"A Quick Sideways Look and Wild Grin"

Joyful Assemblages in Moments of Girlhood

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ABSTRACT

Through stories of young girls at play produced in a collective biography workshop we trace flows of desire and excesses of joy, and bring recent feminist work on positive affect into our analysis of girlhood becomings. Ringrose (2011, 2013) argues that the concept of the “affective assemblage” brings together affect, embodiment, and relationality in powerful ways to enable a mapping of how desire moves through the social. She suggests that the affective capacities of assemblages can be “life affirming or life destroying” (2011: 602). In this article we are interested in mapping flows of desire, moments of joy and possibility in moments of girlhood, and in the limitations and contingencies within these moments that shut down these possibilities. We suggest that the methodology of collective biography (Davies and Gannon 2006, 2009, 2013) offers potential for tracing the microparticulars of girlhood becomings.

KEYWORDS

affect, assemblage, entanglement, joy, play

Introduction

Our work is inspired by feminist scholars taking up Deleuzian philosophy in their analyses of empirical data (Coleman 2008; Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007; Jackson and Mazzei 2012; Renold and Ringrose 2008; Tamboukou 2008; and others). They develop theoretical tools that can help move beyond impasses in poststructurally oriented feminism: an excessive focus on desire as lack in psychoanalytic approaches, an overemphasis on language and neglect of materiality in discursively oriented approaches, an inclination towards deconstruction of binaries but limited capacity to think beyond subjectivity. In the first section of this article we outline our theo-
retical framework, bringing together theories of assemblage, affect and joy. We argue for analytical attention to the microparticals of the affective assemblages of girlhood, suggesting that collective biography is an appropriate method for such work. We then outline the method and the workshop within which we generated the narratives of girlhood joy that are discussed in the final section of this article.

Deleuzian Concepts: Affects and Assemblages

As Hickey-Moody and Malins (2007) suggest, for Deleuze philosophy entails “the creation of concepts which enable something new to be thought or felt” (2). A concept is not something given or fixed but a “way of connecting new ideas and possibilities for thinking” (Colebrook 2002: 57). Concepts do not sit apart, predetermined and ready to be applied to the world as generalizations or interpretive models that might capture meaning in a prescribed sense, but are always on the move, mutating, changing and being invented and reinvented in their encounters in the world. Concepts do things, they are inventive and creative, and can be plugged in to one another and to new concepts to enable new ways of thinking (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013). In reconceptualising joy and girlhood in this article, the concept of “affective assemblages” elaborated by Ringrose (2011, 2013) is particularly helpful. Before we proceed to her particular formulation and the potential she sees for rethinking power and desire, we turn briefly to the concepts “assemblage” and “affect” to consider how they are understood philosophically.

The concept of the assemblage emphasises connection and interaction as fundamental to life itself. It does not privilege subjectivity, language or the human. What is important is movement, flow, affect and desire. Affect and desire move differentially through components of an assemblage, which is always itself on the move—dissolving and reassembling in new formations. Assemblages are heterogeneous and some parts are more affectively volatile or receptive than other parts. While a “human body is an assemblage of genetic material, ideas, powers of acting and a relation to other bodies,” there is no hierarchy or order that governs any assemblage. Rather, “the law of any assemblage is created from its connections” (Colebrook 2002: xx). Rather than regarding an assemblage as an entity or thing, for DeLanda (2006) the processes of assembling are most interesting. The sorts of entities that might be understood as assemblages range from “atoms and molecules to biological
organisms, species and ecosystems” (3). An assemblage is not merely a coincidence of parts (each with its own properties and capacities) in a particular space and time, but it is always something more: new properties and capacities emerge through interactions and connections, through ongoing processes of assembling. Thus an assemblage is characterized by relations of exteriority that are different and beyond those qualities held by its component parts, and further, any “component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different” (DeLanda 2006: 10). These processes of detaching and plugging in, of dissolving and reassembling, take place continuously.

Deleuzian approaches are attuned to spatial and temporal dimensions of experience that are ephemeral and fleeting. Assemblages form from “an hour of a day, a river, a climate, a strange moment during a concert” (Rajchman 2000: 85). The specificity of the assemblage is underlined by the related concept of “haecceity”—or “this-ness” which is “a moment of pure speed and intensity… like when a swimming body becomes-wave and is momentarily suspended in nothing but an intensity of forces and rhythms” (Halsey 2007:146). Methodologically, the concept of the assemblage suggests that we need strategies for mapping connection and disconnection, formation and reformation, for following the transient and ephemeral “force relations,” blockages and flows of power, energy and desire as “[a]ssemblages never simply operate as a free flow of energy or desire, but are cut through with relations of power” (Ringrose 2013: 81).

In her work on girls in online social media networks, Ringrose hooks the concept of affect together with assemblage to foreground bodies (including non-human bodies) as desiring machines. Although affect is sometimes associated with emotion, its use in cultural theory points to pre-discursive, visceral, corporeal intensities that are located in bodies and that circulate between bodies. This is a shift from an “ontology of being” to an ontology of “effectuation” as “we know nothing of a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 284, cited in Ringrose 2013: 81). The concept of affect attends to how “assemblages, languages or social institutions impact on bodies in ways that are not conscious.” Affect differs from commonsense understandings of “emotion” or “feelings,” which overcode, delimit and shut down possibilities for understanding the movements of affect. Rather, “[e]motion comes later, as a classifying or stratifying of affect” (Hickey-Moody and Malins 2007: 8, italics in original). Affects are mobile, volatile, visceral. They erupt, flood,
wash through and exceed individual bodies. Deleuze (1995) suggests that “[a]ffects aren’t feelings, they’re becomings that spill over beyond whoever lives through them” (137). Affect is not some separate or autonomous thing but part of “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into the world” (Ahmed 2010: 22).

The inherently mutable and volatile quality of the affective assemblage contains possibilities for life affirming flows of desire and possibility, and it shuts them down. The affective capacities of assemblages can be understood “along an ethical axis” as “life affirming or life destroying” (Bonta and Protevi 2004: 10, cited in Ringrose 2011: 602). As well as this ethical axis, assemblages are also always organized along a second “structural axis” of “stratification” or of dominating “codes and territories” (Bonta and Protevi 2004: 10). Normative expectations, habitual thoughts and practices, dominant discourses of sexuality and gender can reterritorialize momentary lines of flight, imagination and creativity that open new possibilities for girls. Intrigued by Ringrose’s (2011) approach to the affective assemblage, we wanted to explore memories that suggested life affirming flows of desire, joy and possibility in narratives of girlhood. However, as her research shows, spaces of possibility are also always “striated” (600) and subject to modes of capture. Using Bonta and Protevi’s formulation, we must attend to axes of life affirming and life destroying simultaneously—not as or but as and. The normative or molar formations that structure society such as gender, class, sexuality—and that might be understood as life destroying—are simultaneously reinscribed on the girlhood desiring machines that we glimpse in our narratives of memory.

**Affective Assemblage and Joy**

In this section we sketch an emerging affirmative turn in feminist theory. Our interest in joy is paralleled by work on happiness (Ahmed 2010a, 2010b), on hope (Coleman and Ferreday 2010, Colebrook 2010), and on joy (Colebrook 2008). This conceptual focus is not a naive, depoliticized or dehistoricized feminism but an initially cautious turn towards what might have been too easy to overlook in earlier critiques. It is part of the turn to materiality and to the body, as positive affects such as joy arise in bodies, before thought. They bubble up or brim over to animate and vitalize the body. They come from outside the body as affective flows and desires that are triggered by objects, ideas and matter that connect and that carry and
are in some ways contagious in their effects. As we have noted in the previous section, life affirming flows of affect in an assemblage are always accompanied by life destroying capacities, by lines of stratification and reterritorialization. As Ahmed (2010b) warns, positive affects are always contingent: “Happiness can arrive in a moment and be lost by virtue of its recognition. Happiness as a feeling appears very precarious, easily displaced” (33). In this affirmative turn, it is joy that “opens up the potentiality of life” and that signifies “an intensity of feeling that is transitory and must be transitory if it is to be experienced as intensity” (Ahmed 2010a: 214). Ahmed’s approach emphasises how happy affects emerge through intimate and temporally specific contact with things that become part of our “bodily horizons” (2010b: 32). However, these “happy objects” can lead to an instrumental orientation to positive affect, are shaped by habit and labour, and can have what she calls “unhappy effects” that oversimplify complex histories of differences and injustices (50).

From a specifically Deleuzian frame, Colebrook (2008) suggests that joy is more than animal and more than human, and narrative is ideal for tracing its movements. Joy is “a passage beyond the human intellect of utility and quantified pleasure, to an intuition of the movements and sympathies that are not our own” (83). Colebrook suggest that it is through literature that “the human-animal” is able to “take its technologies of meaning—in the form of narration and images—and create a ‘line of flight’” (83) towards the not yet known. This is not a bounded or individualistic happiness, but a “vitalism” beyond the self. Colebrook extracts joy from any sense of a “chosen or ordered life” and argues that “joy is the very becoming of life freed from any organising image” (86). Much literature that strives towards unity as it constructs coherent human subjects sees happiness as the “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue—so that we become what we ought to be,” while in contrast “joy is the liberation of creation and potential from virtue” (95). In this article, we turn our attention to what appear as smooth spaces of joy rather than the overcoded and commodified notion of happiness that is critiqued by Colebrook and Ahmed. Rather than literary narratives we trace joyful lines of desire in vignettes of memory from collective biography. We approach these as affective assemblages that exceed the individual, and in them we find flows of energy and possibility, sitting alongside reminders of the contingency of joy, of the constraints and molar formations that accompany joyful girl-becomings.
Collective Biography

We require methodologies that map the minute movements of affects as they flow through girlhood assemblages that attend to temporal and spatial rhythms, and the moment-to-moment detail of how assemblages “enable and disenable bodies” (Ringrose 2013: 82). Narrative forms are particularly adept at attending to the “minutiae” of lives and social formations, and the “microphysics of power and desire” through which affect flows in any assemblage (Tamboukou 2008: 361). The narrative vignettes of memory in collective biography enable this tracing of the minutiae of lived experience and open possibilities for interrogating transient moments that seem to provoke discursive, affective and embodied shifts. Despite the inevitability of capture and reterritorialization, this methodology also enables researchers to attend to qualities that are open-ended, unexpected and surprising that arise within memories. The subject is conceived as emergent in moments that are simultaneously discursive, relational and material and in which flows and becomeings in complex assemblages can be momentarily glimpsed.

Collective biography enables a group of researchers to begin to map how subjects are co-implicated with others and with the world. We have elaborated collective biography elsewhere but in general it proceeds as follows. In response to a prompt inspired by particular readings or problems, participants share vignettes of memory that are evoked by their reading and thinking around the topic. In the workshop, as each person tells her story in turn, other participants listen with care to how each story, in its embodied, affective detail, becomes imaginable, recognisable, affectively and materially credible in their own bodies and imaginations (Davies and Gannon 2006, 2009, 2011, 2012). After the stories are told to the group, in as much detail as can be recalled, each participant writes her story and then shares it again by reading it aloud to the group—again with each listener attending to the embodied visceral, material and affective detail of the memory. Questions might be asked of the writer about any points of confusion, clichés, or abstractions. Each story focuses on a particular moment, which might be as long as an afternoon, or as short as a few minutes. In their attention to precise detail, to the minutiae of the moment, the stories aim to capture a sense of the “haecceity” or “just-thisness” of the particular moment (Halsey 2007: 145–146).

A collective biography story is not a transparent window into the past but a precisely and artfully constructed re-imagining of a past moment. We do not claim veracity for these narratives in terms of biographical truths. We
do not seek to position memory as “a veridical act that reproduces the original.” Rather, we understand that narratives of collective biography are “always constituted from a particular time, place, discursive frame and present self” (Davies and Gannon 2006: 13) as well as the particular prompts, readings, theories or problems that are under investigation. They are always partial and subjective, in that memory writers in collective biography are the authors of their memories and—as in any accounting of experience—they select, sort and shape their narrative accounts in the particular context of the telling and writing. However, in collective biography we are not the sole authors of our experience but are entangled together as we work collaboratively with each other to find those words that express the embodied sensations of the memory. Entities are emergent and include “among other things, ourselves; the research question and readings we have assembled; the triggers for memory that we have generated out of those readings; past selves as we remember them; the physical, relational, and discursive space of the memories; the physical, relational, and discursive space inside of which the memory work is done” (Davies and Gannon 2012: 362). Memory stories do not endeavor to capture singular truths or to fix a biographical subject but to explore the entangled agencies of matter, affect and language that are the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the subject in each moment.

**Girlhood Joy**

Our memories of girlhood joy were those that seemed to suggest these moments of immersion and intensity. The assemblages within which these girls become recognisable as joyful subjects are, paradoxically, impersonal. They did not form in response to human will or intentionality, and they exceed the human, the animal and the animte. The two stories in this section both depict girls engaged in outdoor play—in a playground in a park, and in a creek on a farm. In each instance, the girls mobilize imagination to take themselves up in ways outside the ordinary, but their imaginative play does not arise independently from within themselves but rather from the social and material affordances of the particular moments in which they find themselves. These moments were remembered as positive, life affirming and joyful. However they are also nebulus and transient, carrying within them the lines of reterritorialization that are always looming on the horizon of the event. Each of the memories emphasises the materiality of the event but sociality is also crucial to both stories. It is in collusion with other children
that new possibilities for being emerge in their play. However, in the first story in which a girl has gone to the park with her sisters on the weekend, it is also within these spaces of sociality that lines of flight towards the new are curtailed. The narrator is six years old, and her sisters are eight and eleven.

*Playing at the park*

My sisters and I are playing at the park—a large open park mostly free space with picnic tables and old rose gardens, one tall slippery dip, a maple swing tangled together, a lopsided roundabout and two swings making a triangle between the slippery dip and the roundabout. I swing as high as I can, the long chains slipping and gripping, the taste of metal fills my nostrils and I want to take off, my swing a launching pad into the sun-filled blue sky. My sisters chase each other around the roundabout faster and faster hopping on screeching, dust flying under their feet. A family arrives—a mother, a father, and a little child—and stands looking at the swings. I slow my swing letting my legs drop, no more riding it into the sky; I jump, skidding on the worn patch beneath the swings. My sisters and I circle the family. “Hello,” they say, “Do you live nearby?”

“Yerrs,” Alison replies, her long drawn accent on the “e” and “r.”

“Oh, you sound American.”

“Yearch,” I say. “We're American.”

My sister Marian joins in “We're livin' a few blarcks from here.” And so we begin our decision to be American. We play with the little child, swinging her, taking turns holding the shiny smooth wooden seat, letting go slowly, sometimes me at the front to wave hello as she arrived laughing at her cleverness, sometimes Alison. When the parents invite us home for afternoon tea, we go. We eat chocolate biscuits and drink milk in a room filled with cushions and sunshine and tell them about our life in America and how our mother is dead. They are sorry for us and say how hard it must be for our father. Later we say, “Bye arll,” and walk home, laughing in wonder that they really thought we were American. Marian says I was wrong to pretend our mother was dead. They'd asked if our mother was American and it had just slipped out: “She's dead.” I challenged Marian, “You didn't say she wasn't.”

“Well how could I?” she answered back red-faced. “Then they would have known we weren't really American.” Our unspoken decision to become American went unremarked.

The sensations of flight through the blue sky and of the joy of getting away with the game of pretending are immediately recognizable. The author elaborated in her notes following the workshop how the freedom and pleasure of the afternoon contrasted with the realities of life in her home. Yet, if we focus on the memory itself, within the confines of time and space of that afternoon, working with the details in the story rather than inserting it into a larger narrative, it becomes possible to begin mapping the affective assemblages that form and reform throughout that particular afternoon. This
allows for a sort of horizontal mapping that exceeds the individual and allows elements of the scenario that might otherwise be overlooked in more biographically oriented research to come into view.

Although the turn to materiality is sometimes positioned as a turn from the discursive paradigm of much poststructural research, the language of the memory remains part of what we need to attend to. The discursive resources with which a narrative is constructed and through which an experience is understood, remain part of any socio-materially oriented analysis. In this narrative the park itself is described by the writer as a “mostly free space,” not entirely free but “mostly,” like the afternoon itself which turns out to be, in the final lines of the narrative, also merely “mostly” free. Nevertheless, the space itself is described as intensely energising. Although in the first sentence the writer describes how each piece of playground equipment is positioned relative to other pieces of equipment, the remainder of the narrative focuses on the park as relational space of affect, sensation and intensity. In the first section, before the arrival of the family, the girl and her sisters are invigorated and enabled by the playground equipment to begin to transcend their individual limits. The narrator details the joy she feels on the swing, the girl and the swing swinging so high that they are on the verge of “taking off,” on a virtual “launching pad into the sun filled blue sky.” Despite her awareness of the limitations of the device, expressed through the “taste of metal” and the protestations of the chains, the girl experiences herself and the swing as the beginnings of a joyful assemblage in flight—not of discrete objects that come together and retain their discreteness but an assemblage of flight where the borders of bodies and things fall away. The older sisters play below on the spinning roundabout, becoming a flow of energy “faster and faster” as they run, hop and screech together in the dust. These affective assemblages are formed of metal chains, sky, dust, bodies, screeches, corporeal sensations, movement—higher and higher, round and round, faster and faster—and other elements including those that are extrapolated beyond the narrative as readers’ memories and affects are mobilized: the eucalyptus smells of midsummer parks in Australia, the feel of skin sticking to wooden seats, and so on. The arrival of the family marks a turn in the text as the whirling, swinging, frenzied girl-assemblages slow and stop their play to turn towards the child and her parents. The three sisters form a single unit, moving together to “circle the family,” and as a result of the encounter, take on a new form as “American.” In the memory this formation does not arise independently from the girls but it is prompted by this encounter and the comment, “Oh, you sound American.” The girls
instantly collude in building the narrative for their new audience whose members are vital elements in this constantly moving assemblage. There is an intense pleasure in the ways the girls “become American” and the precision with which the writer captures the phonetic dimensions of their speech indicates this pleasure. By the time the young narrator introduces the idea that their mother is dead, they are in too far, the energy of the assemblage and the flight of their collective imagination seems unstoppable. But even in the midst of the American fantasy there is a shutting down of this line of flight. Whilst joy is an energising and enabling affect that moves through these girlhood assemblages, it is contingent on the suppression of a crucial detail of their lives. Through much of the narrative the three girls are interchangeable—at the swing where they play with the child, and in the family home to which they are invited for chocolate biscuits and milk. The family, too, is also treated as a seamless unit, except when the child is on the swing playing with the girls.

It is tempting to read these parties in a binary relation, attending to discourses of privilege that allocate power and goods differentially. This reading fits this afternoon vignette into the larger narrative of class disparities, advantage and disadvantage. In this reading, the encounter with the family highlights what the three girls do not have: chocolate biscuits and milk indicate their absence at home. Nor do they have the cushions or sun-filled room of this idealized other family. In this reading the embodiment of an American life is an attempt to escape the truth of their abject reality. This discursively oriented reading is feasible and can be legitimated by the details in the narrative, but it shuts down too quickly the capacity to see the life affirming dimensions that prompted its writing within the collective biography. The narrative suggests that life affirming is always already entangled with life destroying when life is understood as the line of flight that momentarily escapes the strictures and regulatory effects of the molar forms that order society including gender, class, age, and so on.

Nevertheless, the girls do form an intensely social and relational affective assemblage that carries within it the possibility of joy. They do not begin to merge their lines of desire merely because they are sisters but because of the flows of pleasure that bring them together that afternoon. The little girl, the wooden seat, the narrator and her sisters, the speed and slowness of the swing, the waves and laughter moving between the bodies, the rituals of turn-taking of the older girls, the family as audience, sun, light and dust form an affective assemblage that coheres around the episode on the swing in the centre of the narrative. All of these elements contribute to the pleasures of their
joint play in the park. In the family home where they eat biscuits, the sun
and the cushions and the interest and empathy flowing from the family
enable the girls to imagine living another supposedly American life. When
shame and blame are mobilized and begin to circulate between them, the
girls separate and the molar imperative of propriety means that for the little
sister to pretend shifts into a negative register rather than being the pleasur-
able game that was embodied with such gusto.

This story shows a tentative, nebulous, minoritarian mode of becoming,
where positive or life affirming flows of desire or affects emerge but are read-
ily shut down by the life destroying affects that are always present in any
assemblage. Positive and negative affects circulate in affective assemblages
at the same time. Deterritorialising lines of flight are reterritorialized by con-
ventional forms of morality and notions of proper and improper speech and
behaviour. Assemblages are always “cut through with relations of power”
(Ringrose 2013: 81). Both creation and destruction are necessary for sur-
vival. Whilst it may have been acceptable and deeply pleasurable to be part
of the moving, feeling, freedom-giving assemblage, it is also not acceptable
to say that their mother is dead when she is not. Although the memory story
leaves the girls silenced and with their energies flattened out, there were mul-
tiple moments of joyous energy evident. Throughout the afternoon affective
flows of energy are glimpsed in motion—through and across bodies, extend-
ing into the sky and down to the dust, incorporating playground equipment
and other non-animate elements and encounters. However, despite the sense
of freedom written into the narrative, molar formations are always already
present in the assemblage.

In the second story written in response to the prompt on joy, the affect-
ive assemblages through which the girls come into being in new ways are
intensely material. The story captures some of the assemblages that form
through another sunny afternoon. Although this memory is written in the
past tense, in contrast to the first memory, the particularity of the details
give it another sort of immediacy.

The End of Spring

The end of Spring. A zany idea came from no where: the girls decided to swim
the full length of the creek from one property boundary all the way to the other.
Stashing their clothes in plastic bags and placing them on their heads, they bravely
jumped in with nothing but their undies and boots on. Some parts were deep,
and clear and warm, while other parts shallow so that their bellies scraped the
rocks on the bottom. Whatever came around the next bend, a mess of weeds, a
patch of algae, a swarm of bugs, they boldly pushed onwards, snaking through
the yellow paddock. They laughed at each other and exchanged wet grins, fearless
and happy. Over an hour later, skin wrinkly and bodies tingly from the water, a wall of mud stops the girls’ progress. A quick sideways look and wild grin: without a word, the comrades push forward into the sucking, sticky, smelly brown goo. Instantly cold and heavy, mud clings to their bodies, squishes through their toes and envelopes them like wet cement. Throwing their bags onto the creek bank, arms and hands and fingers are used to drag bodies through the mud, straining to keep moving forward. Muscles weak with exertion, but also from too much smiling and weeping with laughter, they try to pull themselves up to sit on the bank. Lisa’s boot is slurped down and lost. Breathing heavily and laughing—always laughing—one of them pitches some mud at the other and it lands smack in her face. More laughter. More mud slung. Mud rubbed into the other’s hair, mud eyebrows and skin graffiti. Moustachioed villains. Ladies in a bubble bath. Fat little pigs in slop. Groaning monsters from the deep. White toothy smiles lit up their blackened faces.

This vignette can also be located within a more biographically oriented narrative, as the afternoon took place just before the girls began high school. The molecular becomings of girls in mud in this memory are thus subject to the molar formations of schooling and gendered norms of girlhood. The opening phrase “late spring” encodes a certain melancholy or nostalgia for what is or will be lost. However, within the confines of this single afternoon, it seems that joy arises again and again. The spatiotemporal dimensions of this narrative are quite specific—it is this afternoon, this hour, this creek, this season, this wall of mud, this particular friendship.

The girls are positioned in this text as adventurers, or explorers of hitherto unknown territories. They are boundary-riders, literally as the creek extends along the boundaries of the property, and metaphorically as they cross boundaries of conventional girlhood play. The memory suggests that this is a robust and fully embodied submersion into the matter of the world. Beyond the initial decision to swim the full length of the creek, there is no other indication of will or conscious intention directing their behaviour. Beyond that decision they seem to “jump in with nothing” and let the creek and its material affordances take them where it will.

The memory moves through several scenes of action. First, they float down the creek relatively unimpeded, then they drag themselves through the wall of mud, and finally they sit on the bank and play with the mud. In each of these stages, matter and affect entangle and the bodies of the girls are entangled, too, in what seem to be new ways of being that open that afternoon. In the first part of the memory, they move relatively unimpeded through whatever comes, moving with and in the water through changes in depth and temperature and texture, through weeds, algae and bugs which all materialize on the same plane floating in the water with the bodies of the
girls. Mostly the narrative suggests that they move harmoniously with the varying materials in which they are immersed. Sensations are referenced in the narrative—cold, heavy wetness that “envelops them like wet cement” although the detail of exactly how this feels on skin in that moment is left to the reader’s imagination. There are many references to named feelings or emotions—they are brave, fearless, bold and happy. The rush of affect that precedes language, that wells up in the body and exceeds the body, and for which it is hard to find a name is suggested here and there in the ways they feel and move together down the creek. Their bodies are of the matter of the creek except for the moment when their bellies scrape the rocks at the bottom, and when they emerge from the water their bodies seem to be changed right through to the molecular level by the matter of which they have been part—“skin wrinkly and bodies tingly.” This first stage of the memory positions the girls as though they are merged with each other and the matter of the creek, except for the moment of difference where they come apart as they “laughed at each other and exchanged wet grins.” The second episode of the narrative, in which the girls drag their bodies through the mud, increases the intensity of their collapse together from individual discrete subjects into an undifferentiated muddied mass. Bodies move together and come apart into constituent parts as toes, arms, hands and fingers move independently in the mud. The girls decompose and recompose around excessive flows of affect—“too much smiling and weeping with laughter.” It is this quite precise moment of weeping with laughter that seems to capture the affective potency of the afternoon. This part of the narrative also ends with a moment that differentiates the girls from each other in a conventional sense: it is specifically “Lisa’s boot” that is lost in the mud. In the final stage of the narrative the girls are defined by matter and by affect—by mud and laughter. There is no indication of who slung the mud at whom first, nor of who rubs mud into the other’s hair. This is a reciprocal and identical process for both the girls: becoming mud, becoming other. Their imaginations supply some specific others in a montage of alternatives: “Mustachioed villains. Ladies in a bubble bath. Fat little pigs in slop. Groaning monsters from the deep.” These possible others are enabled by the specific cultural knowledge that they bring to the scene. Molar formations of gender and sexuality overlay this reading. They play with gendered subjectification as they parody male villain and female femme. At times their imaginations lead them beyond the human, as they become, momentarily, groaning monsters from the deep, fat little pigs in slop, and disembodied toothy smiles with black faces. Perhaps these images might be seen to reference binaries
of human/animal, human/monstrous, white/black, and thus they draw attention to the all too humanness of the girls and their whiteness.

The narrative tells a memory of joy; indeed it was produced as an experiment in thinking joy and girlhood through memory in response to the provocation of the life affirming capacities of affective assemblages (Ringrose 2011, 2013). However, as we have acknowledged earlier, there are two axes of any assemblage. In a Deleuzian reading, the “structural axis” always accompanies the “ethical axis” of an assemblage and it is necessary in any mapping to attend to both the “life affirming [and] life destroying character of the assemblage” (Bonta and Protevi 2004, cited in Ringrose 2013: 81). While we have traced the microparticulars of girlhood becomings through this narrative, and have readily followed the desire lines that suggest joyful lines of flight and that emphasize minoritarian becomings, it is much more difficult to trace life destroying elements of the assemblage. We might consider how the human/nature encounter in the narrative is idealized as wild, immediate or pure and wonder what differences are repressed in order to maintain this orientation. At what cost are these “fat little pigs in slop” able to move so freely with the matter of the river? What other bodies are forbidden or have been ejected from this space? Perhaps the molar effects of capital are evident when this property can be owned by one family, and boundaries keep others out. In particular the Indigenous inhabitants are absent from the land through the molar movements of colonialism and empire, as well as the private property rights of capitalism. These absences haunt the joyful desire lines of the narrative, and suggest the potential reterritorialization of the apparent freedoms experienced by the girls. The weeds, the algae and the unloveliness of “smelly brown goo” and “slop” might also suggest ecological degradation, perhaps reinstating the privileging of the human over nature despite the momentary joys of the afternoon of girls becoming mud.

Closing Thoughts

Finally, what is apparent in both these memories is that these assemblages are affective and material and discursive/social/cultural, and mobile as they continuously form and reform. The girls in the stories follow desire lines of joy, minoritarian becomings, and they are subject simultaneously to the molar formations that shut down lines of flight and reterritorialize their bodies and desires. In both stories, the girls are immersed in overtly material
contexts each of which offer distinctly different affordances for their bodies. In both stories, the girls exceed themselves through flows of affect that bring them into alliances and alignments with each another and with other matter in surprising ways. In both stories, the girls also bring in cultural knowledge that enhances and extends the possible becomings that are enabled by the particular moments in which they find themselves. The moments that are mapped through these memories also indicate the joy of the relational, of imagination and the creative moment. Girlhood is potentially reconfigured as something beyond, and in addition to, its own discursive formations. However it is clear that despite the joyful lines of desire that are articulated in both of these stories, the molar formations of class, family, empire, gender, race are also part of the assemblages.

For girlhood studies scholars, we suggest that collective biography can be a useful methodology for groups of researchers to interrogate the minutiae of the everyday in the corporeal and affective text(ure)s of their own girlhood memories. One of the unusual features of collective biography in relation to other methodologies taken up in studies of girlhood—such as interviews, focus groups, film and text analysis, creative and narrative methodologies with young people—is what was unique about it in its earliest form as the feminist methodology of collective memory-work (Haug et al. 1987) in that the lived experience of the researchers became the research field, or as it was expressed at the time, where the binary of subject and object of study collapsed in the field of research. While this method has been taken up through a range of projects oriented towards a discursive or language-oriented poststructuralism, most recently, this is reconceived in posthumanist terms as an intra-action or entanglement with the matter of the world (Davies and Gannon 2012). It may seem paradoxical that we seek to understand girlhood beyond predominantly discursive paradigms in these spoken and written narratives, but the material and affective detail that is evoked in an artful telling can enable a mapping of the flows of desire that open up for girls, and the molar formations that shut them down. Collective biography attends to the moment-to-moment detail of how affective assemblages open and shut down possibilities, how they “enable and disenable bodies” (Ringrose 2013: 82). The strategies of collective biography, of careful listening, questioning and attending together to theory and how it might be put to work in the everyday, also open affective assemblages in the methodological space. Although we sometimes recognise moments of joy and affective flows when we might come to know ourselves differently through our collaborative work it is also important to keep in mind the caveat that assemblages are always cut through by relations of power.
Note

1. The seven participants in this collective biography were Bronwyn Davies, Melbourne University; Catherine Camden Pratt and Susanne Gannon, University of Western Sydney; Marnina Gonick, Mount Saint Vincent University, Canada; Kristina Gottschall, Charles Stuart University; Jo Lampert and Kelli McGraw, Queensland University of Technology. The workshop was funded by an Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand Grant held by Gonick, Gannon and Lampert.

References


