. It would be unusual (and perhaps frightening) to observe young children breaking from the chronos of their play to an aion sense of time in which they discussed culminating meanings (‘Now, see, Jill, I have come to understand the dinosaur as representing . . .’). With some similar tension, we are confronted with the need to end this analysis without such an ending being completely discordant and contradictory with its prior movements. How to close without bringing closure, taking territory, forcing our words into the repetitious refrain of the academic page? As a response to

this dilemma – a dilemma of trying to think research and teaching as ‘in time’ rather than out of time – we offer the following discussion, reflective of our wish to create ongoing movement and difference.

What if, we wonder, movement were allowed to be immanent to our ways of analysis as researchers and our ways of being as teachers? What if we ‘thought movement’ and ‘lived movement’ rather than lifted ourselves to some presumed higher ground from which to see and stabilize? If movement is allowed to be immanent, there is a relationship of constant energy between, on the one hand, the deterritorializing potential of fluidity, emergence and unpredictability, and on the other, a fixation on narrativizing or territorializing experience and thereby establishing and maintaining refrains (Guattari, 1995).

To think movement in our analysis of Mike’s play, we have argued, is to attend differently to what moves. In thinking as researchers about the education of young children, we can only be moved by or experience the movement of children’s play if we enter into the whole angelic host of things that children move with. As literacy researchers, we want to understand how the possibilities for the emergence of stories in play are interdependent with the possibilities for the moving emergence of material things and human bodies as they – the bodies and the materials – work their way ‘in’ and ‘out’ of time. Our focus on the break in children’s play, rather than a classroom literacy event, is strategic and political. We understand that moments of putting together or constructing (things, time, stories) live in dynamic relation to moments of breaking. The movement that enlivened Mike’s play created refrains that simultaneously carried the play forward and threatened to shut it down. The hardened refrains of the systems in which early childhood literacy education is often carried out are not merely external or distant to play; not merely ‘out there’ in the policy and offices of administrators while children and teachers struggle ‘in here’. Humans and non-humans, together, hold these refrains. Because we share a concern for both research and early childhood pedagogy, about the ways that refrains hide their ontology, we look to breaks from the known, the settled and the sedimented to provide breaks across the assembled bodies of things, time and stories. We look to those breaks to keep things in movement in ways that give testimony to the life in things. And we see these broken openings – this promise of possibility for difference – as material and empirical commitments to new potentials.

Berardi (2008: 132) argues that for Guattari

It is a question . . . of constructing a new perspective, of opening a gap in the blindness of common vision, precisely of constructing bridges across the abyss. And it is a question of walking across these bridges accompanied by whoever shares the intensity that allowed it to be constructed.

Movements that produce difference, movements involving bodies of all kinds (Lego, stories, a child) also produce variations – intensity that is produced in relation to difference. It is differences in intensity – pressure, variations in speed, attention, affect, potential – that allow us to make a distinction between two things. The moments of putting together or constructing things – what we might call curriculum and pedagogy – exist in relation to breaks. The distinction between the two things points to a third thing, which is difference itself, which is not produced by the two things but is the condition that allows for comparison and distinction (Tynan, 2016). Difference that is allowed to matter is characterized by movement between structure and novelty, territorialization and breaks. Such movement is not limited to the kinds of out-of-school play we see with Mike. It occurs all the time in early classrooms, where children produce movement with and away from the official life of the classroom.

Rather than moving ‘out’ or ‘above’ this piece, as a last reflection we want to return again to the idea of ‘moving with’ as a method for research and teaching, as a method by which the break becomes possible. Our analysis of Mike’s play offers a different type of engagement in children’s worlds in which enlivening, emergent potential is foregrounded and difference matters. As we have sketched out this engagement, it is not a new or different ‘position’ from which to observe – a new location for analysis, or form of understanding children’s play or their literacies. Rather, engagement is a form of mobility, moving with. We present a movement away from the ‘body of research’ or the ‘body of practice’ to the contact zone of bodies, objects and narratives performing desire and possibility, along with children, as these unfold within dynamic assemblages.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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