

Osgood, J., Mohandas, S., de Rijke, V. and SInker, R. (2025) Mess: an interview with Jayne Osgood & Sid Mohandas in V. de Rijke & R. Sinker (Eds) *Challenging Contemporary Thinking on Play*. Springer

Victoria: Welcome to a conversation on Contemporary thoughts about Play and Early Childhood. We have titled this one MESS as it links to the barriers to and possibilities in dirty, disorderly play. It also references the tangled mess of childhood itself and early years education practices. With your work on post-humanist, new materialist practices around this topic, we're relying on you both to either sort this mess out or – better still- make it messier!

Rebecca: To begin with a broad sweep, the original theories for children's play and play materials seem to rest on long-held views of the innocent, free-thinking (Rousseau) or 'natural' (Froebel; Steiner) child. Play-as-learning gathered momentum in the C20th by linking 'learning as doing' (Dewey, Montessori) -ideally outdoors (Owen, McMillan)- to child-centered, emergent creativity (Isaacs, Reggio Emilia), establishing play as an important factor in the social-cultural construction (Vygotsky) or scaffolding (Bruner) of knowledge with schematic, staged (Piaget) *developmental* models of learning. In the UK, policy initiatives for very young children (eg: Start Right 1994; Sure Start 2001; Every Child Matters, 2003) led to a Foundation Stage National Curriculum (2000), setting measurable Early Learning Goals (2012) that value play. So, what is play's role in contemporary early years practice, in your view?

Jayne: So, Sid and I thought that probably the most useful starting place was to think about the early years foundation stage curriculum, and what that has done, on the one hand, for promoting the idea of play and its importance in early childhood contexts, but also regulating, limiting the forms of play, where play is permitted and the shape it can take. It also raises questions about the ways play is quantified, measured, and made sense of. So, for us curriculum context is profoundly important to contributing to reconceptualisations of play.

Another consideration for this conversation is to think with Sid, as a Montessorian, [add footnote] to question what is permissible, celebrated, or regulated by another framework - play can mean radically different things in particular contexts. So, in a generalist sense, early years education and child-centered pedagogies have been both interesting and worrisome in terms of what play is and how it gets categorised and boxed. We were reflecting on this and felt a shift from play as largely unregulated to the current state; where the EYFS curriculum has become increasingly formalised over the years, which has set play up in binary opposition: 'Go and play'; 'It's playtime, go outside'- you know, there's designated spaces and times for play, - then what we see more latterly, is a co-option of play as a useful means of delivering the curriculum, so learning through play. One example of this is the research Sid and I have done with the pink tower¹, which has become a device to measure fine motor skills and so on, through demonstration of competence through play that is highly regulated., so shall I hand over to you for the Montessori perspective Sid?

¹ Osgood, Jayne ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9424-8602> and Mohandas, Sid (2020) Reconfiguring the 'Male Montessorian': the mattering of gender through pink towering practices. *Early Years: an International Research Journal*, 40 (1) . pp. 67-81.

Sid: Yes, sure. What I find very interesting is to trace the various shifts in thinking over the years in Montessori's conceptualisations of play and work from the 1890s to recent times, to grapple with how conceptions of childhood have been shaped by wider political, economic and social processes. Marks of feminist care and activism are visible in her approach. At the same time, colonial capitalist and extractivist logic can be detected, wherein children's development through play is viewed as a civilizing project, focused on making of a particular kind of 'human'. Sylvia Wynter² identifies it as a western bourgeois conception that overrepresents itself as if it were human. In contemporary childhoods, while there have been major shifts, those very same insidious forces continue to work, but they take on a different form. For instance, with the pink tower paper Jayne highlighted, we witness how neoliberal forces shape what the pink tower does and the specific configurations that count as valid engagement. Engaging with Montessori's writings³ on this, we see minor ruptures, like the hints of vital materialism⁴ and enchantment with the doings of matter...attuning this presents possibilities to take play in different directions.

Jayne: Connected to that, is an idea of posthumanist conceptualisations of play. In 2013, I was invited to write a chapter⁵ – often my chapters appear as the final one in edited collections, because it's the slightly whacky one, on the margins, and Janet Moyles was editing that book covering the importance of play, all the great and good are in there, there's developmentalism through various theorisations of play. I attempt to ask how else might we think about play through a posthumanist framing to consider what that makes possible in terms of how children engage with each other, environment, materials, curriculum and with the world writ large. I offered an argument that brought materiality, affect, space and place to the heart of investigations which pushes against this child-centered logic, turning instead to what gets produced *through* the play and the significance of those *other* elements that make play possible.

The pink tower paper, [ibid] takes this further, we were thinking through a process ontology- a diffractive reading of what gets produced through this pink tower - where does that take us?...Not trying to understand and decode what the child is doing in their play so much as how are they *connected* to all of these other worldly aspects and elements. Then it becomes a very political project, taking us into the realm of environmentalism and gender studies and all sorts of places that might be deemed taboo, or too uncomfortable to go (in childhood studies). This is a commitment that runs through our various posthumanist studies of play.

Rebecca: Can I just take you back a moment? What you've said suggests that that prior to the early years curriculum, which sets learning goals and standardises certain

² Wynter, S. (2003), Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument. CR: The New Centennial Review, 3(3), p. 257-337, doi:10.1353/ncr.2004.0015

³ Montessori, M. (1912). The Montessori method: Scientific pedagogy as applied to child education in "The Children's Houses," with additions and revisions by the author. London: W. Heinemann.

⁴ Bennet, J. (2010) *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham, Duke University Press.

⁵1. Osgood, J. (2015). 'Reimagining gender and play' in J. Moyles (Ed). *The Excellence of Play* (4th Edition). pp.49-60. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

things including play presumably- perhaps almost instrumentalising it in those learning goals- do you feel before that, play existed as the thing you did when you weren't doing the work? ie: in a free play mode?

Jayne: Yes, absolutely, if we look at mainstream Nursery provision like playgroups and pop-up Nurseries that were driven primarily by a need to get mothers to work, it was considered a safe place to put your child. Play was happening in a more unregulated way without perhaps the pressure to demonstrate an understanding of what it meant or how it could be instrumental in demonstrating child learning outcomes. It was much more relaxed and unregulated. Then with the government attention and investment in early childhood, from the late 1990s onwards, it became much more politicised in terms of Every Child Matters⁶ and Sure Start⁷, arguing if we can invest in every child when they're very young, it can stop them failing when they grow up. Following this developmentalist logic, I think there was a slogan 'every pound spent on a pre-school child will reap hundreds of thousands of pounds later because all the fixing would be done before they were broken'. There are powerful discourses prevalent in early childhood around fixing a child that is not yet broken and part of that is actually taking their world and dismantling it to understand it, and once you understand it you start to own it, as the policy makers and pedagogues. So it was this process of professionalising early childhood, regulating the sector and trying to better understand and therefore control children's learning which was the tipping point; the logic being we must know and understand what play is so that we can follow it, track it, shape it, contain it, box it. That's how it looks in much mainstream early years education, but it is different for Montessori, as it has existed for much longer, and has a strong philosophy and framework around it, around the conceptualisation of the child and purpose of the curriculum and how the philosophy plays out. One of these is children's play conceptualised as work.

Sid: That is true. When you delve into her writings, you realise that she isn't really referring to 'work' in the traditional work versus play sense; rather work is a reference to the internal processes that happen as children live life. So, for Montessori, pretend play as well as everyday mundane actions such as pouring a glass of water or controlling one's bowel movement – are viewed as contributing to self-constructive 'work', ultimately leading to what she refers to as the 'New Man'⁸. While well-intentioned, her conception of 'New Man' is very much shaped by western Christian view of 'human' as the 'crowning creation' who she believed is uniquely capable of transforming the earth and bringing harmony by embracing a cosmic view of the world. This anthropocentric view stands in stark contrast to critical scholarship that fundamentally questions the ontological givenness of the category 'human'.

⁶ Every Child Matters (2003) was a UK (Labour) Government policy initiative for children and children's services in England and Wales

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-matters>

⁷ Sure Start is a UK government initiative, launched in 1998 by Tess Jowell, to commit long term investment into childcare, early education, health, family and community support. Aimed at supporting children under four, particularly in disadvantaged areas, this was coordinated through local Sure Start Children's Centres.

⁸ Montessori, M. (1989). Education for a New World. Oxford: ABC-Clio Press Ltd.

From a more-than-human perspective, the idea of ‘self’ and ‘self-making’ or autopoiesis is disputed, instead ‘self’ is viewed always already a collective-making-with or sympoiesis⁹

Rebecca: Does Montessori distinguish in this application when advocating for what the child is doing as work, between when they’re motivated by a human need, like having a glass of water, or when they’re motivated by pleasure or imagination, or what might be conventionally seen as the drivers for play?

Sid: I think it is difficult to say, but there is an underlying emphasis on the validity of children’s activity based on whether they contribute to development or not. Problematically, she refers to activities that do not lead to development as ‘deviations’. As stated earlier this is shaped by colonial capitalist mission of civilizing with intents for making wildness disappear. In a forthcoming paper we¹⁰ draw from Rollo’s¹¹ work to uncover the civilizing processes at work in contemporary Montessori contexts, and inspired by Snaza’s work, we embrace the idea of ‘bewildering education’¹², to move away from narrow and deterministic views of childhood.

Jayne: In that paper we grapple with what happens to Montessorian philosophy borne of a specificity with the slum children in Italy in the early 1900s and how that has been reconfigured in contemporary contexts to fundamentally alter conceptualisations of play, work and childhood – which becomes something very different in modern-day Montessori spaces. Certainly, researching in Montessori spaces reveal there to be very little room for fantasy play because it is not part of Montessori, because the fantastical is seen as counter to her philosophy. But work - as in being able to do up your shoelaces is - is that fair to say, Sid?

Sid: In part, yes. Overall, fantasy play is frowned upon in contemporary Montessori practice. And some of Montessori’s writings do lend towards such a view, but when you read some of her other works it appears she contradicts herself. For instance, in her talk with parents from the 1930s she draws parents’ attention to a child playing with dolls doing important work of ‘self-construction’. I don’t think her perspectives on this were ever straightforward.

Victoria: Yes, I totally agree with that, Sid. When I studied Steiner philosophy to explore the idea of Soul in arts education, I came across so many contradictory experiences or systems under the name, which all struck me as *interpretations* of Steiner, so no two people seemed to think the message was the same!

Sid: That’s right. I think part of the challenge in engaging critically with Montessori theory/practice, as with any other pedagogy, is to be able to read with care and

⁹ Haraway, D.J. (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press.

¹⁰ Mohandas, S. & Osgood, J. (2022, f.c). **Grappling with the Miseducation of Montessori: a feminist posthuman re-reading of ‘child’ in early childhood contexts**, Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, Risking Erasure Special Issue.

¹¹ Rollo, T. (2018) Feral children: settler colonialism, progress, and the figure of the child, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 8:1, 60-79, DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2016.1199826

¹² Snaza, N. (2013) Bewildering Education, *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 10:1, 38-54, DOI: 10.1080/15505170.2013.783889

that does mean grappling with these contradictions rather than attempting to smooth them out. When asked about her resistance to fantasy later on in her life, she shares that she was responding to specific beliefs and practices of her time in which children were viewed as incapable of navigating life without adults intervening through fantastical storytelling. She believed children were capable of much more than we gave them credit.

Victoria: So, to allow dignity and stop this business of duping children?

Sid: Exactly. But Jayne is right, contemporary Montessori schools that consider themselves ‘purist’, frown upon fantasy or pretend play, because they believe children must first be introduced to concrete hands-on and ‘real’ experiences before they are introduced to abstract ones. In researching gender, I find this particularly interesting because these distinctions between real and fantasy, and nature and culture are used to promote the idea that the Montessori approach is ‘gender-neutral’. As Jayne highlighted, the absence of gender-typed activities like dress up box and home corner give the perception of gender-neutrality. However, it is a perception that is formed by individualized thinking, in which pedagogical objects are viewed as inanimate. When we embrace relational ontology, all those gendered relations that previously fell out of view become visible.

Victoria: Sid, could you say a little about how posthumanist thinking has challenged your notions of play, in that context?

Sid: Yes. Well, looking back at my journey in early years, as a newly qualified practitioner, my idea of play was very much tied down to developmentalism. Children were seen as resourcing from their environment to self-develop. And my job as practitioner was to observe and prepare the environment accordingly. However, the failure of developmentalism to adequately account for gender, race, disability and sexuality led me to feminist and queer theories, particularly feminist poststructuralisms which made visible how language and discourse shaped everyday childhood experience. Rather than being seen as passively absorbing their surroundings, children are viewed as active agents in meaning-making, through processes of negotiation. So, I came into feminist ‘new’ materialisms (FNM) with this grounding and a desire to complicate gender further, without quite knowing what that meant to Montessori practice. When previously materials, space, and place were simply viewed as play resources, a conduit for child development, FNM reconfigured them as lively and agentic. If we ever thought childhood was innocent, FNM exposes the contaminated, non-innocent relations that make up early childhood practice. In the animal figurine chapter Jayne and I published¹³, we initiated our inquiry with a playful encounter of a child and farm animal family figurines. In the chapter, inspired by Donna Haraway¹⁴, we ask ‘Who and what do we touch when we touch the animal figurine?’ which leads us to all sorts of unanticipated, sinister as well as hopeful places from material-semiotic inscriptions of heteronormativity, to stories of global capitalism, to tales of caste resistance. When we map childhood this way, in which the idea of ‘self’ is always already interwoven with vast biological, economic, political, and industrial networks, play ceases to be a matter of

¹³ Osgood, J. & Mohandas, S. (2021) Figuring gender in early childhood with animal figurines: pursuing tentacular stories about global childhoods in the Anthropocene, in N. Yelland, L. Peters, N. Fairchild, M. Tesar, & M.S. Perez (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Global Childhoods*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

¹⁴ Haraway, D.J. (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

self-constructing. On the contrary, play emerges as sym-poe-isis, a making-with. And considering we cannot predict what relations will be formed or unformed in play, indeterminacy and precarity become a core part of our view of childhood and play¹⁵.

Rebecca: I can see how this position might be deeply troubling for a formal education system that needs frameworks guidelines, measures, and assessments, targets...

Victoria: It doesn't just *need* them, either. It is *led* by them, by its own meaningless metrics. It's led – exactly like the Kafka story¹⁶ of the mouse being chased by a cat to the corner of the room, where there is no escape. Kafka makes it clear: "You only need to change direction", said the cat, and ate it up.

Jayne: That is the crux of it: do we need them? I don't think we do. I think there's some security and comfort in pursuing some form of certainty. There's a fantastic article called *Beyond Boring Meaningless Shit*¹⁷ written by early years teacher-educators and the basic premise is that what they can't get beyond -boring meaningless shit- which is the pursuit of targets, measurability, transparency, performativity, all of those things and because they're so wrapped up with doing *that* work, they can't actually do the more creative and more valuable work. If ever you speak to a Nursery teacher they'll say "I'm so bogged down with paperwork": endlessly recording and accounting for what's going on without any space to deeply engage with what is unfolding. The need to map this against the learning objectives ... and if you try to map and categorise a play scenario, then it just strips it of its own value.

Rebecca: You've talked just now about the constraints of play and how its deployed in formal learning so where do you see the possibilities for play as this more imaginative, risk-taking potential or unknowable possibility within those formal settings? Because, you did mention earlier, the regularisation was partly about taking play more seriously and valuing the idea of play..? I wonder if you could say a bit about that?

Jayne: The main issue is professional confidence. If we look at early years teachers who are confident in their capabilities, they are much more inclined to create space and opportunity to resist the burden of responsibility to perform this neoliberal agenda of measuring and quantifying everything. But the machinery that surrounds them - parental expectations, the curriculum, Ofsted¹⁸ inspections, quality gradings - bears down on them to such an extent that creating space and opportunity for play- *their own included*- just gets completely eradicated. There is recognition that play is invaluable but there is disconnect between enabling it, allowing space to unfold because play is probably most enjoyable when it's spontaneous. But when play is choreographed, over-orchestrated and then recorded for

¹⁵ Osgood, J. (2022). From multispecies tangles and Anthropocene muddles: what can lichen teach us about the precarity in early childhood education? in C. Blyth & T.K. Aslanian (Eds) *Storying in Early Childhood Education Research and Practice - Posthuman and Autoethnographic Approaches*. Springer: ChildhoodNature Series

¹⁶ Franz Kafka's *Kleine Fabel/Little Fable*, c.1920

¹⁷ Novinger, S. and O'Brien, L. (2003) 'Beyond 'Boring, Meaningless Shit' in the Academy: Early Childhood Teacher Educators under the Regulatory Gaze', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 4(1), pp. 3–31. doi: [10.2304/ciec.2003.4.1.4](https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2003.4.1.4).

¹⁸ The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in an independent UK government department responsible for inspecting and regulating education and training for learners of all ages and all those services which support children's care and education.

what it can tell us according to a narrow imaginary it becomes something that nobody actually wanted. Early years practitioners are caught in this impossible bind of what they know to be true and dear and valued but is rarely expressed in their practice, which is desperately sad.

Victoria: Yes, it's a kind of dark loop, isn't it? Being caught in it is very hard for people who work with very young children... have you felt like that, Sid? Your feeling for how you want to work- and I'm glad you mentioned teachers' own play- because I think that's been damaged considerably by all this, and it's highly ironic that so many pedagogies themselves in this context are so unplayful.

Sid: Absolutely, Victoria. As Jayne states it is an impossible bind, and I grapple with this in a recent paper ¹⁹, where I account for the complex disciplinary technologies that are at work in the simple act of sitting on child-sized chairs. In the paper I offer a situated reading of material-discursive processes specific to Montessori that coerce practitioners to sit and observe, the affective marks child-sized chairs leave on queer disabled bodies, as well as the varied ways the panoptic gaze circulates to produce 'children always in progress'. However, I end the paper with a playful becoming-with child-sized chairs, in which chairs are arranged to form an obstacle course, climbed on, crawled under, and jumped from (which we were of course later reprimanded for!). The inclusion of the encounter was partly intended as a joke. But it also works as a *minor gesture*²⁰ which although may seem insignificant and frivolous, transforms the field of relations, offering momentary possibilities of subversion and pleasure.

What I found quite powerful in the playful encounter were the affordances to de-center functionality. I know Jayne often talks about an imperative to take up a toddler-like sensibility when enacting research. Which is so true, children's play that is unregulated already does the kind of work that we want these theories to do. That is, the blurring of boundaries and engaging in practices that defy the violent dualisms of western knowledge practices: those boundaries between work and play, human and nonhuman, fantasy and reality etc. There is a kind of wallowing that it makes possible that is about sensing, feeling, smelling, touching that transcends disciplinary boundaries ... perhaps even *undisciplinary* because children don't navigate and inhabit worlds in the same manner as most adults do, in which boundaries are very defined, set, sedimented and rigid. It is also a place of speculative fabulation that create more openings for worlds that are not-yet, but available to us.

Rebecca: And have you observed or have you witnessed those opportunities in formal settings, or are the two actually increasingly mutually exclusive? (*Yes - brain fog!*)

Jayne: It's interesting that conference presentations given to early years practitioner audiences about this idea of taking up a child-like sensibility, not-knowing and being playful, recommending we see how things unfold and get deeply immersed in stuff? And you see the audience] "Yeah, great, absolutely, that's why I went into this profession, this is why I want

¹⁹ Mohandas, S. (2022) Beyond male recruitment: decolonising gender diversification efforts in the early years by attending to pastpresent material-discursive-affective entanglements. *Gender & Education*, 34(1), pp.17-32, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2021.1884202

²⁰ Manning, E. (2016) *The Minor Gesture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

to work with children”, and then, the next step- it’s almost predictable-is, “but, we can’t do it. It’s impossible.” It’s almost impossible for the children to do it, and doubly impossible for the teachers. It seems there is a latent desire to embrace qualities to be more playful. The important work that Sid’s attempting to do within in the Montessori community is to shift the thinking, reclaim the playfulness, the speculative, the uncertain; to create space for that.

Victoria: And to recognise play as Sid just described it, is not done formally, in any kind of curriculum context whatsoever. So, play is absolutely strapped to the idea of learning, it’s strapped to developmentalism as you’ve both explained, and it reminded me, reading Brian Sutton-Smith again, of seeing play as a kind of deconstruction of society. He says ‘all players unravel in some way the accepted orthodoxies of the world in which they live.’ [add Ref] I love that because it goes back to what Sid was saying about how transdisciplinary or undisciplinatory play can be... play *can* be a decolonising practice; it can be a practice that highlights what’s missing, like agency. Can I ask you both to say a little more about those merits of play?

Jayne: Children’s agency in play is a really fascinating and important question... It connects to our discussion about forms of play and how they are regulated. Sid referred to play that happens on the margins, subversive play, play that’s an act of resistance. I think that’s where we maybe see childhood agency at its absolute best - as refusal, resistance or subversion. From a posthumanist orientation it’s not so much about agency as about relationalities.

Sid: I agree. It’s not so much about agencies located within the human. It would be more accurate to say agencies produced through relatings. As you say, it always goes back to relationality, or as Strathern²¹ argues ‘its relations all the way down’...there is no foundation that the peeling of onions ends up in, there is always more and more and more peeling of layers. But responding to your question, Rebecca, if I’ve witnessed those opportunities in formal settings... What I have witnessed is what Anna Tsing²² refers to as ‘the possibilities of life in capitalist ruins’. Especially when we see agency as how Jayne and I have just described, we begin to see those ruptures...I am reminded of a scene from the nursery where children and adults were experimenting with light, coloured mirror blocks, objects and shadows. Amid this lively creation and performance, I notice a practitioner rush to grab the nursery camera to ‘capture’ the event. The next thing I see are camera flashes. I look over to see the practitioner puzzled. I think perhaps the autoflash setting was on...she turns it off and continues to take photos. The momentary interference pattern produced by the camera flash was quite a luminous moment, where its agentic capacities seem to override and elude developmental captures.

Jayne: Posthumanism helps us with these endless conundrums and diffractive patterns. With our human exceptionalism, we think we can step in and fix things; but then, anthropocentrism and the Anthropocene: we’ve broken it, and then it’s this idea that the world can’t fix itself - it’s Haraway’s ‘god-trick’!

²¹ Strathern, Marilyn. 2018. “Relations”. In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. Online: <http://doi.org/10.29164/18relations>.

²² Tsing, A. L. (2017). *The mushroom at the end of the world*. Princeton University Press.

Victoria: This raises the non-linear, non-literal, possibly even irrational... Sutton-Smith argued that the history of the imagination in childhood is one of ever greater suppression- he would argue- and rationalisation of the irrational, but posthumanism doesn't view it like that, does it?

Jayne: Interesting research is just waiting to be done with children looking back on their pre-school years. Thinking about the current generation of teenagers many of them have grown up with their life on Instagram, Facebook- a very public display and performance of their childhood. Research that could look back at the queerness of childhood, the fantasy, fun, playfulness, and then it kicks in... "oh, what was I doing? That's so weird..." judging playfulness on the basis of how it has been regulated *out* of them. By the time they're 8,9,10, these become embarrassing, haunting memories of pre-school years. It could be a fascinating piece of work, precisely around this - what is play and playfulness and I think there's also a strong connection to be made with virtual play. (0038.25) I am curious about what happens to play when it goes online, underground, and it becomes really subversive – and actually you two have written about this- in the dark play special issue²³. I recently examined a PhD about virtual play spaces²⁴ If we're talking about agencies that open up possibilities to be other sorts of people or things, to build relations and connections and to be playful. Her research shows that we're contained and controlled by the rules of the game in a virtual world, but we're freed from broader societal norms, so a space of playfulness that hasn't been enjoyed since early childhood is re-opened. [*nice possible link here to Rule chapter*]

Victoria: So, on the topic of wilfully breaking things...I want to rein you in to dark play and what you both understand by that and what kind of role dark play has in the posthumanist new materialist understanding?

Sid: I think play is often framed through the romanticisation of childhood, where children are positioned as innocent and in need of protection. This is seen in the emphasis placed on safeguarding in the EYFS framework, which while important for all sorts of reasons has a tendency to sanitise and tidy childhoods to make it look less threatening. This is particularly relevant in relation to queerness... So I think the concept of dark play attunes to the non-innocence, to that which is often sidelined.

Jayne: What Sid has said sums it up perfectly: the idea that dark play is taboo play yet so fundamental to play. Play on the margins- in these secret spaces and out of view or at least we think it is until we research it and then it comes in view again. (laughs). Gender and sexualities is a taboo area; Kerry Robinson's ²⁵ book about childhood innocence, gender and sexuality in early childhood signals that addressing such issues comes at a high cost- ; threats from people in the Christian far right- saying 'You're planting these ideas into children's

²³ de Rijke, V., Phillips, M., Sinker, R. (2017) Playing in the Dark, with Online Games for Girls. CIEC Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education: Dark Play in Digital Playscapes. 6.18 (2)

²⁴ Victoria Timperley (2021). Making gender trouble: a creative and participatory research project with neurodiverse teen gamers, Unpublished PhD thesis. **Cardiff University**.

²⁵ ROBINSON, K. H. (2013). Innocence, knowledge and the construction of childhood the contradictory nature of sexuality and censorship in children's contemporary lives. New York, Routledge.

heads, so that becomes the narrative: that children are too young, too innocent to be interested or play with ideas about gender or sexuality so it's perverse queer theory and gender scholars planting ideas into children's minds ... it's fraught and difficult and as a consequence dark play doesn't get the air space it deserves, but part of me thinks maybe it *shouldn't*. Because what happens? I feel quite conflicted about teaching and research, because once you start to unravel it, ask could we do it another way, could we do it in ways that make space for children to be freer and unregulated then that becomes co-opted, that becomes the new orthodoxy, so it's only a matter of time I think before people come into nursery settings with a posthumanist checklist...did we see relationalities? did we see diffraction? What's going on here? Tick tick tick that's what happens in early childhood pedagogy! (That's just my secret fear)

So yeah, I think dark play should probably be left in the dark places.

Victoria: I'm with Jayne: I'm outraged that dark play has no place but its place is underground and its place is in the dark and there's also of course beautiful mystery about things that are not fully knowable... that arrogant academic humans feel they can deconstruct and know everything about- those things that the child psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas ²⁶ [add Ref] calls the 'unthought known'. We *feel* it.

Rebecca: I'm struck by you talking about taboo, because of course that's – like play- so enculturated and a lot of what you've said earlier about play being a sort of assumed universal that's happening in the same way everywhere, which of course we know it isn't. So we wanted to ask about decolonising play: how we might go about it and where is this happening?

Jayne: I can talk to a concrete example of something I'm involved in at the moment, working with Karin Murris who undertook some research in South Africa for the Lego Foundation with a British collaborator. Lego had a particular agenda and lens that they were looking through, and despite Karen's very fervent demands that it shouldn't be framed in a particular way, it nevertheless was. That was, that African children lack access to digital technologies -it's all about the lack -so the narrative reinscribed superior western notions that we have play right, and this is what the African child needs. The project that I'm involved in asks how can we decolonise these practices and ideas of play and so elevate sub-Saharan African children's games so that there not seen as other and deficit. We can do this by broadening the definition of play and digitising indigenous games. It is of course fraught with difficulties but a genuine commitment to bring equivalence to the kind of dominance of white western ways of thinking that certain forms of play and moments of playing are superior to others, but it is difficult and political terrain to navigate.

Rebecca: And it sounds like there was a commercial element? At least with the initial one, because it was driven by Lego?

²⁶ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (1987)

Jayne: Absolutely, and increasingly play is commercially driven²⁷ which Sid and I unearthed with the pink tower. The ‘innocence’ of the pink tower was unveiled as a huge commercial enterprise. The wood is harvested in a certain place at a certain price and then the global, commercial movement of the wood, impoverished cheap labour, gendered politics and exploitation in its manufacture. Posthumanism challenges childhood innocence and the idea that play objects, materials, games, are in any way innocent. It attends to the deeply troubling and very dark back stories. Yet natural materials in Montessori settings with supposed proximity to nature and ideations of goodness and wholesomeness are troubled. That’s not exclusive to Montessori, but these ideas we have about preserving the purity of childhood is naïve and partial when you follow diffractive lines of enquiry. Oops- I think I’ve done one of my tentacles, haven’t I?

Sid: No, I think what you said earlier about play being uniquely western phenomena definitely needs troubling. Decolonising play entails the moving away from those abstract universals – the universal child or universal patterns of development – towards relational specificity. Nxumalo and Villaneuva²⁸ wrote *Decolonial Water Stories* to discuss how water play and pedagogy from a western perspective positions water as a tool for the development of the individual child. The water tray seen in many nurseries in the Global North is often intended to support children’s cognitive, socio- emotional and physical development. However, framing water as a resource for ‘human’ progress reinstates and reinscribes colonial capitalist and extractivist logic. Instead, they propose human-water relations based on reciprocity and focused on a becoming-with, and an on-goingness.

Jayne: But I have anxieties about the colonisation of decolonial projects, such as writing a chapter where editors say you must bring in indigenous thought, and here are some scholars you must cite. And I thought: must I? I’m not indigenous myself. How do I do it with any degree of authenticity and respect to indigenous worldviews and ontologies without saying, oh, here’s a nice concept that works with my ideas. It’s really problematic. So, you know, regarding that really beautiful paper Sid cited about the watery stories, that paper is written because of the authors’ positionality and situated knowledges. We need to be really careful not to fall into this trap of colonising indigenous thought in a quest to decolonise. People are rushing at it. Just take it slow, be careful

Rebecca: Is it the rush to impose a solution? As opposed to situating things together in a troubled but productive space?

Sid: I absolutely agree with Jayne. This is something I grapple with in my own PhD. There definitely needs more care in mixing theories and concepts. But I think we also need to take heed of what Ahmed and other feminist scholars of colour have highlighted about the erasure of non-western scholars from the citational apparatus. We need to ask how we can work with those tensions, across multiple lines of difference.

²⁷ Osgood, J. (2019). ‘Materialised reconfigurations of gender in early childhood: Playing Seriously with Lego’, in J. Osgood & Robinson, K. (Eds) *Feminists Researching Gendered Childhoods*, Feminist Thought in Childhood Research Series: Bloomsbury: London. Chapter 5. pp85-108.

²⁸ Nxumalo, F. and Villanueva, M. (2019) Decolonial Water Stories: Affective Pedagogies with Young Children. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 7(1), 40-56

Victoria: I think it's part of the construction of myth, isn't it? and there's a huge investment in the myth of childhood innocence and in some of these myths that both of you have just raised, like the primal, the so-called primitive, the connection to cultures that seem somehow closer to nature and spirituality... and these are western myths that are enacted time and time again in our literature and visual arts, in our thinking, and how we view childrens' play.

Jayne: That, I suppose, going back to your question- taking your question and actually answering directly...

Victoria: What? (everyone laughs) Can't wait for this!

Jayne: How do we decolonise early childhood play? Well, it's not by bringing in the possum-paw or any tokenist play material or toys that are supposed to suggest inclusion or multiple world views. We know from the research that's been done around child festivals celebrations that it becomes tokenistic, fetishized, it further exacerbates the exotic othering and it's not decolonisation. So, it takes more than that, but then the other challenge is- if you're taking it slow and carefully, it looks like you're doing nothing. So do I put indigenous scholars in this paper that I'm currently writing and how do I do it? How do I do it in a genuinely respectful way that is not me appropriating another's ideas, or colonising the wonder of indigenous world views? How do you do that in a way that's ethical?

Rebecca: I'm going to move us to the next question- and by all means take this outside of the particularities of formal education settings: what do you think is overlooked in play? And why is mess so overlooked in play?

Jayne: Research that I've done and examined provides evidence of subversive play, when children are not being observed for measurable learning outcomes and there is fantasy play going on around the dress up box, there's all sorts of gender-full expressions unfolding, which gender scholars have identified. There's a beautiful chapter in *Feminists Researching Gendered Childhoods* by Jen Littleton-Smith and Kerry Robinson ²⁹[complete Ref] about gender-full dressing up: what the dress and 'dress-up' as a verb are doing, what materiality makes possible, how its read and what it shuts down, and it dress-up creates unforeseen opportunities. We should resist constantly trying to orchestrate and choreograph opportunities for everything- just leave some space! Leave some dark spaces for that sort of stuff to unfold in an unregulated way, and not even try to apply some meaning to it or see what it demonstrates! That's what we're afraid of as adults. We talk about child-centred play, but it really isn't, it's about adults having control. Even if we're not directing it, we feel we've got to understand it, measure and ultimately have to fix it, until play disappears.

In relation to mess, and trying to really get my head around matter, I've written about babies in the context of events and multicultural festivals, and this particular event was Chinese New

²⁹ Osgood J., and Robison K. (2019) *Feminists Researching Gendered Childhoods*

Year³⁰. I was invited into the baby room and there was Chinese music playing and it was ‘Quick! There’s something really Chinesey going on in the baby room! And I’m like Gosh- what’s this? I was invited to sit on the floor with 9 month-old babies pulling at cold noodles from a massive wok; pulling at them, decorating themselves, lassoing noodles, sticking them all over themselves (Jayne acting out the babies here) educators are taking photos- this demonstrates fine motor skills, this demonstrates oral exploration or whatever it is, everything documented. But I’m wondering ‘what else is going on, here?’ There’s too much going on! Hard to disentangle but one of the things that struck me was underneath the babies were these bathmats with thousands of tassels. As the exploratory play is unfolding, bits of noodle were flying all over the place and embedding in the bath mat, and me- my socks and in my hair- and I thought, what’s going to happen to this bathmat after the event? Somebody is going to have to pick all these bits of noodle off, it will have to go in the washing machine, this is somebody’s responsibility, so yes, the early years teacher is doing loads of unseen, unrecognised emotional labour but then comes the unseen domestic labour. So, if we’re thinking about mess, that’s a real factor we need to take into account: these underpaid, undervalued early years teachers who are principally women have to clear the mess up! It all comes together in a tangle: the curriculum, multiculturalism, the material, plus this basic injustice: from facilitating messy play, there’s a dark layer that’s not spoken about.

Rebecca: I would love to see that scene painted! What you’ve just described, it’s so incredibly visual...possibly painted with the materials you’re describing! I’m also really struck with the difficulties and contradictions- I think you used the term ‘Chineseyness’ of the multicultural scenario being constructed there? The waste of the noodles?

Jayne: Absolutely. I was talking to the manager of that particular Nursery, asking how have things changed since Covid? And she said ‘you know, things have changed since the pandemic in ways we hadn’t imagined: the dominant narrative is doom, gloom, children as vectors contaminating the adults, we’re all distraught with this learning loss following lockdowns... but for us, no, not at all!’ For them, social distancing means more space to play, resources pared back so there’s a lot less mess to clean, they’ve got more time to actually to become-with the children, and most of the provision is now outside. The flip side to what the pandemic has made dystopian and awful could be that the nature of early years provision is unrecognisable from that frenetic, overcrowded, highly regulated scenario to increased space for play... and it took a virus to do it!³¹

Rebecca: And if that’s seen as positive, can it be retained?

Jayne: Well, it’s not seen as positive, it’s temporary, and it’s not getting any coverage.

Victoria: we wanted to finish with the question: how much -or do you- play yourselves?

³⁰2. Osgood, J. (2020). Queering understandings of how matter comes to matter in the baby room in L. Moran, K. Reilly, and B. Brady (Eds) *Narrating Childhoods across Contexts: Knowledge, Environment, and Relationships*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

³¹ Osgood, J. Andersen, C.E. & Otterstad, A.M. (2022). Portal-time and wanderlines: what does virusing-with make possible in childhood research? *Reconceptualising Educational Research Methodologies*.

Jayne: this is a brilliant question! When Sid and I discussed this, I said I don't think I play at all, and Sid said don't be ridiculous, you're the most playful person I know, but I don't think I actually play. Later on, we planned an event³² on what the machine of academic publishing does to us, affectively, by playing with metaphor and materialised figurations of academic affect, choosing sounds to go with each. The sounds were awful: being inside an MRI machine, a mosquito, a fetal heartbeat, an ocean storm, and a syringe that people thought was a sword cutting somebody's head off, like this (Jayne demonstrates; everyone laughs)... so yes, I think we are quite playful in practice. I guess it goes back to what we were reflecting on at the start: how you categorise play and what's seen as play... I think I see it increasingly as a research method, kind of following Haraway's 'serious play', playing seriously³³. We need to do that because it's only by playing on the margins and considering what else is possible, that you're able to explore other ways to be in the world, ways to think about things, rather than getting stuck in the old orthodoxies of mastery and reproducing what we already know... but if you play with knowledge for social justice, then you need to do it in ways that push against³⁴. It is exactly going to the dark places to see what that generates and it's not always linear, conclusive or comfortable, but it's certainly generative.

Victoria: being prepared to make a mess?

Jayne & Sid: yes.

Jayne: And I think for Sid- it's been awful at times, because as their supervisor I say just make a mess and then we can clear it up afterwards, but then I'm like but where's chapter 3? We need chapter 3!

Sid: It's definitely been challenging, quite a messy undertaking. Haraway's game of string figuring that Jayne and I mobilise in our research often takes us on tentacular journeys³⁵. It's a playful research practice, where you never know in advance what patterns will emerge, and it often leads you to some of the most strangest places. So it's a constant challenge to ground those journeys back to the classroom, to think about how that will make a difference on the ground.

Jayne: String figuring is a really good example, as it's an ancient practice, it's historic, passing patterns between one another. And then getting stuck with the knots: it's metaphorical but also bodily and physical, cerebral, so following a string to its end point yet recognising it's connected to the other strings, and then where do the rest go, passing patterns and knots and staying with the trouble ... I think that probably is a playful practice of scholarship.

³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZb6WGv0aVg>

³³ Coleman, R. & Osgood, J. (2019). Glittering practices: what gets produced through feminist new materialist methods, practice research and pedagogy? *Reconceptualising Educational Research Methodology*, PhEMaterialisms Special Issue, 10 (2) 61-86. <https://doi.org/10.7577/term.3669>

³⁴ Osgood, J. & Robinson, K. (2019). *Feminists Researching Gendered Childhoods: Generative Entanglements*. Bloomsbury

³⁵ Osgood, J. & Mohandas, S. (2021). Figuring gender in early childhood with animal figurines: pursuing tentacular stories about global childhoods in the Anthropocene. in M. Tesar (Ed) *Global Childhoods Sage Handbook*. London: Sage.

Victoria: Lovely. I think we'll leave it there. So thoughtful, funny, brilliant.
Thank you so much.

Jayne: Will we be the last chapter in the book?

Victoria: NO! You might even be the first!