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## **What (else) can a kiss do?: theorising the power plays in young children's sexual cultures**

**Holford, N., Renold, E. and Huuki, T.**

*ABSTRACT This paper draws on school-based ethnographic research in two elementary schools (South Wales, UK and north Finland) to explore the 'ordinary affects' (Stewart 2009) of gendered/sexual power in young children's (age 5-6) negotiation of their own and others' bodies in playground and classroom spaces. We apply queer and feminist appropriations of Deleuze and Guattari's key concepts of 'assemblage', 'becomings' and 'territorialisations', not to pin down what a kiss is, but to explore the kiss as always more than itself, and thus what (else) a kiss can do. To explore the affective journey of the kiss as an always-relational social-material event, we sketch a range of kissing assemblages across four vignettes – 'the kissing hut', 'the classroom kiss', 'the kissing line' and 'the dinosaur kiss' – mapping the enabling/restriction of a range of gendered and sexual becomings. Each vignette foregrounds the complex, contradictory nature of children's gendered and sexual cultures which we argue are vital to map in a socio-political terrain where discourses of denial, silence and (over)protection dominate accounts of how young children are doing, being and becoming 'sexual'.*

### **Introduction**

'Task forces are being sent into primary schools to tackle the rise of inappropriate sexual behaviour in young pupils. Teachers are growing increasingly concerned that children as young as seven are interacting in a 'sexualised' manner with each other, with old-fashioned games such as kiss and chase no longer being deemed innocent enough not to set alarm bells ringing.' (Nick Britten, Daily Telegraph, 18 July 2006).

*Matilda:*<sup>i</sup> *[Those boys] annoy me and Isabel all the time... they always get us and they try to kiss us and, and, they're just trying to chase us and get a kiss and then they annoy us [...]*

*ER: Do you like it?*

*Matilda: It's OK, 'cause sometimes they chase us really funny, sometimes they don't.*

*ER: So sometimes you like it?*

*Matilda: Yep.*

*ER: And sometimes you don't.*

*Matilda: Yep.*

*ER: And do you chase them? Kiss chase them?*

*Matilda: Um, yeah, yeah. Sometimes we scare them.*

*ER: Do you? What do you do?*

*Matilda: Well, we just use superpower <Matilda laughs and shows off her superpower, stretching out her arms>*

These extracts testify, in very different ways, to the intense affective power of the kiss within children's relationship cultures. The first, from a UK broadsheet newspaper, incites enduring western anxieties over the 'sexualisation' of children. It presents a binary choice: either kiss chase is disturbing evidence of a new, hyper-sexualized, dangerous landscape of childhood; or an age-old, harmless, 'innocent' tradition. As such, it illustrates the dichotomous representations of sexuality in childhood: violent incursion into the supposedly asexual, protected space of childhood, or trivialized, playful, inconsequential game. Within young children's peer cultures, as viewed by adults, the kiss is overcoded, laden with interpretations that may simultaneously imbue it with meaning and strip it of power.

The second comes from a conversation between one of the authors and two five-year-old girls in South Wales (UK) during the fieldwork of an ethnographic exploration of children's relationship cultures. It speaks to the insufficiency of either narrative to represent the complexities, ambiguities and ambivalences of the kiss, and sexuality more widely, as experienced by young children. The 'old-fashioned' game of kiss chase is both pleasurable and painful. It is inescapable; as they say elsewhere in the conversation, teachers' reprimands

do little to stop the boys chasing them. Sometimes a burden, sometimes exciting, the flows of power shift and change. Sometimes harassed by the chase, at other times the girls mobilize the kiss as threat, taking up narratives of superpower, enabling them to strike fear into the boys. Their ambivalent relations to the game suggest the impossibility of pinning down any singular meaning to the kiss – as always-sexual or always-asexual, always-harassment or always-harmless.

In the modern cultural imaginary, childhood is a space incompatible with sexuality. To be a child is to be ‘naturally’ innocent, unknowing of sexuality – an assumption and discourse that has been widely critiqued (Lloyd and Duveen 1992; Higonnet 1998, Epstein and Johnson 1998; Walkerdine 1997, 1998, 2000, Renold 2005, Blaise 2005, 2010b; 2013b, Hawkes and Egan 2010, Egan 2013; Faulkner 2010; Robinson 2012, Taylor 2010, Bruhm and Hurley 2004). Research into young children’s peer cultures has shown them to be deeply engaged in constructing their own sexualities and/through regulating those of others, engaged in ‘doing’ sexuality as they are ‘doing’ gender (e.g. MacNaughton 2000, Davies 2003, Blaise 2005). Heterosexualized discourses of love, marriage and family are powerful in children’s early lives. Heteronormativity shapes how children negotiate their gendered subjectivities (see, for instance, the ‘fashion girls’ in Mindy Blaise’s (2005) research). As Paul Connolly’s (1998) research indicates, games of kiss chase form spaces where the shifting flows of gendered and racialized power within peer cultures (Corsaro 2003) play out. Young children know and explore sexuality with each other, but – aware of adults’ need for childhood innocence – often keep this secret, in what Best (1983) calls the hidden ‘third curriculum’. In young boyfriend/girlfriend cultures (Renold and Mellor 2013, Blaise 2005, Connolly 1998), ‘boy-girl romances [are] read as evidence for the mature sexualities that await them’ (Bruhm and Hurley 2004: ix). Moreover, gendered and sexual behaviours that challenge or subvert the age-appropriate hetero-order of things such as the queering of gender/sexual norms or

coercive practices of sexual harassment can be normalized, thus rendered invisible, through developmental discourses of experimentation and play (Blaise 2010a).

We take inspiration from Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2009) figuration of the always already 'queer child' and her evocation of 'growing sideways' to disrupt assumed (hetero)normative developmental linearities. While empirical research which foregrounds children's queerness is rare, the ways in which configurations of gender-sex-sexuality work on, in and across bodies and things (e.g. cultural objects, playground games) are particularly heightened in the early years, as are the ways in which gender and sexuality appear as both fixed *and* fluid (Renold and Mellor 2013, Blaise 2010a, 2013b). Indeed, a central aim of our relationship cultures project was to explore post-constructionist theories and methodologies (see Lykke 2011, Lenz-Taguchi 2012, Taylor et al. 2012) which assisted us in analyzing the micro-socialities of young children's dynamic intra-action (Barad 2007) with gender and sexual norms in the early years of compulsory schooling. Like others researching with young children, we wanted to think critically about the making of subjectivity inside institutional social spaces, recognizing yet going beyond the regulatory practices of developmentalism (Olsson 2009; Pacini-Ketchabaw 2010, Blaise 2010a, Jones and Duncan forthcoming) where universalized and highly classed, raced, gendered, sexualized and age-appropriate notions of 'growing up naturally' abound (Burman 2008, Blaise 2013a and 2013b).

A central aim of our paper is thus to 'think sideways', challenging the pull to fix, unify and totalize young children's gender-sexual experiences through either/or binaries (e.g. straight/queer, masculine/feminine, sexual/innocent). To do so, we apply queer and feminist appropriations of Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis and key concepts of 'assemblage', 'becomings' and 'territorializations', not to better determine and pin down *what a kiss is*, but rather to explore *what (else) a kiss can do* within young children's school-based peer cultures.

After setting out our theoretical and methodological framework, we draw upon four vignettes, each mapping map a range of kissing assemblages. We show how a kiss can excite, transform, impose, invade, and repel in different ways as it travels onto and across different bodies, things and places. Our analysis illustrates how ‘the kiss’, as an affective material-social event, is entangled in local and culturally specific practices which open up and close down a range of gendered and sexual becomings. Our conclusion suggests that recognition of the complex, contradictory and ‘schizo’ nature of children’s own sexual cultures is long overdue, and gestures towards ways in which our approach can inform future research and praxis in the emerging scholarship on young gender-sex-sexualities.

### **The ‘kiss’ as an affective material event: assemblages, becomings and territorializations**

‘We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body’

(Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 284)

In this paper it is the ‘exchanges’, ‘actions’ and ‘passions’ of the kiss as it travels across other bodies and things that we set out to explore, precisely because it gets at the fixity and flux of how gender and sexuality operate in young children’s relationship cultures. We draw upon new onto-epistemologies of the subject (Barad 2007), and specifically upon feminist and queer appropriations of Deleuze and Guattari’s theorization of the sexed/sexual body (Grosz 1994, Colebrook 2010, Nigianni and Storr 2010). This scholarship sees bodies not as deterministically written by culture or hard-wired by biology, but as unpredictably entangled in living, moving and intra-acting social-semiotic-material assemblages (Barad 2007, see also

Ivinson and Renold forthcoming 2013a, 2013b). While movement and spontaneity are dominant discourses in early years pedagogy (see Olsson 2009), rarely have the fractal movement and unending possibilities of gender and sexuality been empirically explored in the early years (for exceptions, see Hickey-Moody and Rasmussen 2009, Driscoll, Garland and Hickey-Moody 2011; Blaise 2010a, 2010b, 2013b, Renold and Mellor 2013).

Deleuze and Guattari focus not on what a body 'is' (e.g. active/passive, healthy/unhealthy, straight/gay), but what (else) a body can 'do' and 'become' (Fox 2012). They are keen to stress the active, experimenting, creative and desiring body, or what they call 'desiring machines'. For us, this focus is crucial, because the child body operates inside a highly stratified and organized future socius, where queering gender/sexual norms must be grown out of (Bruhm and Hurley 2004). Such imagined future trajectories operate to 'reduce the complexity and chaos of an ever-changing multiplicity of bodily flux to discrete categories of meaning and constancy' (Malins 1994: 86). But no body is fully stratified. There are cracks, gaps, and ruptures everywhere in the strata. These bodies are alive, creative and full of potential revolutionary becomings (that is, ways of being otherwise) – quite a radical and risky position to take up in the current socio-political climate of 'sexualisation' panics (Egan 2013; Blaise 2013b, Taylor 2010, Renold et al. 2012) and the ever shrinking performative possibilities of doing sexuality in childhood (Bond Stockton 2009: 37).

While it is important to map the molar lines that criss-cross to sediment and bind the subject - we also 'need to consider the open possibilities enacted within a milieu of connecting body parts... creating and allowing for lines of desire that connect elsewhere and in other ways' (Probyn, 1996: 55). This is a 'schizoanalytic' cartography focused on its capability of 'bringing into beings new representations' (Guattari 2009: 206) – a mapping that can explore the co-ordinates within which such 'becomings' are possible and sustainable. Of significance here is recognising that becomings are seen not as residing inside the individual body. They

are the effects of bodily relations or linkages, comprised from a range of material or non-material domains (ideas, things, humans, nature) – which Deleuze and Guattari define as ‘assemblages’. Assemblages are embedded within (not outside) the ‘strata’ and created from partial elements that pull in many directions at once, leaving heterogeneous residues that create possible becomings (Guattari 2006: 59). They are dynamic, always in movement, made rather than found; they can be big (e.g. sexual assemblage of pornography-capitalism-child) or small (e.g. sexual assemblage of girl-lips-dinosaur). For us, becomings and assemblages are productive concepts because they push us to theorize gender and sexual subjectivity as the effect of constant processes of differentiation and proliferation.

In summary, assemblages provide the capacity for bodies as ‘desiring machines’ to deterritorialize and reterritorialize molar *and* molecular lines of gender and sexual becomings (see also Renold and Ringrose 2008, 2011, Ringrose 2011). We take up the kiss as an affective material event because it operates precisely at the relational space between bodies and between bodies and things. In the section that follows we outline the productive capacity of ethnography to capture bodies in moving affective assemblages.

### **Mapping ‘what can be’: researching young children’s relationship cultures**

In her book, *Ordinary Affects*, Kate Stewart evocatively explores the predictable and unpredictable affective flows that circulate in US everyday life. She illustrates the processual multiplicities of everyday ‘ways of relating’, of dynamic assemblages creating circuits of unanticipated connections, relays and ‘becomings’. In dialogue with recent methodological writings on how to be open to, and open up, sometimes reductive representations on ‘what is’, we focus on the multiple realities of ‘what can be’ in our research while, all the time,



attending to the flows of power thwarting and blocking possible gender/sexual becomings (see Coleman and Ringrose 2013).

The data discussed in this paper were generated from an ethnographic project investigating gendered conflict within young children's local relationship cultures. Fieldwork took place in two schools, one in urban South Wales (UK) and one in a semi-rural city in north Finland using ethnographic and participatory methodologies to explore how children are 'doing' gender in early years' schools, mapping the affective flows of power within their day-to-day peer cultures. Our methodology sought to make visible the 'awkward, messy, unequal, unstable, surprising and creative qualities of encounters and interconnection across difference' (Stewart 2007: 128; see also Olsson 2009, Jones et al. 2010, MacLure et al. 2010, Ringrose and Renold 2013). In both schools, fieldwork involved observations and ethnographic conversations in key spaces around the school, and generated detailed fieldnotes, audio and video recordings, and photographs (taken by both researchers and children).

The South Wales school accepted an ethnically diverse demographic of children living in varying socio-economic circumstances, and was selected using our existing networks. The school has approximately 450 pupils and is situated close to the centre of a large city. There is a strong official ethos of equality and diversity; the school puts emphasis on 'respect' and 'fairness' between pupils and also between staff and pupils, and on positive encouragement. The study focussed on one Year One class of 31 pupils aged 5- 6 (15 girls and 16 boys) over three months, during which the primary researcher spent between two-four days in class each week. In classroom and playgrounds, where Y1 shared playtime with the Reception class (4-5) and Y2 (6-7), a large number of children shared a small amount of space. Children's bodies

often came into physical contact out of necessity, and touch was routine and unremarkable for boys and girls.

Most children were willing to play with both boys and girls during ‘free play’ in class. In the playground, while some games were strongly gendered (like football, considered a boys’ game) many children participated in mixed-gender games of chase and/or fantasy play. There was no strong boyfriend/girlfriend culture in the year group; boys and girls could interact as friends without that relationship being necessarily heterosexualized. Certain groups of boys, however, rarely played with girls and expressed anti-girl sentiments (we meet one of these boys below). While, of course, some children were more ‘popular’ than others – more sought after to play with and/or able to move more freely between a wider range of companions – there was no clearly defined status hierarchy among boys or girls.

The Finland fieldwork was carried out in one school, Aurora, located in a new, mostly white ‘middle class’ suburban residential area in a large North Finnish city. At the start of this project, the school was new, just beginning to admit students. The school, comprising pre-school, primary school and secondary school, has 800 pupils on roll. It envisions itself as a school where learning is integrated with technology, promoting values such as children’s well-being, communality, equity, creativity, joy and a safe learning and growing environment. The study focused on one preschool class of 23 pupils aged 5-6 (10 girls and 13 boys) over four months, during which one researcher and one research assistant spent between two-four days in the class each week.

Pupils in Aurora had much more space available to them than Ashwell pupils. The class had use of two classrooms, both similar in size to the Ashwell classroom, and corridors and another small room were also used for learning and playing. Peer status hierarchies were evident from the beginning of the school year, and it was easy to see which pupils were ‘high

status' and which 'low status'. There were many conflicts each day among boys and girls, and sometimes between boys and girls. There was no strong boyfriend/girlfriend culture in the group, and, many girls reported being scared of the boys. Games were strongly gendered, and very few of the children participated in mixed-gender play.

Through our data, the kiss emerged at many points and carried multiplicitous affects: for instance, a boy asks another boy politely if he can kiss him; a girl pushes a boy towards a researcher, laughing and urging him to kiss her; a girl smiles, saying a boy kisses her and wants to marry her when she grows up; two girls argue over who can kiss Jesus after they're married; a group of girls chase and try to kiss a resistant boy; the class shouts 'Eww!' at kisses on screen during a storytelling session. The four vignettes we present below were carefully selected for their analytic potential, letting us map the heterogeneous flow of the kiss. Each explores how the kiss in specific localized assemblages travels onto and across girl and boy bodies and 'things' in ways that 'sediment and rupture contextually and culturally contingent institutional 'heterosexual hegemonies' (Butler 1993). This isn't a mapping of subject-norm human relations – that is, how children are performing 'queer' or 'straight' – or how they conform, or not, to a future heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham 1994). Rather, we explore 'the assemblages a child can mount' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:286) which open up and shut down gender and sexual becomings.

### *The kissing hut*

The first episode, from Aurora, follows the kiss as it moves through changing spaces and encounters. The kiss forms the centre of a ritualized playground game, where established rules and expectations shape encounters. Similar games also took place at Ashwell, although, as we explore below, the physical space of the playgrounds – as well as the configuration of the gendered relationship cultures – enabled different forms of social practice.

*It is a winter day. Children are out in the schoolyard, playing kiss chase, which certain children play regularly. Two boys, Aaron and Petteri, chase seven girls, who linger near them. When a girl gets caught, she is taken to a small tower at the top of a hill, which the children call the 'kissing hut'. Aaron stays further away from the tower and is not involved in the kissing itself. The girls crowd together inside the tower, and as they wait for more girls to be brought, they push Petteri around, shoving him from both sides. Petteri never pushes back. Sometimes he falls to the floor, and lies there for a while; the girls don't try and touch him at this point. Sometimes they push Petteri away from the tower; he dramatically rolls down the hill towards the playground, shouting 'Help!', while the girls wait for him to come back. When enough girls are in the tower, they stand around the edge of the tower in a small semicircle. Petteri stands near the entrance of the tower, chanting a nursery rhyme while pointing at each girl in turn. The girl who falls at the end of the rhyme is chosen by Petteri to be kissed. One or two others then take hold of the girl, while one or two take hold of Petteri. Petteri and the girl kiss – their lips are pressed together for a long time. The other children hold them still by their heads and/or bodies. The girls sometimes try and resist during the kiss, but Petteri doesn't.*

*Petteri often asks the girls' opinions on the game; they negotiate and make decisions together. The children talk during the game about kissing, marriage and love. At one point, Annika and Anna ask Petteri, 'Who do you like most?' At this point the children are located down in the playground. Petteri does not give the answer there. Instead, he climbs up to the tower (Annika and Anna follow him) where all the other girls are located. Without any further words, the children in the hut immediately move into a formation similar to that used when they are kissing. Petteri points at each girl, and names each girl in order, omitting only Anna's name.*

*After a while, one of the girls suggests changing the game and playing 'home', and this is agreed upon. Girls lie down in the snow in a circle of around 3-4 metres' diameter. Petteri goes around the circle, stopping by each girl, kissing each one on the lips as he bestows on her a role in the game (for instance, mother, baby, big sister). Many of the girls refuse the roles they are given, accepting only young, female, adult roles. Aaron (who has been playing elsewhere) comes back to the group, and lies down in the snow among the girls. Petteri carries on around the circle, kissing the girls. When he reaches Aaron, he says Aaron will have the role of grandpa, but as he is about to kiss Aaron he hesitates, and stops suddenly. Instead, he touches him on the stomach, bestowing the role as he does so. After this, as he carries on giving out roles to the girls lying down, he touches them all on the stomach. [Non-videoed, observational fieldnotes]*

This game takes place within gendered cultures in which boys and girls rarely interact. The kiss chase produces a ritualized heterosexuality which can open up novel forms of sociality, pleasure, flows of desire between boy-bodies and girl-bodies, as well as sedimenting molar lines of heterosexualized gender. There is a wide space available for the children to play; free to roam around, their coming together becomes purposeful, with children seemingly able to leave and return to the game as they wish. The kissing hut – situated at the far end of the playground space, elevated, overlooking the fray, reminiscent of fairytale castles, sites of captivity, rescue, romance – becomes part of an assemblage in which bodies come close, and different forms of touch and intimacy emerge. Pressing together in the small space, they take pleasure in physical, tactile contact, with the girls pushing Petteri, culminating in the sustained kiss itself. The kiss is very social, enabled physically by the 'non-kissing' girls (part of the kiss by extension), who hold the others together, supporting the performance of resistance that is central to the game. But tactility is carefully monitored, staying within the

rules – the girls enjoy pushing Petteri until he falls over, but do not then touch him further, or try and kiss him. Petteri only kisses after he has finished the rhyme ritual.

We see the creative force of the kissing hut–boy–girlgroup assemblage highlighted at a point of disjuncture, when Annika and Anna ask Petteri whom he likes most. In the open play yard, such a question seems dangerous: the striations of local gendered divisions press down and render it impossible for Petteri to ‘like’ a girl. Instead he leads the girls to the kissing hut, where heterosexualized relations are possible, indeed, required. The girls move into formation, creating a new assemblage imbuing Petteri with the power to judge heterofemininity. The errant sexual possibility is reterritorialized through his ritualization of the answer to Annika and Anna’s question; and, perhaps, his omission of Anna through this ritual is a way of reasserting his own position as director.

Throughout the game, the encounters flow in and out of broader molar lines of heteronormativity. As a rare meeting of boy and girl, the heterosexual striations intensify and the game opens up discursive space for talk of love and marriage. Petteri is the chaser, pursuing the ostensibly-reluctant girls and designating the girl to be kissed. He is not popular among the boys in the class; this game may offer him the pleasure of inclusion and control, and for the girls, perhaps, his low status means they can play with him without fearing a takeover. The girls outnumber him and demonstrate their power through pushing him out of the kissing hut; they signal their physical ability to overpower him, strengthening the understanding that their resistance during the kiss is theatrical. The kissing hut seems to produce a rare space for consensual intimacy between boys and girls, away from the mockery and tensions we see in the next vignette. The decision-making and play seems democratic, with children at ease; the girls and Petteri negotiate together to steer the game, and it is a girl who suggests they change to playing ‘home’. This progression suggests the entanglement of the ritualized kiss with wider assemblages of heteronormative family.

In this next phase, the kiss retains affective power as it moves into the family assemblage. The transgressive pleasure and excitement of the kiss-chase game imbues the kiss with a productive force, allowing it to bestow a role upon the receiver. But there is a moment of almost-rupture. Aaron, who earlier tried and failed to embody the heteromasculine role of kisser, returns, seeing perhaps a possibility to become otherwise, to belong within another game, to be touched. Petteri almost bestows the kiss upon Aaron but hesitates as he is assailed with molarity. Instead he quietly changes the game, touching Aaron on the stomach, less intimate. With this jarring moment, the kiss becomes over-eroticized. Reterritorialization requires that he also stops kissing the girls, as the kiss has become more confusing, more adult; or perhaps its earlier eroticism rubs abrasively inside a 'family' game? We might then wonder at the lurking potential threat within the kiss chase. Together, these two assemblages illustrate the wandering flows of affect through bodies and spaces, and the intensity of the kiss as a moment of molecular rupture to well-worn molar rituals.

In the next episode, the relationality of the kiss is saturated with lines of threat as the ritualized kissing game extends into the institutionalized, hierarchical space of the classroom, where re- and de-territorializations emerge through physical force.

### ***The classroom kiss***

*In the classroom, class has come together and is waiting to begin. Petteri, Oti and some other boys are standing on one side of a circle, with Pihla and Noora on the other side. Petteri shouts 'Let's kiss!' and Oti urges them on. Petteri approaches Pihla, who is smiling, but not looking at Petteri. As he approaches, she bows her head, turning her face away from him. Petteri is smiling, looking directly at Pihla's face. Oti says, 'Kiss! Get married!' Petteri comes closer and closer, and when he is very close, Pihla steps backwards. Petteri then opens*

his arms, and Pihla turns straight towards him, and starts hitting him lightly, in the style of boxing. Petteri turns around, shouts 'No! No!', laughs, and starts running away to the opposite corner of the circle. Pihla runs after him, following him to the furthest corner of the classroom space, pretending to hit him and shouting that she doesn't want to marry him. As Petteri reaches the wall, he lifts up his arms to protect his head, still laughing. Pihla stops, turns around and returns to her original place in the circle, smiling broadly. Other children are laughing and shouting; Oti says 'Get married!' Petteri starts approaching Pihla again, laughing with his arms spread wide, until the teacher says his name, and he returns to sit in his original position, laughing loudly. Oti approaches Petteri, who extends his hand. Oti goes behind Petteri, taking hold of Petteri's neck with one arm, and his arm with the other; Petteri leans back on Oti's legs. They and other children talk about 'the wedding'.

Meanwhile, Pihla approaches, and stops in front of Petteri, standing still. Petteri comes closer to Pihla, trying to reach her by lifting and opening his arms, laughing. Oti is standing behind him, pushing him slightly forward, as if making sure that Petteri won't back off. When Petteri tries to stand up and touches Pihla unintentionally, she hits Petteri in the head with her right arm. Oti lets Petteri go, looking at him and smiling, and Petteri falls down on all fours. Oti again encourages Petteri to approach Pihla by holding his shoulders and pushing him forward. Pihla backs away to her original position, and turns so she is face to face with Petteri. Eetu, a boy standing behind Pihla, takes hold of Pihla's chest with both hands. Smiling, Oti leads Petteri close to Pihla and then quickly goes away. Petteri throws his arms around Pihla's neck and, smiling broadly, makes an effort to kiss her. As Pihla notices that Petteri is coming close and that she is being held, she screams and starts resisting strongly. She leans back, avoiding Petteri's kiss. She yells, 'Don't! Don't!' and pushes Petteri in his face so that he stops, turns around and runs away quickly. Eetu lets Pihla go, smiling. Pihla



*is smiling, too. The teacher shouts 'Petteri!' Pihla sits down. Someone shouts 'You received your just reward, you got a ride!' Throughout the episode, Pihla frequently fiddles with and readjusts her dress and tights. [Videoed observation fieldnotes]*

This episode in Aurora involved some of the players from the first extract, and illustrates how some very similar bodily interactions can carry very different affects. Petteri initiates an imitation of a 'kissing game' in the classroom space. Throughout, gestures recur that call back to the game: other children hold the kissers' bodies, moving them together; children talk about kissing and marriage. But in this space, they are not pleasurable. Here, bodies are penned in, it is impossible to escape. Where the kissing hut was controlled by rules agreed upon by the girls and Petteri, and the theatrical struggles for control over the territory illustrated the flimsiness of Petteri's hold over the girls he kissed, the classroom is controlled by adults.

The affective relations here are different too. Pihla has not been chosen randomly after deciding to participate, as in the game, but singled out. In other playground incidents, Pihla has participated in kiss chase games but seemed unenthusiastic, not as engaged as other children. The encouragement of the other boys renders the pursuit dangerous: it is not one boy chasing many girls, but many boys chasing one girl. When Petteri first approaches Pihla, she reacts strongly, physically fighting back. She chases him as far as the classroom will let her, through the space that is occupied by the boys, seizing the role of chaser, imbuing it with aggressive power (a reversal similar to Isabel and Matilda's 'scaring' the boys with superpowers in the introduction). We could also read it as charged with erotic power, within these cultures where the girls direct heterosexualized play. In this brief moment, paradoxically, the restrictive space of the classroom enables her to pursue molecular lines of possibility. She returns satisfied to her position in the classroom, but her aggressive pursuit is

reinscribed within the heterosexual chase by another boy (*'Get married!'*). It seems to be the encouragement of this boy, Oti, and others that convinces Petteri to continue trying to kiss Pihla: first verbally, and then physically. Petteri's easy physical intimacy with Oti seems pleasurable, but flows into Oti's body urging Petteri's forward, forming with Eetu (holding Pihla from behind) an assemblage creating threatening affects. Pihla fights back physically, causing Petteri to withdraw (as when the girls pushed him out of the kissing hut). Her fear speaks to the affective intensity the kiss can invoke: a punishment just as clearly as a source of pleasure. Again, Pihla's achievement is closed down by another child shouting at her, suggesting she deserved her fate. Through the episode, when she is standing, waiting to fend off the next approach, she often seems uncomfortable. She is caught up in, blocked by the molar lines of heterofemininity not only in defending from unwanted approaches but also in the restrictions of her clothing. Her very first reaction, too, seems to speak to particular striations of femininity, as she smiles, looking down and away, citing the demure maiden deflecting interest while simultaneously inviting it.

The next two extracts are taken from Ashwell, and explore what (else) the kiss can do within different gendered cultures and spatial configurations. In contrast to the ritualized and sustained interactions in Aurora, in the next vignettes the kiss emerges seemingly more spontaneously, between boys-and-boys or boys-and-girls whose bodies are constantly jostling for space, rubbing up against each other. We see some different assemblages that can (and cannot) form, opening up the affects circulating through and around the kiss.

### ***Kissing in line***

*It is the end of playtime. The whistle has been blown and the children are coming to stand in their class lines. They stand close together, in a messy single file, some facing forwards, some*

*backwards, some interacting with other children and some not. Thomas and Jon are standing near the back of the line, where it is more disordered in form. Thomas leans forward and kisses Jon on the cheek. Jon recoils, moving his head away, and they both laugh. Both boys are wearing hooded sweatshirts and start playing with them. They face each other in line and one boy pulls his hood forward and puts it over the other boy's head, so both their heads are covered by the hood and their faces are close inside it.*

*Mia returns to the line, after reporting to the playground supervisor that a boy from Reception has been hurting her, and stands behind Jon. She is crying and keeps to herself for a short time. Then she stops crying, and kisses Jon on the cheek three times, making exaggerated 'Mwah! Mwah! Mwah!' noises. Jon says 'Euugh!' Then he says to Thomas, who is standing beside him, 'I'm kissing you!' He kisses Thomas on the cheek. The teacher calls for the class to start walking inside. On the way to the classroom, Mia starts crying again.*

*[non-videoed observational fieldnotes]*

In contrast to the Aurora episodes of ritualized play inside traditional molar lines of families and weddings, this example spotlights brief, fleeting kisses. We can track the kiss here as it moves across bodies, doing different work as it goes. Again, space is crucial to the potentialities. The line is quintessentially liminal, marking the border between playtime and class time. Owing to space constraints, children's bodies are pressed closely together; touch is habitual and non-remarkable. They are not allowed to leave the line, so they move within a limited space. As such, it becomes a site for intimate play and teasing. The proximity renders it easy for Thomas to surprise Jon by kissing him and difficult for Jon to retreat. Unlike Pihla in the previous episode, though, Jon does not need to defend against the kiss with physical retaliation; voicing disgust is sufficient. While the kiss as a moment of bodily meeting is excessive, rather than closing down intimacy between the boys, the moment of laughter

seems to open it up. They intensify their tactile connection through their clothing, the hood becoming an extension of the head until they are almost one body.

When Mia enters the moving assemblage of the boys-hoods-kissing-line, though, she brings her own sedimented history. Life for Mia in her family home is difficult and violent, and she is often involved in playground chases that sometimes bring joy, sometimes pain.<sup>ii</sup> The teachers and playground supervisors tend to dismiss her complaints and tears over being hurt in the playground, having seen them too many times. At this moment, then, she carries a particular, immediate burden of pain caused by another boy chasing her. Tears flow until she takes up the theatrical power of the kiss – pressing her lips on Jon exaggeratedly and repeatedly – perhaps to disturb, perhaps to comfort her own distress. Jon and Thomas rarely play with girls, and, more than most boys in the class, frequently heterosexualize their gendered relations with distaste. Predictably, Jon reacts with disgust, as he did when Thomas kissed him, but without the immediate laughter. Instead, he immediately transfers the erotic contagion of Mia’s kiss to Thomas, but announces it beforehand, as if to warn him.

Interestingly, in contrast with the first episode in *Aurora*, it is perhaps the heterosexual erotic molar lines that criss-cross to rupture their boy-boy intimacy/assemblage, tipping it over the edge from intelligible transgression to unintelligible transgression. While Jon’s kiss to Thomas effects a reterritorialization, folding the kiss back inside lines of contagion and threat, it nevertheless leaves heterogeneous residues which ignite what (else) a kiss can do and how the boys re-kindle earlier intimacies. With this new assemblage, however, the affective glow (MacLure 2013) of Mia’s power to disturb/comfort quickly dissipates. She begins crying again.

### *The dinosaur kiss*

*The supply teacher has sent a group of five or six children to play outside the classroom, in the corridor, and most of the children are playing on the carpet with bricks. Mia and Asad are around a corner from the other children, near a table, both standing up. As I approach, Asad complains that Mia is ‘annoying’ him. She is holding a plastic dinosaur toy in one hand, and is making it approach him, sometimes touching him with the dinosaur, and making dinosaur ‘roar’ noises. She is smiling and sometimes laughing. Asad looks irritated and tells her to stop, fending the dinosaur off with his body. Mia goes over to some other children who are playing with animal toys and drawing in my notebook. A little later, she comes up to me, points at a box on the top shelf and says, ‘There’s a dinosaur up there, can you get it down?’ I get it down and give it to her, and Asad, nearby, groans. She starts going after him again with the dinosaur, laughing as she follows him with the toy. He says she’s annoying him, and says to me, ‘Tell her to stop it’. I say, ‘I don’t think he likes that very much’. Mia laughs and says ‘It’s funny!’ Asad sits down on a chair. Mia comes up beside him, and presses the dinosaur’s face to Asad’s cheek, making a ‘Mwah’ noise as she does so, and repeats this several times. He looks irritated, and after several kisses says ‘Miaaaaa’ in a frustrated tone of voice. She carries on, laughing in between kisses. He gets up from the chair and says ‘Stop it – I’ll put it back up there.’ She says, ‘No! I’m going to put it up there’, and puts it back in the box, but then starts trying to get it back. She can’t reach high enough. Asad taunts her for not being able to reach it, and says, ‘It’s easy’, reaching up to demonstrate (Asad is the tallest boy in the class). Mia almost manages to get hold of it. Asad reaches up to get the dinosaur, and gives it to Mia. After this, Mia leaves him alone. [audiotaped and observational fieldnotes]*

In this episode from Ashwell, again we see Mia wanting to deploy the affective power of the kiss which can disturb and unsettle. Again, this assemblage is created in liminal space and time; a supply teacher with different rules, a space outside the classroom seldom used for

play. Asad, like Jon and Thomas, rarely plays with girls and frequently expresses antipathy towards them. Unlike the previous three episodes, this one does not involve a meeting of lips with a body. Instead we see the formation of a Mia-dinosaur assemblage, bodies and things coming together. This assemblage opens up potential to interact with Asad at length in a way that Mia, by herself, could not. In the class, the dinosaurs are generally considered boys' toys. Becoming the dinosaur, then, connects Mia to masculine possibilities, and also heightens the provocation of the kiss: she imbues the masculine with the feminized erotic. Where Mia in the line stopped at three kisses, Mia-dinosaur continues for many more, and delights in Asad's reaction. Both Mia and Asad, though, illustrate the ambivalence and knife-edge of pleasure-pain that the kiss can induce, particularly – perhaps – for those with heightened anxieties and defences around their gendered selves and cultural-familial histories.<sup>iii</sup>

### **What (else) can a kiss do? : concluding thoughts**

In the final chapter of her book, 'The Material of Knowledge', Susan Hekman writes that 'different disclosures yield different materialities' (2010: 127). What we choose to disclose is informed by our ethico-political ontoepistemology, and has real material 'consequences, interventions, creative possibilities, and responsibilities' (Barad 2007:185) for making a difference in the world. Our key concepts of becoming and assemblage, and our mapping of the re- and de-territorializations of the molar and molecular striations of gender and sexuality, have been productive not in terms of how they 'reflect' or 'fit' our data, but in terms of the new knowledge, or ways of seeing, they can create. We explored how the kiss as an affective material event, 'has different connections, different relations of movement and rest, enters different assemblages' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 282), using ethnographic methods which can 'catch and create' the multiplicities of everyday events (Coleman and Ringrose 2013). Choosing our analytic 'cuts' carefully, so as not to reproduce the same over-coded binaries

that we introduced at the start, but rather identify the singularities of the kiss as always something more than itself, we reconstructed the affective journey of the kiss through four vignettes across two elementary schools in contrasting localities. It is the creative possibilities, responsibilities and consequences of what our analysis can do that focus our concluding thoughts as we summarize our mapping of what (else) a kiss can do – a mapping we hope might gesture towards different ways of researching and theorising young sexualities.

While not exhaustive, we explore three potential becomings. First, foregrounding *the kiss as a relational intra-active event*. Here we illustrated the in-between-ness of the kiss. Rather than seeing it as belonging to and/or emerging from inside individual bodies and things, we glimpse what Braidotti (2006: 289) writes about as ‘irrepressible flows of encounters [...] which ONE is not in charge of’. Relational ontologies were central, where the subject and subjectivity is decentred, emerging ‘intra-actively’ with other bodies (desiring machines) and things: when, for instance, Mia came together with the toy dinosaur to create a human-non-human kissing machine. Second, to foreground these relationalities, we explored the intra-activity of *the kiss in dynamic shifting assemblages*, where ‘assemblages’ comprised those dynamic coming together of partial elements that can create and/or block possible gender/sexual becomings. Seeing the kiss as relational (not individualized) and in moving assemblages enables us to disrupt the binary (developmental) logic of what we might think constitutes a kiss as straight or queer, non-erotic or erotic, coercive or consensual, and thus resist the pull of what we think we ‘know’ as dominance, marginality or transgression in the power plays of young gendered relations and relationship cultures.

Our exploration of how the kiss is affected and affects others in its making, re-making and unsettling of highly stratified gender and sexual norms allowed us to see heteronormativity coalesce as a powerful, troubling and always present affective glow that blocks and binds. It also enabled us to map the significance of space and place when exploring gender-sexual becomings. Third, then, we mapped *the kiss as a politics of transposition*. That is, we attended to the particular material-spatial configurations (such as the kissing hut, the hoodies assemblage and the kissing dinosaur) where children could momentarily ride on ‘lines of flight’, even if these potential gender-sexual becomings were quickly reterritorialized. We also provided examples of assemblages creating powerful molar striations where lines of force and violence both deterritorialize (e.g. Pihla’s boxing and hitting) and reterritorialize (e.g. collective masculinity surging up to enforce compulsory heterosexuality in ‘the classroom kiss’). In many of these assemblages, one question often burned for us: what else can gender/sexual norms do? For some children, ritualized normative molar lines criss-crossed assemblages in ways that seemed to provide the conditions for potential molecular becomings to emerge (e.g. the kissing hut/family game). We also saw how rupturing the gendered-sexual strata by ‘wildly destratifying’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:178) was far too risky a move to sustain, as Petteri, age 6, instinctively knew in his body when he swiftly replaced the lips with his hand, rearranging the assemblage that can ‘mimic the strata’ of home, yet hold the potential for boy-boy intimacy.

Taking seriously the politics of transposition and the ethico-queer-feminist imperative of what (else) knowledge can do, we want to conclude with a brief overview of how our key ‘findings’ of exploring ‘the kiss’ (and thus any perceived ‘sexual’ touch in young children’s social and cultural relations) as relational, intra-active and always in spatial-temporal-historical assemblages, can inform local praxis. We thus end with one example of our on-



going research relations with Ashwell Primary School. During and beyond the fieldwork for the relationship cultures project, we have been sharing our insights and knowledge of the multiplicity of the kiss inside young gendered, classed and racialized peer cultures. Methodologically, this has involved sharing with teachers the kind of ‘wild empiricism’ that captures the unstableness of everyday life - sharing how it is always possible to identify new conditions of possibility by attending to the ways affects ‘surge, rub and make connections across and through bodies and things’ in ways that bolster and blow apart the strata (Renold and Mellor 2013). We are currently working on pedagogic practices around physical touch and intimacy between children. Here, children in the early years (age 5-7) are provided with safe spaces to hold, stroke and embrace each other, or themselves, with material objects (e.g. teddy bears, massage equipment), with the aim of developing body-movement practices and discursive repertoires enabling them to express out loud and to others what feels good, weird, uncomfortable or painful. Situated within a wider gender-sexuality sensitive pedagogy, we wonder if such practices might open up potential spaces from which ‘ethical relationalities’ (Braidotti 2006) of touch and intimacy can flow. Indeed, we would argue that intimacies such as ‘the kiss’ are vital to map in a socio-political climate where discourses of denial, silence and (over)protection dominate in ways that neglect the normalising and queer pleasures and pains of young children being and becoming ‘sexual’ (Blaise 2013b).

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## Notes

i Pseudonyms are used for participants and schools throughout.

ii Mia told us about this in interviews and conversations after the researcher had been in school for some time. We passed the information on to the class teacher and to the child protection officer in the school.

iii In both of the Ashwell episodes, our knowledges of the young children open up and complicate our ways of thinking about the encounters. Bodies carry with them the weight of other relations, of history and encounters between other bodies and other things; the assemblages created in a moment are always part of other wider

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assemblages. We do not see this in linear terms or through fixed lines of causal connection – for instance, arguing that Mia’s experience of violence within her family causes her to persistently pursue Asad with a kissing dinosaur – but we do see it as an example of the ever-flowing affects that circulate between gendered cultures in the family, racialised peer cultures (Asad’s active anti-femininity), and the heterosexualised striation of the kiss. Our knowledge forces us to read and re-arrange the partial elements in the encounter differently, but it also draws us to the vastness of the unknown – we can never know everything that comes together to make a moment what it is. Thus rather than using our awareness of Mia’s family life to close down interpretation, to fix a meaning on, we use it to open it up, to multiply and complicate.

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