

Fences, Bogs, and Bodies: Diffracting Belonging Alongside Black Futurity in Early Childhood Education and Care

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Author's Note

Lynda Smyth is a PhD student at the Department of Early Childhood Research Centre, Dublin City University. As a requirement for a PhD, this article forms part of a larger research project that aims to reconceptualise ECEC within the geopolitical space of Ireland. Lynda's research disrupts the foundational paradigms from which knowledge is traditionally generated within the field of ECEC. Central to Lynda's collective work is a post-qualitative approach that works with data as it emerges. Articulating the relational entanglements of data as it emerges, Lynda engages with multiple theoretical perspectives, including Irish mythology, post-human perspective, Black feminist theories, and Indigenous cosmology. In a curious meeting of humans and more-than-humans, webs of knowledge that intersect with oppression and violence are dismantled. In a world of entangled precarity, Lynda's research actively pursues the generation of knowledge that creates opportunities for ECEC to respond to the question of planetary well-being. Correspondence or Questions should be sent to Lynda Smyth, Dublin City University, St. Patricks Campus, Drumcondra Road Upper, Dublin 9 D09 YT18, Ireland or Email: lynda.smyth22@mail.dcu.ie

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Abstract

Set in the geopolitical space of Ireland, this article pursues a (re) storytelling of belonging within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Data led the knowledge production process, as it emerged from two unrelated stories of children's world-making to include a fence and the Bog. As guided by a feminist relational paradigm, I diffract these two stories to make agential cuts that bring new materialism and Black futurity into conversation. Story 1 emerged from children's intra-action with a fence and dominant discourses of belonging. Story 2 is generated as a response to a photograph of a Black child's relational moment with the Bog (peatland). In the intra-action of (re)storying belonging, the following agential cuts emerge as provocations: How can Black futurity be included in thinking with belonging as a relational practice of world-making? Within a relational paradigm, what types of borders can be undone to connect humans and more-than-humans?

Keywords: Belonging, Black Futurity, diffraction

Introduction

Set in the geopolitical space of Ireland, this article disrupts the concept of belonging by calling into question both human exceptionalism and White supremacy. In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), belonging as a concept is often researched within the context of human relationships to include communities, cultural affiliations, and social positions alongside

affinity to place (Antonsich, 2010; Kyrönlampi et al., 2021; May & Muir, 2015). However, this article responds to an invitation to (re)story belonging 'as an ethical, political, ontological and epistemological concern that centers the inter-dependencies and interconnectedness of human and more-than-human thriving'. (Nxumalo & Nayak, 2024, p. 591) This article draws inspiration from Haraway (2016) and Osgood (2022, p. 1) curations of stories as 'a method of earthly and multispecies survival' in the Anthropocene epoch, where human activity devastates the planet's ecosystem.

This research story is structured as follows: firstly, I will relate the 'glow' of the data as it emerged. Then I present the 'not-yet' data as it occurred in the knowledge-making process, namely Story 1 - The Fence and Story 2 - A Bog-moment of Black Futurity. Next, in tracing the 'not-yet' data, I turned to Barad's (2007) optical metaphor diffraction as a platform to read both stories through each other. Then, I recount the story of shifting from foundational to post-foundational methodologies. Followed by an exploration of theoretical concepts as I bring Black futurity and new materialism into conversation. In situating this article within the scholarship of ECEC, I draw on the work of Power & Somerville (2015) as they trace fences as technologies of control in the context of Australia. Also, I rely on Nxumalo's (2020) post-qualitative research that successfully disrupts anti-Blackness in early childhood. The subsequent section situates the borders between Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). In the spirit of generative provocations, I re-turn Story 1 and Story 2 with agential cuts. Finally, as an invitation to the field of ECEC, I sum up this curation of (re)storying belonging with actionable provocations.

The 'glow' of data – not the beginning

Drawing outside the frameworks that govern ECEC research, I forgo traditional academic procedures for producing knowledge. Guided by new materialist thinker Karen Barad (2007), the data emerged from two seemingly unrelated stories of children's world-making to lead the knowledge-making process. Barad (2003, 2007) asserts that 'matter', human and more-than-human, organic and non-organic, is inherently diverse, navigating between nature and culture with agency. Agency of matter, human and more-than-human, does not reside in the object, thing, or body but is the 'flow of energy' that emerges in relation to all the elements (Bennett, 2004; Hickey-Moody, 2020). Building on the agency of matter, Barad (2007) puts forward the concept of 'agential realism', which contends that matter and meaning are not separate but undisputedly merged. In the role of the researcher, I, alongside the participants (human and more-than-human), produce knowledge within an entangled relation of energy that occurred through what Barad (2007) describes as 'intra-action'. In this way, agency is not reserved only for human actions. Agency permeates the interconnected relationships of materiality to include the more-than-human, in this instance, the data itself. Researchers such as MacLure (2013) and Mcphie (2018) convey the 'glow' of data as various moments that emanate within the research process, such as a fragment of a feeling, a fleeting thought, an object, or a noise in the background. As researchers, we do not know when a data 'hot spot' will come about or how a 'glow' may emanate as it does not reside in certainty or knowing (MacLure, 2013). While engrossed in data collection, the data reached out in a manner that I could not ignore. The 'glow' emanating from the data insisted that while thinking about belonging, I go beyond a human-centric standpoint. Simultaneously, the data refused to be moulded into coded categories. MacLure (2013, p. 228) eloquently describes this entangled intra-action with the data as a radiation of 'wonder.' However, this wonder is not always pleasant, comfortable, or awesome. I can affirm that the entangled intra-action with the data did, as MacLure (2013, p. 229) promised, bring 'the privilege of a headache'. A headache ensued as the data refused the comforts of typical


qualitative academic structures, i.e. theoretical framing, methodology, and thematic analysis. So, this research story does not have the usual beginning. Instead, this story starts with an introduction that recounts the affective nature of the data as it applied agency to the process. Thus, in this (re)storying of belonging, humans are not central or separated but rather come together, as depicted by Cozza & Gherardi (2023, p. 62), ‘in a relational process with more-than-humans, discourses, knowledge and the Earth’.

The entangled intra-action of the ‘not-yet’ data

The following section stories the intra-action of the ‘not-yet’ data from the two separate events. Considering the research process as a relational space where all the elements intra-act, Gherardi and Benozzo (2021) put forward the notion of the ‘not-yet’ data. Paying attention to the ‘not-yet’ data changed the dynamic within this research process of gathering and producing data to become a story of ‘diverse ways in which data can come together, interact and intra-act’. (Gherardi & Benozzo, 2021, p. 298) Notably, this project did not begin with a research question that related to the concept of belonging. The research began in 2020, with sixteen postgraduates exploring their current pedagogical practice within ECEC. To capture changes in practice, postgraduates reflected on observations previously submitted in 2018 as part of the requirement for an MA programme in Early Childhood Studies (ECS). Please find Table 1 below, which is an attempt to create a visual format of the data as it emerged. Story 1 – A Fence: an observational text by an educator that captured children’s world-making from behind a fence. This was followed by the educator’s conversation with me as a researcher in 2020, expressing her views towards observing the children’s interactions with the workmen(persons). Simultaneously, Story 2 – A Bog-moment of Black futurity emerged as I pondered the recently collected data. The concept of belonging was on my mind as I walked with my child in the peatland, commonly called the Bog.

Table 1

Data 'glow'

Story 1: A fence	Story 2: A Bog-moment of Black Futurity
<p>Observation submitted as a requirement for MA in 2018.</p> <p><i>Three children (all children are white presenting and aged 3 years old approx.), attending preschool were outside, standing beside the fence, watching men working. The men (who are white presenting) were carrying out maintenance on drains near the preschool. The children were watching; the men ignored the children. Their truck was parked on the path. As the truck drove away, the children started to shout from behind the fence, 'Go back to Chinese, go back to Chinese.'</i> (postgraduate student/educator, 2018)</p> <p>Educators' Conversation with Researcher (2020)</p> <p><i>First, I thought they had picked this racist chant up somewhere; they were copying it from somewhere and possibly they had...however, I started thinking about power. I do not think that the children necessarily understood the meaning of the chant, but clearly, they engaged with the power involved; they were using this power towards the truck and the men. I was thinking about the fence; the children were behind the fence; the fence had separated the children from the workmen...</i></p> <p>Figure 1: Observation and conversation with the educator</p>	<p>Figure 2:</p> <p>Photograph while walking in the Bog</p> 

Story 1 - A Fence

This article presents an observation from one of the sixteen educators. This observation captures children's play behind a fence (figure 1). While conversing with the educator, I thought of Yuval-Davis' (2006, 2011) research that demonstrates how belongingness is contentiously framed by nationalism. Dominant discourses of belonging draw power from notions of who has the right to belong and who does not. As such, Souto-Manning and Rabadi-Raol (2018) contend that without discerning hierarchies of power, ECEC only embraces the rhetoric of belonging. Thereby, educators may fail to question deeper issues, such as the impact of White supremacy and nationalism in children's world-making. Although, in this case, the educator has the tools to

analyse how the children used the power of belonging as a discourse, the educator was also thinking about the fence.

Story 2 - A Bog-moment of Black Futurity

Story 2 - A Bog moment of Black Futurity (figure 2) came about as I walked with my son in the peatland, commonly called the Bog. Inspired by Haraway's (2016, p. 1) outlook of 'staying with the trouble', I pondered the recent conversation with the educator. The educator had expressed the following viewpoint.

I was thinking about the fence; the children were behind the fence, the fence had separated the children from the workmen... (educator, figure 1).

The fence was as troubling to me as it was to the educator. While walking in the Bog with my son, I was thinking about the fence. I was thinking about how the children used dominant discourses of who has the inherited right to belong and who does not. Living in Ireland as a Mixed-Race family, my children's early childhood experiences of racism relate mostly to belonging. Incidents of racism are often directed towards their bodies, such as skin and hair, and how, as a family, we cannot belong (O'Malley, 2022). I contemplated Yuval-Davis' points that even though belonging as a concept may reconfigure according to location and time, consistent discourses of racial constructions nestle in arguments of ancestral heritage. Why do parts of Irish society claim the right to belong? As we walked, I started to think about the Bog. The Bog I walk in is a bordered landscape embroiled in discourses of ancestral heritage. Irish nationality privileges an inherent right to extract turf, a source of fuel from the Bog. This discourse reflects the belief in human superiority, which ignores the needs of more-than-human life forms in the Bog. I was thinking about how discourses of ancestral heritage interact with all types of bodies: human bodies (child) and more-than-human bodies (the Bog). As all these thoughts swirled around, I observed my son spontaneously flopping to the ground in a cross-legged seated motion. An active child whose preferred mode is movement sat still. I marvelled at the time spent in stillness yet totally engrossed in their world-making. At that moment, I took a photograph -see Figure 2.

Diffraction: tracing the not-yet data as intra-actions

In tracing the not-yet data, I turned to the work of Karen Barad. Diffraction is put forward by Barad (2007, 2014) as an optical metaphor for research practice. Diffraction is a physics phenomenon that occurs, for example, when waves of light or water encounter a barrier or an opening. For example, diffraction happens when the spikes of light appear from the brightest star or patterns made by waves as they spread out in ripples, each ripple creating interference with the other (Arndt & Bartholomaeus, 2023; Barad, 2014). Thus, for Barad, diffraction is not an attempt to represent or map the concept's appearance, in this case, belonging, but to consider the connections in a multi-layered, temporal interfering way. Barad (2014, p. 30) states that 'diffraction involves reading insights through one another in a way that helps illuminate differences as they emerge.' Diffraction as a methodology provided a solid platform that allowed me to trace the relational entanglement of the data as it intra-acts between two seemingly unrelated research stories of children's world-making. Diffracting data as it emerges from these two stories affords attentiveness to the interference of matter in the intra-actions of how belonging is bordered and how belonging is relational. Dolphijn & Tuin (2013, p. 50) relate diffraction as a mode of inquiry that does 'not settle on one approach or discipline but rather a detailed attentive and careful reading as the ideas of one approach move through another leading to more generative inventive provocations'. In generating inventive ways to refigure the multifaceted nature of belonging, guided by the emerging data, I knit together feminist new materialism and Black feminist theories, including Black refusal

and Black futurity. In bringing these perspectives together in conversation, I hope to generate inventive provocations that support the field of ECEC to consider the multifaceted nature of belonging within their geopolitical context.

Becoming data – a relational affect

Following the ‘glow’ of the ‘not-yet’ data, this research shifted from typical qualitative methodologies such as themed analysis to a post-qualitative inquiry. This disruption came about as the data refused to be predictable. During the research process, the agency of the data affected me to change from the position of what already exists to becoming ‘more interested in what might be and what is coming into being’ (St.Pierre, 2020, p. 4). Becoming with the data as it emerged led me to engage in a feminist relational paradigm. This paradigm shift allowed for a creative articulation of all the elements encountered as they intra-acted within this research story. Thus, the knowledge produced within the folds of this article places reciprocal relationships between humans and more-than-human as multi-scalar networks that are in constant intra-actions (Braidotti, 2019; Kimmerer, 2020; Tallbear & Willey, 2019).

I am mindful of Haraway's (1988) view that knowledge-making is not neutral but rather an entangled becoming between the researcher and the data. The ‘glow’ of the data is not independent of the researcher’s ‘gaze’ (Murris, 2023, p. 556). I come to this research story as a human Bog dweller, living and crossing the border of Northern Ireland, as a White mother of children from a Mixed-Race family who experiences discrimination that relates to belonging. All these relational experiences are entangled with my professional role of teaching, where I accept the ethical responsibility to imagine opportunities for socially just pedagogy within the field of ECEC. That said, I acknowledge my continued privilege, which limits my understanding of marginalised standpoints.

Situating Black futurity and new materialism

In becoming with the data, I continued to engage with a feminist relational approach, which allowed me to evoke multiple theoretical frameworks such as Black futurity and new materialism. Koggel, Harbin and Llewellyn (2022, p. 7) assert that a key feature of feminist relational theory is that it 'borrows and makes use of relational insights from a range of frameworks and approaches'. Although Black feminist theories and new materialism concepts are often deemed incompatible, I draw on these perspectives to knit together a theoretical network that helps generate a response to the data. No doubt these incompatibilities are paved with polarised tensions. Flatschart (2017) highlights that Black feminism often restricts the categories of analysis to identity and power that is exclusive to the human experience. According to Flatschart, this restriction opposes the central project of new materialism, which is to topple the naturalised category of humans. The naturalised category of human is problematised by Haraway (1988, p. 581) as the ‘god trick’, which places the white, western, elite, able-bodied hetero male (HUMANS) at the centre of all meaning. Nevertheless, Jackson (2013) points out that people of colour have always been excluded outside the order of Man. Disrupting anti-Blackness and challenging a White gaze, Campt (2017) explores methodologies of Black refusal by actively engaging lost archival photographs of Black subjects. Campt develops a haptic framework that goes beyond just seeing but includes other senses, like feeling and hearing. Numerous research projects are spearheaded by Campt (2019, 2021) that bring a praxis of Black refusal to the fore, a refusal to be defined by a system that places Black life in terms of erasure.

refusal: a rejection of the status quo as liveable and the creation of possibility in the face of negation, i.e. a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible; the decision to reject the terms of diminished subjecthood with which one is presented, using negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise (Campt, 2019, p. 83).

Building further on Black feminist perspectives, Campt (2017, p. 19) implores us to think about Black futurity as a 'grammar of possibilities', which is 'not necessarily loud or intentional but can be quiet, opportunistic and disruptive'. Acts of refusal create opportunities for Black futurity not as a means of transcendence anti-Blackness but as an embodied relational mode of re-imagining opportunities for living otherwise.

Reconceptualisation of ECEC

In the field of ECEC, the reconceptualisation movement places relational entanglements as central to disrupting colonisation, anti-Blackness, and anthropogenic climate change. Notably, Somerville (2014, 2017) disrupts what is considered data in foundational terms by drawing on Indigenous relationality to water. Further research by Power and Somerville (2015) traces fences in ECEC as technologies of control back to the colonisation of the Aboriginal people in Australia. Fences were historically used to exclude the Aboriginal people from their lands and to fence them into reserves. As such, Power et al. found that the technology of fences supported the colonising authorities to impose atrocities on the lives of Aboriginal communities during the formation of the Australian nation.

A key feature of post-foundational research within ECEC is the move to decentre the child as a subject, as such, romantic views of children, childhood innocence, the child-nature dichotomy and normative development are challenged (see examples Crinall & Somerville, 2020; Malone, 2016; Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). These post-qualitative stories focus on the agential nature of materials in relation to children's world-making to investigate children's 'being in and being with complex entangled worlds' (Malone & Crinall, 2023, p. 1187). To include, for example stones (Rautio, 2013), earthworms and ants (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015), and a grassy hill (Smyth, 2024). However, Bodén and Joelsson (2023) warn that as the child's body becomes meshed with different materialities, there is a risk of erasure in terms of differences. Early childhood researcher, Nxumalo (2021), takes up terms of differences by drawing on Black feminist and new materialism perspectives. Furthermore, Nxumalo challenges researchers to seek possibilities to include Black childhood futurity in ECEC research. Practising Black refusal, Nxumalo successfully disrupts normative temporal epistemologies of child development where Black children, historically, are viewed in education as deficient. While listening to a visual image and observing Black children's interactions with a creek, Nxumalo provides a valuable example of how to apply Campt's haptics framework. Hence, Nxumalo (2021, p. 1197) urges early childhood researchers to affirm Black childhood's relationality, which is 'tethered to Black futurity in ways that disrupt both coloniality and human centeredness.'

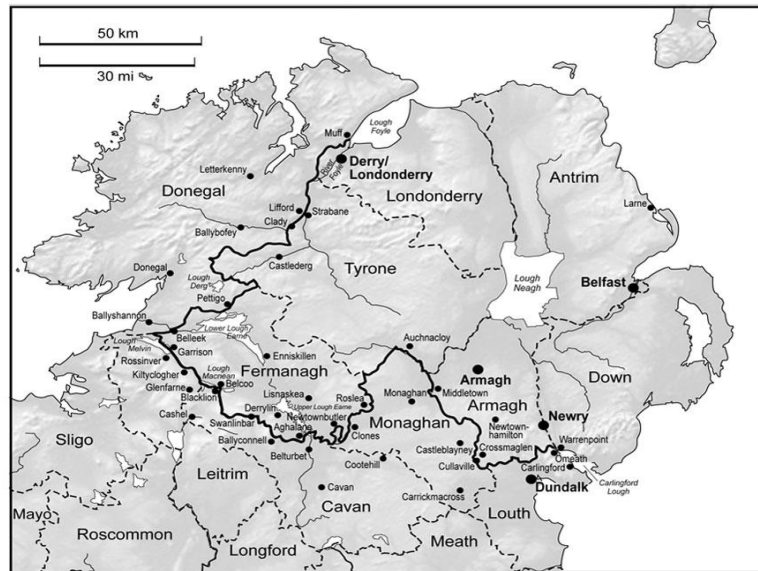
Building on this scholarship and concerns, I diffract the materiality of the discursive notions of belonging alongside Black futurity within the geopolitical space of Ireland. Relationality is the thread that knits together this network of theoretical perspectives and ethical considerations. From a relational perspective, Bodén and Joelsson (2023) urge researchers to pay attention to the networks from which stories emerge. My renewed awe of the

Bog has led to an ethical consideration of the political context of borders, bodies and belonging.

The political context of borders, bodies, and Bogs

Figure 3

A map of the Irish border that divides Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (source: Gramhan & Nash, 2008)



The two research events occurred in the Republic of Ireland. Story 2 is located in the Bog that borders Northern Ireland. It is outside the remit of this paper to delve deeply into the issues of sectarianism, racism, and environmental destruction within a post-conflict society. So, this section aims to provide a brief context to fences, bodies and Bogs while pointing out how Whiteness is an integral aspect of bordering belonging. The border (figure 3) between the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI), according to Cunningham (2023, p. 1165) 'has acted as an ideological battleground in the long-term proxy war between the Irish and British patron states'. Consequently, the island of Ireland has hosted a range of borders, including hard and soft borders that stretch across land and sea (Anderson, 2020).

The politics of belonging

For centuries, the two islands, Ireland and Britain, have disputed territory control over Ireland. In the 17th century, all of Ireland was brought under the control of Britain (Hayward et al., 2021). The historical accounts point to extreme racialisation by the English through the process of colonisation (Munck, 1992). In 1921, following a campaign by Irish Nationalists for an independent state, the Island of Ireland was divided into two jurisdictions. Twenty-six out of thirty-two counties gained independence, and these counties became known as the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Six counties remained under British rule and became known as Northern Ireland (NI) – (See Figure 3). Protestant Unionists held the majority vote in NI, while ROI established an independent state. In NI, Unionists controlled state institutions aligned with Britain, while Catholics were viewed as Nationalists, seeking independence with the ROI (Aveyard, 2023). The conflictual divide between Catholics and Protestants was/is, as Ruane (2021) describes, set in theological beliefs encompassing land, economics, culture, and the politics of belonging. From 1968 until 1998, a violent sectarian conflict raged in Northern Ireland

between Unionists and Nationalists, commonly known as *'the Troubles'* (Mitchell, 2023). The British army was deployed to police Northern Ireland, which also involved erecting security installations (McVeigh, 2015). During this time, fences, checkpoints, and military structures were erected along the border of NI and the ROI. During the time of the Troubles, paramilitary attacks by both Unionist and Nationalist military groups killed and injured thousands (Coulter & Duffy, 2023). In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), a multi-party peace accord, marked a significant turning point in the conflict (Doyle, 2018). Despite the peace process, sporadic violence and political tensions persist, highlighting the ongoing challenges of reconciliation and the fragile nature of peace. With the GFA came the physical removal of hard borders. However, Tóibín (1994) stresses that military structures such as fences and barbed wire forming borders are still visible in the landscape depending on how heavily militarised an area was previously. Fences, as material agencies, form technologies of borders, which, according to Barla and Hubatschke (2017, p. 396), 'leave cuts in several ways on both human and more-than-human bodies'. Barla et al. propose a speculative mode of thinking where borders become locations of 'multispecies matters of care,' thereby, avoiding naturalised images of the environment. Thinking of borders as locations of care, Barla et al. (2017, p. 398) bring forth notions of 'affinity, connectedness, kin and mutual responsibility' to bind humans and more-than-humans in relations with the Earth. Thus, defined territories as nations are disrupted. Careful not to detract from the ongoing global crisis for human refugees, Barla et al. convey the importance of recognising the interconnected ways in which superiority normalises violence against people marked as Other and nonhuman life. To this end, decentring the human in nature-culture relations is a vital strategy in cutting through how violence is orchestrated against humans and more-than-humans.

White bodies

This section will overview key examples concerning Whiteness as a currency that has influenced the national identity within the Irish context. The first example is from 1920, when Eammon De Valera, a prominent figure in establishing independence for the Irish state, toured America in a strategic ploy to gain support. While touring America, Eammon De Valera utilised Whiteness as a rationale for Ireland's liberation. Eammon De Valera asserted, *'Ireland is the only White nation still on earth in the bonds of political slavery.'* (Nelson, 2012; Walsh, 2021). Joseph (2018) also traces the currency of White Irish bodies by examining the history of the Irish diaspora in Britain. From the 1950s evidence of racial profiling was commonplace particularly with housing, for example, signs that advertised rooms for rent often read *'No Blacks. No Irish. No dogs'* (Mellet, 2024; Walter, 2011). Over time, Joseph stresses that the Irish were able to move across racial lines of division to become accepted as White. One example is the Irish legal right to free movement between Ireland and Britain. The right to travel is enshrined in the British Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962), which, to date, has not been afforded to any former Black African colony (Joseph, 2020; McKay, 2008). As noted by Smyth (2022), the experiences of the Irish during times of colonisation were brutal. Nevertheless, Joseph (2018, 2020) stresses that over generations, the Irish have moved across racial hierarchies to reap the benefits of White privilege, which was something that people of other colonised countries could not do.

While constructed as two opposing doctrines, Unionism and Nationalism intersect to mould Irish/Northern Irish identity as exclusively White (Crangle, 2018; Mitchell, 2011). Also, Robert McVeigh, a prolific writer on racism in Northern Ireland, critiques the dominance of sectarianism as the main reason why discussions of racism are sidelined (McVeigh, 2015; McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). More specifically, Fanning (2013) suggests that racism has

become normalised within Irish society, allied with the circulation of discourses of 'Irishness'. Connolly & Khaoury (2010, p. 208) observe that discourses of Irishness serve to 'hide the aspects of White identities in Ireland' while 'refuting the need to take ownership of White supremacy thinking'. White Irishness, Fanning (2013, p. 3) notes, involves 'racism, discrimination and inflexible rules of belonging', which pushes other identities outside to a place of Otherness. Current day examples of racism and inflexible rules of belonging include numerous rallies organised in local communities (not necessarily organised by local communities) that denigrate refugees and migrants to the Other, deemed as not belonging (Michael, Reynolds and Omid, 2023).

The Bog as a more-than-human body

Under Britain's colonisation, the peatlands, commonly called the Bog, were deemed barren wasteland. From 1823 to 1875, the British parliament promoted drainage of the Bogs to convert the land to agricultural use (Feehan, O'Donovan, Renou-Wilson & Wilson, 2008). At the same time, the Bog was a place that provided refuge from the forces of colonisation, a place where people could attempt to survive (Feehan et al). As such, the Bog became a place of colonial tension intertwined with colonial memory. A key strategy to building a revolution and dismantling the oppressions of the colonial past was to reconnect Irish identity and culture with the land (Scanlon & Satish Kumar, 2019). Thus, the Irish Bogs are romanticised in folklore, films, poetry, and paintings, particularly images of turf, a fuel source extracted from peatland.

In Ireland, according to Deckard (2016, p. 150), 'the conflict for territorial control changed biologically diverse Bogs into rationalised sites of capitalist monoculture'. Over two-thirds of Ireland's peatland has been converted to agriculture, forestry, and peat extraction on an industrial level. Recently, a national conflict has ensued between peatland conservation and the cultural rights to own and cut turf privately. In 2022, the European Commission renewed an infringement action against Ireland for failure to protect the peatlands (Flood, 2023; United Nations Environment Programme, 2022). Intact peatlands actively remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. However, dry peatlands emit accumulated carbon dioxide (McFarlane et al., 2018). Intact peatlands actively remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and are estimated to store 20 to 30 per cent of the world's soil carbon, which is three times more carbon than stored in a tropical rainforest (McFarlane et al., 2018). In addition, there are concerns that ammonia emissions from poultry farming are devastating for multispecies within the blanket Bogs that border Northern Ireland (the Bog in this article). In June 2020, the EPA published data that shows Ireland's agriculture contributes to the exceeding ammonia emissions target, as set out per the National Emissions Ceilings (NEC) Directive (2016/2284/EU) and the Gothenburg Protocol (Kelleghan et al. 2021). Furthermore, Kelleghan et al. (2021) found that ammonia has an adverse environmental impact with implications for human and more-than-human health. Notably, ammonia does not recognise bordered territories of the Bog, which is a concern for both the jurisdictions of the ROI and NI. As such, Deckard (2016) notes the importance that Ireland's ecological development can no longer be understood only in the context of colonialism alone. As a society and a geographical location, Ireland must also account for the erosion of Bogs as part of a capitalist world ecology.

Agential cuts as inventive provocation

Building on the concepts of agential intra-action, Barad (2014, p. 168) puts forward the motion of 'cutting together-apart', which implies that entities are simultaneously separated and interconnected. Enacting agential cuts is not

simply about isolating individual entities but involves a complex intertwining of their relationship in a momentary stabilisation of doing rather than being. In a diffractive analysis, as advocated by Murriss (2020, 2023), different modes of analysis are already threaded through one another. However, they can be expressed inversely through agential cuts for which the researcher is responsible. Barad (2014) advocates re-turning as a concept of turning the data over again and again to create more openings for diffractive patterns that interfere. Re-turning Story 1 and Story 2 (refer to table 1), I make the following agential cuts, which are always in a state of emergence.

Story 1 - A fence

In conversation with the early years educator, we discussed an observation and analysis of previously recorded children's play. The agential cuts that follow are from the researcher's gaze. Reading One - Body Politics. Reading Two - Behind the Fence.

Observation – (taken in 2018)

Three children (all children are White presenting and aged 3 years old approx.), attending preschool were outside, standing beside the fence, watching men working. The men (who are White presenting) were carrying out maintenance on drains near the preschool. The children were watching, but the men ignored them. Their truck was parked on the path. As the truck drove away, the children started to shout from behind the fence, 'Go back to Chinese, go back to Chinese.'

Educators' reflection on observation -2021

First, I thought the children had picked this racist chant up somewhere; they were copying it from somewhere, and maybe they had... I started thinking about power. I don't think that the children necessarily understood the meaning of the chant, but clearly, they engaged with the power involved; they were using this power towards the truck and the men. I was thinking about the fence; the children were behind the fence, and the fence had separated the children from the workmen...

Reading one – Body Politics

Initially, the educator began to analyse the observation of the children's chant 'go back to Chinese' from a developmental perspective of behaviourism: copying and repeating. Childhood is often romanticised as a non-political, innocent stage of life, neglecting ways in which the child takes up political discourses and how the child is embedded in political power (Murriss, Smalley & Allan, 2020). Decentring the child as a subject is noted by Smyth (2024) as a key feature of post-foundational research, where the adult's gaze is redirected. In this analysis, the decentring of the child as the only subject in the observation enabled the educator to view different entanglements that would otherwise be obscured. The educator was thinking about power outside the fixed lines of normative development. *I don't think that the children necessarily understood the meaning of the chant, but clearly, they engaged with the power involved'* (educator 2021). Within the power dynamic of who has the right to belong and who does not, Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) describes one side of the community or society as the 'nationalist gatekeepers'. Thus, discourses are constructed within the social collective as to who has the claim to belong inherently. The children in becoming nationalist gatekeepers, place themselves in a position of power to exercise inclusionary/exclusionary discourse of belonging/nonbelonging as they bordered the Other – workmen (people). Therefore, the children held the power to waive the acceptance of the Other into the negotiation of being included or not (Antonsich, 2010;

Yuval-Davis, 2006). Hence, belonging becomes a political negotiation through the everyday intra-action of bordering. The children's reactions confirm the observations of Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2018, p. 4) that bordering has moved from the 'margins into the centre of political and social life'. Additionally, Popescu (2012, p. 4) reflects on the 'interplay between contemporary society and political ordering as border making where bordering is not only about who moves and who does not but also about who controls whose movements'. While historically, physical borders such as fences act as technologies of control, contemporary borders are relocating deep into human bodies, exercising surveillance from within. As previously stated, borders 'leaves cuts in several ways on both human and more-than-human bodies' (Barla et al, 2017, p. 396). The technology of borders embroil the children's bodies in discourses of belonging, non/belonging, Whiteness and nationalism, all of which challenge the notion of childhood innocence.

Reading two - Behind the Fence

The educator is wondering about the fence and the interaction with the children.

I was thinking about the fence, the children were behind the fence, the fence separated the children from the workmen (Educator, 2021).

Power and Somerville (2015) assert that fences around early childhood centres subject women and children to a high degree of surveillance while separating them from public life. The children were deemed invisible within this public space; the workpeople ignored them. Did the children use the power derived from the discourses of belonging to increase their social status, negating the separation created by the fence and being ignored by the workpeople? Barad's notion of intra-action is distinct from interactions. Intra-actions articulate a continuous becoming of the subject/object through entanglements, which challenge the fixed boundaries of interactions. So, 'matter is not static or the property of things but rather a dynamic entanglement of relations emerging through ongoing intra-actions' (Barad, 2007, p. 224). Therefore, matter and meaning cannot be considered separately because meaning-making is a continuous motion of becoming in and with the world. The children and workmen (persons) together with the fence -more are intra-acting in a dynamic doing. Barad (2014) builds on the concepts of agential intra-action through the motion of 'cutting together-apart', which implies that entities are simultaneously separated and interconnected. Agential cuts are not simply about isolating individual entities, i.e., the children and the fence. They involve a complex intertwining of a relationship that is a momentary stabilisation of doing rather than being. In this way, the agency of the fence is not a determining force. The fence acquires the capacity to impact within a relational process that intra-action with children and the workpeople, which Barad (2007, p. 141) characterises as a 'dynamism of forces'. The fence imposed a regulatory framework through intra-actions that affect power relations between children, workmen, and educators. As such, a human-centric position that views the fence as static, and passive is challenged.

Story 2 - A Bog-moment in Black Futurity

Figure 2

A Bog-moment of Black Futurity



Story 2 - A Bog moment of Black Futurity (figure 2) came about as I walked with my son in the peatland, commonly called the Bog. To generate a response to the photograph, I bring Black refusal and Black futurity into conversation with new materialism. In reviewing the image, I rely on Campt's haptic framework of listening to images as a mode of Black futurity. A haptic framework insists on thinking and feeling what Black refusal might sound like. By attending to the quiet resonant frequencies of images, visual images can be engaged as a conduit to see, feel, and sense how relationships of Black refusal are mediated through everyday practices (Campt, 2017; Campt, 2019). Guided by Campt's haptic framework of phonic substance, this everyday encounter with the Bog becomes more than just ordinary.

phonic substance: the sound inherent to an image; one that defines or creates it, that is neither contingent upon nor necessarily preceding it; not simply a sound played over, behind or about an image; one that emanates from the image itself (Campt, 2019, p. 81).

From a new materialism perspective, the human body is a temporal location within a continuous flow of material forces between people, places, and political systems (Alaimo, 2010; Bodén & Joelsson, 2023; Teets, 2022). As such, the porous materiality of the human body is embedded in a location of relational networks comprising of political systems and racial ecologies alongside the more-than-human. Reading this story through the lens of Black refusal testifies to the multiple possibilities of belonging for Black childhood futurity. As a location, the human child's body and the Bog are temporally intertwined in an intimate moment of continuous flow of materiality. In this intimate moment of world-making, a stillness leaves aside notions exclusively concerned with human entities. What if the Bog does not belong to us, but we belong to the Bog? Hence, this relational moment of being and belonging to the Bog captured in the image (figure 2) challenges the human-centric position of who or what belongs and who decides.

This is not to fall into a trap that nature can fix how discrimination relating to belonging is experienced nor a psychological orientation of resilience. Nor is this moment to be misinterpreted as silence in speaking out against injustice. This image bears witness to an intimate moment in Black childhood futurity that subverts louder discourses of non-belonging. A relational belonging

where human physical-ness in all its material flesh-ness is inseparable from nature, time, and space. While haptically listening to the image - figure 2, I wrote the following poem.

The Bog bodies

The Bog is silent.
Stillness radiates and vibrates.

A stillness that refuses to explain.
Belonging as nothing sounds.
So, hush now.

If all can listen.
Where I am, is where I am from.

Concluding agential cuts as provocations

Initially, this research process did not anticipate the (re)storying of belonging. Trusting in the ‘not-yet’ data reconceptualised belonging to include Black futurity while expanding from an anthropocentric position to embrace the more-than-human Bog. In the context of Ireland as a geopolitical location, this post-foundational approach made visible matter that ripples within colonised discourses of belonging, such as Whiteness and bordering. In this case, a fence, the Bog, and bodies would be rendered invisible through methodologies that assume human exception. Re-turning these two stories gave rise to capturing an intimate moment of Black childhood futurity. In this instant, the stillness of Black refusal subverted louder discourses of non-belonging, generating possibilities otherwise for Black futurity. Engaging with theories of Black refusal and Black futurity provided an opportunity to step outside the dominant discourses of belonging formed by Whiteness and nationalism.

In an act of rebellion, I do not confine this article to a concluding summary only. Instead, as an invitation to the field of ECEC, I will sum up questions as provocations to continue re-turning belonging as an emerging concept within research and practice.

How can the field of ECEC continually expand the vision of what is possible within an educational arena not defined by human exceptionalism or White supremacy? In the intra-action of (re)storying belonging, the following agential cuts emerge as provocations: How can Black futurity be included in thinking with belonging as a relational practice of world-making? Within a relational paradigm, what types of borders can be undone to connect humans and more-than-humans?

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