**Becoming child/ becoming dress**

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**Abstract**

Taking an example of play as a point of departure I mark out why children's bodies have become tricky subjects often demanding the night watchman of repression. Following Foucault (1977) and Butler (1990; 1993) I foreground the interrelationship between desire, the lived performances of bodies and the sometimes shattering consequences of those frames of containment in which we inscribe children including 'girl' and 'boy'. The paper then moves to question whether Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) conceptualisations of 'becoming' offers a radical means for dismantling manifestations of the body and in so doing provides me with a space to consider alternative practices in relation to children and their bodies.

Key words: body; becoming; performance

**Introduction**

Taking an example of data as a point of departure, this paper situates the child's body as a key focus. Drawing on Foucault and Butler I summarise how discourses predispose children's bodily enactments to be inclined towards some performances and not others. I go on to argue that whilst both theorists call into question the idea of a stable, normative and unified body there is still more work to be done to eradicate this particular fantasy. It is in relation to this work that I move to question whether Deleuze and Guattari's (2004) conceptualisations of 'becoming' has radical potential for dismantling the body where alternative practices might become possible.

The paper pursues a number of pressing questions where I ask: can the concept of 'becoming' help me to think beyond sterile distinctions and the routine ways in which the child's body is marked and mapped? Can it move me beyond familiar and reassuring ways of knowing children? In addressing these questions I draw on an example of data that is derived from an eighteen month ethnographic study that sought to understand how and why some children earn negative reputations such as 'naughty'.

In this study we drew on a poststructuralist(s) analytical framework that allowed us to appreciate the ways and means by which children and their teachers were caught within the discursive practices that circulate within the milieu of schooling, where what constitutes 'good' or conversely 'bad' behaviour is discursively produced (MacLure, 2003, Brown and Jones, 2001). Three researchers spent one day a week in a reception classroom that are for children aged 4-5 years. Reception classrooms are the first stages of official and legal schooling in England. The researchers employed a mix of methods including filmed and written observations, interviews and informal chats. For fuller details, including detailed descriptions of the research sites and methods used please see MacLure et al., 2011.

**The data**

A group of five-year-old children are playing in an area that had been crudely but effectively constructed as a medieval castle. Lucy and four boys including Harley, his twin brother Sean, Jonathan and Jack were in the castle. Lucy had put a princess costume on and was directing the other children in terms of the roles she wanted them to play. "You can be the prince", she says to Harley. Harley has picked up another princess costume and is putting the dress on. He has his back to the other children. "Look at Harley" says Jonathan. "He's being a princess!" Lucy turns to look at Harley and then turns away to help Jack fasten the jester costume. "Right, you're entertaining me with dancing" she says to Jack. "I'm not dancing. I'll do some magic tricks," responds Jack. Jonathan suddenly bursts into laughter. "Look at the girly Harley" he says, pointing at Harley. Harley is swirling around. Sean is watching quietly. Jonathan cries again, "Look at the girly Harley" pointing at Harley. Harley, still swirling, is holding the skirt out so that he seems to float across the castle. Sean is still watching quietly. Jack and Jonathan burst into loud laughter at Harley.

It is this laughter that prompts an intervention from Ms Anderson. "That's a little too much noise in the castle", comes Ms Anderson's voice from outside. The children do not quieten, but continue laughing as Harley spins, skips and flounces around in exaggerated ways. "Stop it," says Sean. "I've asked you to settle down in there!" shouts Ms Anderson. "Sshh!" says Lucy, but Jonathan and Jack are beginning to force their laughter as Harley continues to perform as a princess. Ms Anderson comes over and

stands just outside the castle. "We're trying to work hard over here Jonathan, and all this noise is distracting us. Do you think you could play a little more quietly?" "Ok", says Lucy. Sean nods his head. Jonathan covers his mouth with both hands, trying to stifle his laughter. Harley starts to undo the princess costume and takes it off.

**Writing about a castle, bodies and technologies: tricky positioning(s)**

First, a confession. I did not write the data. Another member of the project team documented it. Following Denzin (2003) I understand the use and the liberties that I am about to take with my colleague Rachel Holmes' field-notes as 'performative'. Hence, I am seeing the observation, where what was initially seen, sensed, and felt as continuing to intermingle with my own feelings and my own senses. As such, writing is always a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1994).

It is perhaps not too surprising that the paper turns initially to Foucault given the alignment of children's play within a castle. In general, Foucault has highlighted how institutions including schools, prisons or, in this instance, a medieval castle, are neither benign nor innocent establishments. Rather, they are sites where what it means to be a man, or a woman, or a boy or a girl is produced within a range of discursive practices so as to fabricate or construct a "regulatory ideal" (Butler, 1993, p. 1). From a poststructualist perspective(s), "the meanings ascribed to bodies are culturally produced, plural and ever changing" (Weedon, 1999, p. 102). Discourses operate both at the level of language and within material structures where together they have serious implications in terms of shaping both bodies and minds. Rose (1998) expounds further:

> Certain ways of holding oneself, walking, running, holding the head, and positioning the limbs are not merely culturally relative or acquired through gender socialization, but are regimes of the body that seek to subjectify in terms of a certain truth of gender, inscribing a particular relation to oneself in a corporal regime: prescribed, rationalized, and taught in manuals of advice, etiquette, and manners, and enjoined by sanctions as well as seductions (p. 32).

In brief, discourses define or shape whom we are, where we learn how to think and behave through regulatory discursive practices. Given this, it is not too surprising that Foucault (2006) urges us to be deeply skeptical and suspicious of discourses and that

we should "criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them" (Foucault, 2006, p.171 in Chomsky & Foucault, 2006). Turning to the children and their play it is possible to pinpoint two significant elements. The first is language and the second is the body. Let me first concentrate on language, knowing that the body will inevitably intrude. Then I will go on to discuss how I might 'fight'.

If we follow the line that the 'self' is constituted within talk, where the stories and narratives we tell about ourselves and one another are significant and moreover, keep us "in good repair" (Shotter and Gergen, 1989, p. x) it then becomes possible to perceive Lucy's requests and orders as (perfectly) intelligible. Her own position as princess, within the specific domain of the castle constitutes a regime where Lucy's command is "sayable", "hearable" and "operationable" (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). Positioned as princess, it becomes (perfectly) comprehensible for her to use the properties that are available, including those of boy and costume so as to produce intelligible inhabitants and actions within a specific domain. It is suggested that Lucy, in donning a princess costume and in wanting Harley to become a prince can potentially set in train meanings that are inscribed within power/knowledge relations, which provide the basis for surveillance and regulative (heterosexual) practices. Augmenting Harley, as prince will help to establish the castle as a "community of consent" where discursive boundaries will be drawn around what is both "intelligible" and "desirable" (Britzman, 2000, p. 36). The paper will return to the manner of Harley's 'refusal' subsequently.

By helping Jack to fashion himself as a jester and by uttering the following: "Right, you're entertaining me with dancing" I gain a sense of Lucy's own subjective security as necessarily bound up and implicated in the subject positioning of Jack and with relations of power and regulatory practices that are attendant with/in the subject of 'jester' and the acts of 'entertaining' and 'dancing'. It is the latter which appears to act as a trigger on Jack where he refuses to dance and instead offers to "do some magic tricks". So, whilst both children can agree on the subject positioning of jester, Jack nevertheless appears wary of being a dancing jester whose role is to entertain Lucy. By promoting himself as a jester who does tricks he both contests and effects an exit strategy from a subjectivity

(a dancing jester) that carries with it forms of being - which for him seem problematic - whilst at the same time retaining an intelligible semblance within the castle.

As said, the work of a discourse makes certain subject positions comprehensible and by inference others incomprehensible. In the above data it is evident that whilst Lucy's enactment of a princess has been noted there is, particularly when compared to the language surrounding Harley's performance, an absence of emotive description. It is suggested that this lack of description contributes towards hardening Lucy's position as princess as ordinary, banal and predictable. Within the make believe world of castles becoming a princess is what girls 'normally' do. Thus the text insinuates and makes 'natural' Lucy's performance and in so doing works at confirming (my) common sense notions about what girls can (and cannot) be. As Bruhm and Hurley (2004) note, who tells the story matters because it is the storyteller including in this instance the ethnographic researcher who defines what can exist in the field of representation. So how the data has been conveyed – who have been made visible, what language has been used and so on carries what Bruhm and Hurley refer to as "moral weight", a weight which in classrooms is directed towards creating the normative child (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004, p. x) and in medieval castles creates what is customary or the ideal standard in terms of being a jester and or a princess.

Judith Butler's work (1990; 1993; 2006/2008), however, has the potential for tampering with Lucy's performance both as a 'girl' and as a 'princess' as being normative. Butler (1993) insists that:

> Gender is performative insofar as it is the effect of a regularity regime of
> gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under
> constraint …There is no subject who precedes or enacts this repetition of
> norms (p. 237).

So, just as there is nothing 'real' about Lucy's performance of the princess nor is there anything 'real' about her gender. Following Butler, Lucy's performance (as girl and as princess) is so ordinary, so unremarkable because it's predicated on a repeated stylisation that is enacted time and again within highly rigid regulatory frameworks whether that be an imaginary castle, the fairy tales we tell children, Disney films, adverts or, as suggested, classrooms. It is because these enactments of gendered

performances are so repetitive that they "congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Within Butler's terms Lucy's gestures and her acts are no more indicative of an essentialist or universal notion of what constitutes a girl and/or a princess for both are a fabrication that has "no ontological status apart from its various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler, 1990: p. 336). The illusion that she creates when wearing the frock sits on yet another illusion where the latter is "discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler, 1990, p. 337).

Yet, if it is accepted that Lucy performance is predicated on reiteration rather than ontological substance does that mean she has no agency? Within the confines of the castle, which arguably is a space that is representative of patriarchal power, Lucy does command. Even dressed in that most potent symbol of femininity, a pink princess costume, she nevertheless does seem to have her say. However, Butler (1995) would argue that Lucy's commands, her utterances and her 'doings' are all performative where performativity is defined thus:

> if a word ... might be said to 'do' a thing, then it appears that the word
> not only signifies a thing, but that this signification will also be an
> enactment of the thing. It seems here that the meaning of a performative
> act is to be found in this apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting
> (p. 198).

So, for Butler Lucy's agency does not 'exist' prior to its production through enacted discourse. Thus, her 'doings' are constituted within already established formations of knowledge where "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler, 1990, p. 24). Lucy's agency is caught within discourses where she helps to fasten a costume but where she nevertheless cannot get a boy to entertain her with dancing. There are reverberations here with Elisabeth Grosz's work that is concerned with architecture and the body. For Grosz, who in turn was influenced by Luce Irigary (1993) ideas, 'woman' functions as a container or place for 'man'. Lucy like 'woman' affords a place in which:

> …man can situate himself as subject, which means she represents a

place that has no place, that has no place of its own but functions only as a place for another…the exchange: she gives him a world; he confines her in his (Grosz, 2001, p. 159).

If, as Butler argues, performances are reiterative does this mean that Lucy and the other children can never be different, can never escape the enclosure of (repetitive) normativity? Butler does suggest that there are radical possibilities, which lie within the notion of *repetition*. It is within repetition that agency becomes a possibility. She writes:

> The subject is not *determined* by the rules by which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, *but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency", then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition (author's emphasis, Butler, 2005, p. 116).

Within these terms agency becomes a possibility when coded scripts, binary logic and taxonomical structures that mark out and produce relations of power between girl/boy, prince/princess and perhaps jester/dancer are discarded, or ignored, or replaced and in so doing individuals can experience themselves as different in spite of existing conventions. This is the moment or the juncture, as Butler (2004) describes it, when " a subject – a person, a collective- asserts a right or entitlement to a livable life when no such prior authorization exists, when no clear enabling convention is in place" ( 2004, p. 224). Despite and because of her capacity to designate (certain) roles Lucy's performance is without radical potential but can the same be said of Harley?

**Becoming…**

Previously, Judith Butler offered a frame, predicated on performance in which to situate the children and where I am left wondering whether repetition might carry some radical potency. My next step is to turn to Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari where I want to grapple with their concept of 'becoming' as a further move in destabilising and unsettling stable subjectivities that are codified, given substance and made rock-like by

common sense and by reiterative practices. I am aware of the theoretical differences between Butler and Deleuze and Guattari (Hickey-Moody and Rasmussen, 2009) and I am not attempting to synthesise their work. Rather, I take up each as a way of supporting my own endeavours in thinking against the grain.

Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari also have an interest in repetition. Whilst Butler suggests that there are potential radical possibilities within the repetitive act of identity performance Deleuze argues that repetition is always difference. Deleuze (1994) draws a distinction between generality and repetition. So, in perceiving an object once and then seeing it again at a later juncture whilst we assert repetition of the same we are nevertheless making a judgement based on generality. Our common sense suggests that if it looks the same it is a repetition of the same. Protevi (2011), following Deleuze, indicates how retention and expectation give us faith that things will repeat in the ways we are used to. Thus past and future are "synthesised in a living present" (Protevi, 2011, p. 34) and it is this synthesis, which "is our habit of life" (2011, p. 34). Perception, repetition and memory can offer stability yet besides being a questionable stability it also blocks us from recognizing our potential for seeing differently. As Colebrook (2002) notes, "… there is always more than the actual world; there are also all the potential worlds we might see" (p. 6). The question of how we shift ourselves so as to see "all the potential worlds" is embodied in Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'becoming', which as is subsequently illustrated is different to 'being'.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004) Deleuze and Guattari are quite firm in marking out what is (and is not) 'becoming'. They note, for instance, that a becoming is not a correspondence between relations. Nor is it a resemblance or an imitation. So in returning to Lucy, for example, we can see her taking up of the role of princess as predicated on a set of comprehensible blocks (girl + castle + costume = princess). To see this 'becoming', at least within Deleuze and Guattari's terms, would be unproductive. Lucy as princess makes common sense but it nevertheless "impoverishes the phenomenon [becoming] under study" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 262).

Thinking beyond or outside of customary logic necessitates rejecting linearity. To achieve this daunting task Deleuze and Guattari encourges us to think rhizomatically, where we have to fight the urge not to take root, or to look for causes along a linear line

where girl, dress, castle is predetermined to equal princess. As they note, "a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 8). So, thinking isn't about establishing end points; rather, it's a matter of getting stuck into the thick of things.

In turning to Harley I want to get into the thick of things. I want to put to one side the idea that Harley is imitating or resembling a princess; instead I want to try to pay attention to 'stuff' that is in between or in the midst of things. For if becoming is not resemblance, imitation or identification, what is it? "To become," writes Deleuze (1997) is not:

> to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of
> proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation where one can no longer be
> distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule—neither imprecise
> nor general, but unforeseen and non-preexistent, singularized out of a
> population rather than determined in a form (Deleuze, 1997, p. 1).

Deleuze and Guattari illustrate this with Hitchcock's film, *The Birds*. They write, "When Hitchcock does birds, he does not reproduce bird calls, he produces an electronic sound like a field of intensities or a wave of vibrations, a continuous variation, like a terrible threat welling up inside of us" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 336). In turning back to Harley I begin to wonder what he 'does' if he is not reproducing princess, if he is not imitating a girl(y). Lingering once again on the data I feel myself resonating with Harley's body caught as it is in a dangerous dance that refuses to be stilled by sneers, laughter or taunts. Such stings and arrows are aimed at piercing and ridiculing, hell bent on (re)turning him to the same old, knowable Harley. One that is entombed within his unitary, customary and familiar self. As he swirls, skips and flounces I read (and sense) his movements as an intensity that propels him to go beyond what is safe, to move outside of prevalent discourses that insist on a unfolding of the same. I hear, see and feel his breath labouring as he swirls and floats. And yet I am still haunted by representation where the signifier 'dress' acts as a placeholder, or if you will, a form of containment. Doesn't dress = princess? Again I turn back to Deleuze and Guattari who remind me to resist resemblance and to be sensitive to influences. Bradotti (2002) continues the argument when she proffers the

advice of transcending the signifier (i.e. dress) and to heed "the potency of [its] expression" (p. 119). Returning back to Deleuze and Guattari they would suggest that this "expression" gets its effectiveness and affectiveness from constant movement, lines of flight and molecular activity. Dress, children, castle, movement and I suggest, myself are all caught within an assemblage where Harley is *becoming dress*. Corrupting Deleuze and Guattari (but with good intentions) I ask what does *becoming dress* make possible? What are its functions with and in connection with other things? What does it transmit? What intensities does it induce or condone or negate? What vibrations are put in circulation which whilst indiscernible nevertheless have molecular affect producing reactions that I feel, like a sudden, (in)explicable gripping of the guts?

Again I move to corrupt Deleuze and Guattari (please see the references to Little Hans in *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 282-84) so as to edge towards and feel my way into *becoming dress*. I see Harley taken up in assemblage where the castle, the brotherly element, the boys' friendships, the jester's costume, the princess dress, the right to wear the dress, the right to dance wearing the dress, the joy of winning the right but also the dangers of winning the right, the shame, the teacher's angry focus on work, the muffling of toxic yet joyous laughter… These are not idle reveries. Rather, they are trembling, tentative but nevertheless serious considerations of thinking my way out of normative and habitual notions in relation to the self.

Deleuze and Guattari (2004) make an interesting observation when they note that "there is no performed logical order to becomings and multiplicities, there are criteria and the important thing is they not be used after the fact, that they be applied in the course of events, that they be sufficient to guide us through the dangers" (p. 251). As Patricia MacCormack (2001) points out "becomings can be as liminal or as domestic as we desire based on the potentials of our own being to expand into a process of hijacking the movement and rest, speed and slowness of that which we become" (p. 2). But this does not imply Harley has become half boy, half dress for this would mean that in a half and half state he would have forged an alliance between two singularities, keeping the signification of each. Rather, it is suggested that a boundary has been dissolved between boy and dress and in so doing the ontological categories that we would normally use to pin either Harley or the dress down are disrupted. In seeing Harley as *becoming dress* and the dress as *becoming Harley* we can understand his

body as being outside the 'conscious self' or the 'biologically determined self'; we can now understand *becoming dress* 'through *what it can do*- its processes, performances, assemblages and the transformation of becoming' (Springgay, 2008, p. 2, author's own emphasis). *Becoming dress* is not dependent on organisation or on an interior truth or identity; rather, it is an organic, (text)ured desiring machine that exists within the event. Within the context of the castle *Becoming Dress* connects, repels, galvanises. It invokes laughter, disconcertion and anger. As Deleuze and Guattari indicate (2004), "all becomings are molecular: the animal, flower, or stone one becomes are molecular collectivities, not molar subjects, objects, or form that we know from the outside and recognize from experience, through science, or by habit" (p. 303). *Becoming dress* can be understood as creation where molecular connections produce movement, speed and even floating. "Fibres" as Deleuze and Guattari note, "lead us from one to the other, transform one into the other as they pass through doors and thresholds" (p. 300) forging 'unnatural nuptials' outside of the programmed body" (p. 302). I see my workings with *Becoming dress* as a door or threshold that allows movement away from those theoretical frames which seek to first 'know' children and second to tie or nail them into particular identities. *Becoming dress* allows me to think of the body outside of boundaries including that of anatomy. Working in the middle obliges me to see beyond usual or familiar scripts that circumscribe and represent children.

**Concluding remarks**

Working with Foucault, Butler, Deleuze and Guattari I have tried to write performatvely, investing myself in the data as well as arguably infecting it. In moving between the two princesses, a jester, a silent twin and a cross teacher the aim has been to worry away at the body. In so doing the paper has illustrated how discourse, performance and organisation addresses, represents and acts upon self and body so as to produce normative, stable accounts of identity that are located within a bounded body. Thus even within a make believe medieval castle both children's selves and their bodies are con(script)ed, codified and pressed into being where binary logic, common sense and habitual practices  leave children little choice but to be either a jester or a princess.

Yet by and through the peculiarities of *Becoming dress* I see possibilities for resisting standard ways of behaving and performing. Deleuze and Guattari argue that this standard, which they describe as 'majoritarian' is predicated on power. Thus

majoritarian and its opposite, minoritarian are not understood in the numerical sense, but rather through their positions in power relations. Thus if Harley, for example, had taken on the role of prince there would have been no challenge to or interruption of 'the standard'. As Beaulieu (2011) notes, "there is no becoming-man as the male is the majoritarian standard and becomings can only be minoritarian" (p. 76). Both 'becoming princess' and 'becoming dress' can be understood as a minoritarian because each can be understood as the negative other to the majoritarian standard. It is possible I think to see why Deleuze and Guattari ascribe a political value to the experimentation of becomings. The latter always constitutes a deviation from majoritarian power.

One final thought. Whilst the medieval castle is a temporary structure fashioned out of relatively flimsy cardboard it is nevertheless quite adequate in fortifying a number of habitual and normative practices. Whilst it is noticeable that these performances emanate from scripts predicated on reiterative and repetitive performance I nevertheless think that I did catch a glimpse of *becoming*. It would appear that currently Sean and Jonathan are unable to "make new and strange connections…but rather fulfil a certain form of subjectivity fixed in space" (MacCormack, 2001, p. 2). However as MacCormack continues, "*one is never safe* in a dominant position but must re-establish the rules of dominance while fulfilling the expected subjectivity of these rules" (my emphasis, p. 33). And, whilst cautious, I nevertheless understand the statement "one is never safe" as heralding possibilities for cutting into what is still the yard stick by which subjectivity is appraised - 'the white heterosexual male' - and against which the non-white and the non-heterosexual individual is aligned and negatively construed.

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