Playgrounds as sites of radical encounters: mapping material, affective, spatial, and pedagogical collisions

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Contemporary playgrounds

Contemporary playgrounds are a familiar sight; situated in urban centers, school yards, parks and housing estates. Playground structures, typically “commercial equipment that links steps, deck and slides …pyramid roofs …a resilient surface …fences and gates” (Solomon, 2005, p. 1) possess a design conventionality that is easily recognizable; “variations of a model that has few local or regional distinctions.” (p. 1). Often made from metal, plastics and wood playground structures are situated on surfaces covered variously in grass, bark chipping, concrete, sand, or rubber. Surroundings might include trees, ponds, grassland, shops, and buildings.

Conjuring up a mental image of a playground is likely to display something architecturally “commonplace” (p. 1) despite the existence of diverse playspaces such as adventure playgrounds, pop-up playgrounds, artist-built playscapes and the temporary play zones that appear during community festivals. These less-common sites operate from different aesthetics, architectures and pedagogic agendas to “the fixed metal structures currently pervasive in community playgrounds.” (Walsh, 2006, p. 139). Pop-up playgrounds, artist-built playscapes and the child-designed environments built at Gever Tulley’s Tinkering School <www.tinkeringschool.com> encourage children to make decisions about structure, form and function in ways that bring bodies and materials together through active participation and decision-making.
Different types of playgrounds work to different intentions, design agendas and concepts. While these differences are of interest, I focus on the ‘officiated’ playgrounds permanently installed in parks, schoolyards, housing estates (often paid for and maintained by local councils and education bodies) because these types of playgrounds are so commonly seen. This commonality can present sanctioned playgrounds as unremarkable, easily described. Sanctioned, unremarkable playgrounds are problematic however because they aim to encourage active play within health and safety, and building regulations that exert such control over their structural design (McCurdy 1996) that children’s playground play becomes officiated within particular dualist discourses that fixate on the tensions between learning and play, the preference of active versus sedentary lifestyles (Bundy et al. 2011), and engaging the child in mind/body work. These controlling, dualistic discourses conceptualize playgrounds as a demarcated site where children and equipment interact in particular ways.

Examining playgrounds though a new materialist theorization proposes that more is going on beyond this human/material interaction. A new materialist theorization of playgrounds sees that the child and play equipment are only part of larger, complex, sensorial, atmospheric, corporeal and temporal assemblages that include objects, times, lights, atmospheres, and animal/human/creature bodies. Through a new materialist reading commonplace playgrounds lose their banality and regularity. The simplistic interaction of child and equipment is subsumed into a wider milieu of collisions that include the more-than-human replete with diverse affective, movement encounters that have pedagogic agency.

My chapter considers how a new materialist reading of playgrounds complicates the simplicity of conventional playground discourses to allow for an affirmative retheorization of the pedagogies of pedagogic sites (Ellsworth,
2005). I explore how pedagogy, rather than through human-centric dialogic exchanges (Robertson, Kinos, Barbour, Pukk & Rosqvist, 2015) or as interrelational, symbolic power structures (Bernstein, 1996) might, in being untethered from the human, be ‘in movement’: that is rhythmical, a choreography of sorts. I consider choreographic movements as pedagogic because movement “tweaks the durational field of experience, tunes its total movement toward new ecologies, new potentials” (Manning, 2014, p. 169).

Movement is not a consequence but is constantly occurring, before a cognitive decision is made. Within a new materialist reading of playgrounds pedagogic choreography and choreographic pedagogy come about through interrelations that occur across matters, times and dimensions. Within this new materialist reading the playground is pedagogic through assemblage-series of actions, affects, and interactions.

I begin by focusing on the physical structures of playgrounds, and how the design and architecture of play structures can intend to purposefully initiate particular bodily movements. Overhill (2015) beautifully exemplifies how structures shape movement choreographies, by her description of doorknobs. Overhill describes how combinations of size, mechanism, material and shape of doorknobs, combined with the weight of the door force particular movements: “If you are carrying two cups of coffee as you approach a door... the door has a lever handle, you can twist one elbow down onto it, then push through with the shoulder, still holding the coffee.” (p. 7). Combinations of doorknobs and the doors they are attached to demonstrate “that what has really been created by the design of the doorknob is a series of motions triggered by its circumstance. The designer did not just make an object; the designer choreographed a dance to be improvised by the user upon encountering that object.” (p.7). Gallier (2015), an architectural designer builds outdoor structures that “can be understood as a movement catalyst, categorized according to various parameters.” (p. 45). Gallier anticipates
visitors will perform a range of choreographic responses that play out the overall design concept/agenda. Likewise, through her architectural design practice Overhill (2015) understands that “In positioning the exhibition elements, I had created a sort of dance to be performed by the visitors... in sequence, as series of desired poses and gestures” (p. 5). Overhill describes how she expects her site designs and built structures to prompt a finite range of physical movements.

In particular contexts then, there is an expectation that the design of public structures (sports stadia, train stations, museums, and shopping malls) will manipulate and order crowd behavior in particular ways. Sanctioned playground designs similarly, purposefully initiate movements and choreographic responses within various parameters. In the case of playgrounds these parameters are becoming increasingly dictated by a rising “municipal risk culture” (Walsh, 2006, p. 137) and a perception that the public has “increasing difficulty with assessing risk on a daily basis.” (Solomon, 2005, p. 1). Fear of unpredictable play and the potentiality of injury, gives rise to “boring play equipment in playgrounds and parks replicated time after time ...[as] the physical manifestation of this risk culture.” (Walsh, 2006, pp. 137-138). The play structures in early childhood sites such as nurseries and kindergartens often work to highly specific safety regulations that determine maximum heights for climbing, swinging and sliding which conform to highly specific dimensions that minimize fall injuries. The play equipment for young children is thus so manufactured that the body movements and physical reactions to the architecture of the space are managed and reduced, with children forced to navigate their physical play in heavily pre-anticipated ways. Playgrounds in schools and parks, designed for older children are as heavily controlled by national safety industry standards as those in kindergartens. The design of playground architectures comes to be heavily regulated by concepts of play as risky and
dangerous and in need of careful management. Playground equipment, like other designed structures is designed to initiate finite physical movements, and these too, can be thought of as choreographic, as movements that repeat although not in a regulated order.

In a contemporary and risk-averse society, playground spaces, determined by litigation and the creeping hysteria around children’s safety plus a creeping distortion of a child’s physical fragility coerce children’s physical interactions with the structures in regulated ways. Children’s safety is important to think about, however the point here is when safety concerns reach oppressive levels children and childhoods come to be viewed through this risk of potential injury (or worse) over any other relationship. Children come to be seen as ‘potential risk’ rather than ‘child’.

Children’s play has become pathologized in line with similarly pathologized visions of childhood fixated on health, wellbeing and development. Pathologizing play discourses have emerged as a reaction to combating higher density urban housing with less outdoor space available (Monbiot, 2015) for children to “spend more time outside in unstructured activities” (Allen & Hammond, 2005, cited in Gleeson, 2006, p. 44) or for them to play away from adults, or in their own architectural constructions. Ideas of physical play have become so tied to health and wellbeing discourses (Gleeson & Sipe, 2006) that the architectures of public playgrounds have become corporatized. Playground design then, is less about design, aesthetics or a physical challenge but as structural, architectural formulations of a pathological play discourse fixated on addressing children’s physical health “as an area of sharp concern with the recognition that levels of physical fitness among urban children have been declining” (p. 4). This fixation has at its core “the incidence of childhood obesity and the associated decrease in children’s physical activity.” (p. 4) as a result of greater access to computer-
based technologies, and the dwindling hours children spend playing outside. Obesity scare stories and their corresponding statistics (Gleeson, 2006) force councils to demonstrate to the public that they are responsive to the needs of voters and provide playgrounds that are ‘safe’ and sites for combatting childhood sedentarity, thus playgrounds often contain structures that encourage a range of physical actions including climbing, sliding, swinging (with upper and lower body).

The primary design agendas for playgrounds respond to pathological play discourses and seek to ensure children’s bodies move in particular ways and for particular purposes. Play governance, as an additional layer of control to the health and wellbeing discourses “produce a flow of performances acquiescently” (Webb, 2006, p. 203) through coercion: children often receive instruction, by the “surveilling practice” (p. 210) of attending adults, on playing within particular discursive framings which include playing ‘nicely’, ’safely’ and ‘properly’. Add to pathological play discourses and play governance, a litigious society and explosive growth in public liability claims (Gleeson, 2006; Solomon, 2005; Walsh, 2006) and the design of playgrounds become heavily constricted by many regulating forces.

Contemporary approaches to children’s play spaces connect in complex ways to childhood discourses. Playgrounds simultaneously convey a past childhood, a nostalgic childhood of a time when outdoor play was commonplace, with a present childhood that is under threat and that has never been so good (i.e., so benefitted by good food/medical/housing services). A new materialist reading of playgrounds takes on this complexity and contradiction, acknowledges that playground sites are regulated by forces and uses these complexities to consider additional complexities: the “inhuman forces within the human …the self-organizing powers of several nonhuman processes” (Connolly, 2013, p. 399) that occupy playgrounds in
agentic and affective ways. The commonplace reading of the pathologized child, variously described through discourses including developing (Schwartzman, 2012; Wood & Attfield, 2005) and socio-historical (Samuelsson & Fleer, 2008), occupying playgrounds to engage in social interactions (Bretherton, 2014) or to participate in troublesome play (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010) are not discounted or made historical, but become a part of a reading of the event. A more complex, affirmative reading begins to see that boundary lines between identities, objects, sensations, times, histories, meanings, interpretations, policies, chronologies, acts, theories, observations are blurred in this schizo reading of playgrounds, and this thwarts the persistence of essentialist readings of what and how might be occurring.

**New Materialist readings of playgrounds**

New Materialist thought signals a philosophic turn away from humanism and towards the ethics and politics of the effects of positing “humans as makers of the world and the world as a resource for human endeavors” (Bolt, 2013, p. 2). In challenging subject/object binaries, new materialism is a philosophy of emancipation, a philosophy of difference emancipated from “the dualisms that form the backbone of modernist thought.” (Dolphins & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 383). New materialism helps focus on how difference comes to be constituted by a resistance to seeing the world through human/non-human binaries as well as the dualisms seen in relational hierarchies between couplings such as mind/body, and power/subjugation. Rather than attempting to oppose modernist dualisms and in so doing, simply offer a “next step in a discussion that is structured according to the dominant lines of sequential negation” (Dolphins & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 389) such as rejecting prior definitions of play for new, alternate definitions, new materialism avoids dismantling or upholding dualisms but reconceptualizes these relationalities through an ontology of difference-as-differing (Colebrook, 2004). Differing is emancipated because it is not about exclusion but the complexity of the
schizo; the multiple, sometimes raucous ways theories exist in the milieu.

A new materialist theorization of playgrounds is not preoccupied with asserting an alternative dynamics and economics to mainstream views of play, it can however unsettle the socio-dynamics/economics of playgrounds by exploring an ontology of difference through movements, interactions and negotiations. Through this unsettling new materialist readings of playgrounds shift away from seeing playgrounds solely through the subject/object, play/work, and formal/informal dualisms commonplace in humanist observations of children at play. In thinking about difference through affirmative relations the playground becomes less a site of dualistic couplings based on “pre-determined relations” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 384) and more a diverse collection of presences that move through, communicate, contribute and reside with agency and affective action. The playground can be thought of as a collection of movements and encounters of presences that might be material, vaporous, and sensation(al). As an example of movements and encounters, through a new materialist reading the movement of a newspaper through a neighborhood becomes a series of transactions and interactions as it “enters the neighborhood in the back of the route manager’s truck … and, finally, as it leaves the neighborhood in the garbage truck” (Wood, 2013, p. 23). The movement of the newspaper through place is a rhythmical, choreographic arrangement between bodies, engines, sensations and materials. Paying attention to the non-human exposes how objects and movements have affective force and form part of the assemblages of places and events. In the playground corporeal, material, and sensation(al) encounterings perform corporeal, material and sensation(al) choreographies: bodies tense, stretch and move, temperatures change, shadows and sunlight travel, equipment shifts, atmospheres adjust, and plants and creatures intercept.
Playgrounds are pedagogical sites, they are sites of a radical pedagogy that emerges from interactions and negotiations enacted through choreographic movements physically, sensorially, and temporally performed by items, bodies, atmospheres, temperatures and others. Components such as frost, ants, wood, scooters, and voices form diverse presences with individual pedagogic potentialities and pedagogic effects.

**Choreographic pedagogy/pedagogic choreography**

My chapter has so far declared that pathologizing discourses and their alarmist visions of childhood as in a constant state of being at risk of illness, injury, failure, kidnap, unhappiness, along with the corporatization of urban space and regulatory safety practices affects the design and architectures of playgrounds. These resulting designs and architectures direct how encounters with the structures occur: I suggest these encounters make playground play choreographic. The term ‘choreographies’ is chosen because these corporeal, material and sensation(al) movements, these “rituals” (Gallier, 2015, p. 38) are created, considered, aesthetic; they are “an effect, a functional product, an external result — an illusion which appears once the agent arrogates to itself an identity that it lacked.” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p.120). In movement the agent (whether material, temporal, sensorial, and no matter what scale or what speed) becomes form, takes ‘shape’ and differs from other agents, although it requires an encounter with other agents to become this differing agent, it cannot differ otherwise. Without movement there is no difference. Choreographic movement emerges as rhythmic and through the effect of energy as it flows between diverse sensory, temporal and material agents. The affective power of the flows creates choreographies that pertain to each agent and as an external result of those encounters. The movements of a leaf at a particular moment differs from the movements of the air currents it encounters; it is these movement differences that make
movements choreographic.

Although choreography, in the context of this chapter is discussed in relation to movement, affect and pedagogy choreography is commonly associated with forms of dance. Fensham & Kelada (2012) assert that choreography “takes shape in an articulated corporeal form that draws richly from, but is not inimical to, the situated imagination... the transformation of an “impulse” to recollect, or to project and anticipate change, through dance is mediated” (p. 397). Choreography, according to Fensham & Kelada (2012) is seen as a return (rather than a turn), a repeat, an ordering and organizing of movement and gesture. For Sweeney (2011) choreography occurs perceptually by the dancer as a series of sensations the body experiences as it takes different positions and experiences “temperature conditions, olfactory and textural data as well as sonic and visual information, all of which can be said to trigger their own immediate stimuli for further movement” (p. 70). Sweeney (2011) worked with blindfolded dancers in woodland spaces to help them experience how they might become more attuned to the ways “isolated touch and smell sensations would become enlarged across specific external surfaces of the body” (p. 74). Sweeney’s choreographic experimentations focused on the perceptual responses a human makes to its surroundings through the skin being brushed by a leaf, pricked by a thorn or grazed by a branch, and the nasal passages being assaulted by pollen, the smell of rotting leaves, or animal droppings, and how these prompt the dancer to choreographically react. The 'surroundings' can also make perceptual responses to human and environmental presences. The leaf for example, can respond to rain, sunlight, breezes, and human touch as immediate stimuli for further movement. Heat, frost, rain, and grass not only generates and communicates olfactory and textural data to the human, these elements perform their own choreographic sequences in multi-connecting and multi-responsive ways. The dancers and surroundings extend beyond a
subject/object dualism and work as a collective. Conceptualizing movement through this collective encountering helps to reconfigure conventional ideas about where choreographic practices and corporeal movements occur.

Dance is a highly potent expressive mode for interrogating belonging and identity. Fensham & Kelada’s (2012) explorations into how dance can bring on “affective belonging, to place and nation” regard choreography as helping dancers “imagine the self beyond hegemonic political and social models of identity.” (p. 395). For dancers Gray & Shea Murphy (2013) the role of dance choreography articulates relational histories and networks in Indigenous communities as “a form of life-writing that places bodies in relation to one another [to] activate and create meaning, knowledge, and history.” (p. 245). Thinking of the cultural in the human body, Gray & Shea Murphy (2012) suggest that “Dance is grounded in connectivity... an incisive tool for accessing knowledge that has been out of the mainstream, including indigenous knowledge rooted in specific indigenous stories, protocols, epistemologies” (pp. 245-246). Movements, enacted through the body are part of a swarm, an assemblage of non-human aspects vital to the actions taken by the dancer. Histories, traditions, resistances, politics, and artifacts form the life-writing that is danced and the aspects are not simply thought about but have choreographic agency over the movements and sequences of the dance. Choreography can be rethought in this important identity work as more-than-human, it is a pedagogic choreography/choreographic pedagogy of materials, dialogues, environments, politics and contexts.

Gallier (2015) sees choreography as pedagogic. She states ‘As a choreographer working with conventions that dictate spectators’ behavior, I am interested in how the context of performance opens up opportunities to the audience for physical and mental experience.’ (p. 39). Although she focuses on human activity, Gallier (2015) anticipates that audiences will
move in relation to or reaction to public space (e Silva & Hjorth, 2009; Ellsworth 2005): in this case a large-scale, outdoor memorial park. A new materialist reading of place extends beyond this human/place engagement to take in the fluid, unbound complex agglomerations of entanglements and interrelational encounters. In Gallier’s memorial park the architectural designs for the park include the placement of car parks, paths, and the controlled incremental topology of hills; these are highly agentic, and force the body to move in anticipated ways, but also at certain paces and bring about choreographies that include the temporal, the sensorial, and the atmospheric. Gallier declares that “pace is convenient for the appreciation of visual lines” (2015, p. 40), she plays with the ways that pace becomes a temporal pedagogy as bodies physically adjust when faced with topologic structures. For Gallier (2015) “the wanderer can be choreographed in its rhythm, effort, direction and flow” (p. 40) as it moves within assemblages that include animals, birds, weather, breezes, ideas, memories, and understandings.

Clearly, human choreography connects to diverse critical, theoretical, and cultural practices and is an important researching process. Choreographic movement can however be dislocated from “prioritizations (implicitly) involved in modern dualist thinking” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 384) and extend beyond a notion that choreography relates to humans ‘dancing’. Reconceptualizing ontologies of movement in its many articulations away from the human emancipates considered-motionality-as-choreography from Cartesian mind/body, or active/inert dualisms towards generative concepts of movement as choreographic pedagogy and a pedagogic choreography. In the playground multiplicitous, articulated movement interactions between shadows, bodies, weather, time, temperatures, and light become sensorial, atmospheric, corporeal and temporal choreographies. These multiple choreographies are thought about as movement-series: as considered
movements but not repeated; not rehearsed but impromptu; rhythmic, but not of a style; not telling a story or an interpretation but having affective impact. The movements are part of a “flow-producing machine” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/1983, p. 5) that is choreographic, rhizomatic, “inherently connective in nature: "and . . ." "and then . . ."” (p. 5). Multiple, simultaneous interactions connect and produce other multiple interactions.

Conventional definitions of the playground as a demarcated space full of carefully designed equipment that children attend and play on, is rethought. ‘The playground’ shifts from being a discreet site to a concentrated cluster of moving agents, an assemblage-series of choreographic negotiations, reactions, considerations and productions. Through this new materialist reading, play, pedagogy, and pedagogic sites are contested, complicated, and reconceptualized.

Choreographies are pedagogic, and pedagogies are choreographic. The presences and movements of bodies, materials and sensations in parks, playgrounds and many other spaces contain an affective significance as they encounter, navigate and interact within series of assemblages. This conceptualization of space as complex assemblages has ethical implications on the ways space and place is commandeered, occupied and altered, and theoretically it interrogates how pedagogic sites are identified, and who/how is pedagogy enacted. Choreographies are pedagogical because they have impact: the rain that pours onto and soaks a playground, the frost that crusts the metal frame, the beating sun that heats it and makes it impossible to touch act as sensation(al) pedagogies, forcing shifts in participation and encounters that require new movements, thoughts, considerations.

Pedagogic choreographies and choreographic pedagogies present a radicalized idea of learning, occurring in sites that are conventionally regarded as places where activities form “an experience of learning that has little to do with
learning as compliance” (Ellsworth, 2005, p. 16) associated with ‘formal’
learning spaces. Associating pedagogy with choreography, through new
materialist theory troubles education as a series of easily constructed
pedagogue/student, expert/novice, and teach/learn dualisms. Connecting
pedagogy with choreography, and in relation to complex assemblages of
different forms and matter makes it almost impossible to think of learning as
having a singular direction, or a co-learning arrangement, or as a definable
exchange. Movements between many things are entangling in
multidimensional directions and on different planes, at multiple speeds,
simultaneously moving at paces that are halting, rushing, pausing, stopped,
and crawling, in reaction and in action. Pedagogic choreographies and
choreographic pedagogies are radical as learning comes to be seen as a
chaotic assemblage-series of times, matter and sensations.

Mapping the playground
Playgrounds are sites brimming with activity, the intensities brought on by
collisions and interceptions between aspects and agents moving in and out
and around the space. Trying to capture these intensities and collisions, these
choreographies in their entirety is impossible and futile, but partial
recordings, or what Wood (2013) terms the “inefficient map” (p. 19), maps
that do not attempt to include everything on a single sheet but focus on
particular subjects, can record the playground through its affects and the
diverse pedagogical happenings that take place through the interactions and
interactivities of these subjects. Mapping, rather than other forms of
recording (such as a running record, or video recording) can be a way to enter
into the milieu, to notice some of what goes on without claiming to represent
some kind of truthful or whole account of the time/place.

Inefficient maps differ to conventional maps, and particularly atlases that
traditionally aim to be faithful “works of reference, where you go to find facts”
(Wood 2013, p. 13) about agricultural potentialities, heights and depths, waterways, habitation, distances and so on. In challenging the factuality of maps and the atlas, Wood (2013) theorizes that atlases and maps become texts “constituted [by] a semiological system indistinguishable from other semiological systems, like those of paintings or novels or poems.” (p. 13). Maps are narrative interpretations, material productions of a ‘reading’ of a place. As a response to place, and a recording (brought into a physical manifestation through marks and symbols), maps are the result of the affective power of components and happenings occurring there.

The symbolic traditions of mapping coerce the cartographer into recording specific aspects deemed relevant to the purpose such as land development, agricultural production or the building of new road systems (Wood, 2013). Making maps that resist economic rationales allow for recordings that see the world not for its manufacturing potential but for “the way the land smelled ...the sound of the wind in the oaks ...the way twilight made all the difference ...the less “mappable” things” (p. 18); ‘things' that are affective and affecting, and that show how assemblages emerge from material, sensorial and temporal clusterings. Furthermore, cartographs, or maps needn’t slavishly adhere to symbolic conventions and recordings, they can instead use different marks, symbols and scratches to capture “all the things about the place that are overlooked and unnamed.” (Glass, 2013, p. 10). Small, inconsequential details, temporary features, and non-physical/material presences can be mapped in preference to building/foliage density, topology and road systems.

The contexts and concepts of mapping are experimented with in the schizocartographs developed by Tina Richardson. Inspired by Guattari’s work (1998, cited in Richardson, 2014) into schizonalysis and schizocartography as “a method of mapping complex embodied, relational, spatial, affective
energies” (Ringrose, 2010, p. 599), Richardson (2014) mobilises the ‘schizo’ to “[offer] up the possibility of multiple voices, and alternative world-views” (p. 149) of a familiar place. Through schizocartographs Richardson (2014) counteracts mapping conventions by producing maps that critique and articulate these familiar spaces “in a way that highlights, subverts, or challenges dominant power structures.” (p. 131) to “provide an aesthetic/affective response to space that could be considered to run counter to dominant representations of that space.” (p. 131). As an example, a schizocartographing of playgrounds and the parks they are often situated in might present park spaces as nature-under-control, with play spaces within parks holding this contrived version of nature at bay. Grass, trees, and plants make way for reconstituted rubber, bark chipping, sand and built structures which proclaim ‘here is the sanctioned play space’. Schizocartographs can pay attention to the politics of placing urban playgrounds in inner city zones and the valuable real estate space that urban playgrounds take up, how space is begrudgingly allocated to children in the city, and how children experience the city as “an archipelago of bounded activity spaces” (Iveson, 2006, p. 53).

I used gestural drawing to make partial, or ‘inefficient’ recordings of the less mappable things of a playground (fig. 1; fig. 2). The graphic orientation of these gestural mappings allowed for visual notation of the ‘schizo’ of playground activity: overlapping, simultaneous, multiple movements, forms, light, and time, and how their presences create choreographing and choreographed interactions and arrangements. My gestural mappings were responsive, driven by affect and “attentive to the experience of place” (Wood, 2013, p. 19) and the politics of working at a playground site deep in the Central Business District of a big city. My observations of different activities, within this political contextualizing forced an affective response that then played out in physical gestures and the resulting drawn marks that appeared. The act of mapping became part of the assemblage: the mapping is a
choreography between the body and drawing materials, and is also a response to the diverse pedagogical happenings occurring in the playground. The act of mapping pedagogic choreographies thus produces recordings of the pedagogical and political.

Mappings help formulate new materialist readings of the playground as a site where the politics of play, the occupation of the highly bounded space by children, the uninvited invasion of creatures, weather, time, and shadows, create a place of radical pedagogy. Making gestural drawings of the architecture of the playground and the collisions which occur between bodies, spaces, airflows, pressures, sounds, forms, and surfaces as series of choreographic interactions exposes how the conventional, pre-anticipated movements brought on by the play structure form only a portion of the encounters which occur there.

Like any documentary recording the mappings become historic the moment the final mark is laid down on the paper; rather than regarding this as a deficiency my drawings hold the playground in suspended time and provide a partial snapshot of the complex activity between things and essences that are constantly on the move. As visual suspensions the mappings challenge conventional views of playgrounds by paying attention to some of the chaotic interactions between material, sensorial and corporeal presences and forces without hierarchy or prioritizing human activity.
Figure 1. Pencil on tracing film

Figure 2. Pencil, pen and ink on tracing film
Conclusion: playgrounds as radical sites

My chapter has considered playgrounds as sites of learning where components, or neighboring frequencies (Deleuze, 1968/1994), the movements pertaining to the diverse agents in the milieu communicate unpredictably through choreographies that emerge from differences “small or large according to its possibilities of fractionation” (p.120), that is, the movements of those agents differ because they pertain, possibly even in infinitesimal ways, to each agent, although these movements are not fixed or predicted. The diverse aspects of playgrounds as assemblage-series, comprising matter, air pressures, atmospheres, and bodies collide and force indentations and impressions that force counteractions and diversions into new collisions. These frequency encounters, these collisions are affective and affecting, and work to rhythms that are choreographic and pedagogic. Interactivities initiate reactions and responses between agents that change courses of direction, prompt reconsiderations and adjust trajectories.

Choreography and pedagogy is not reliant upon human presence or participation. Children's playgrounds are sites where radical biological/material/sensation(al) happenings occur, where boundaries and strata shift, where changes and continuations present the playground as a place of fluidity and continuous complex assemblages of biologic and material things. Notions of pedagogy as choreographic, and choreography as pedagogic is learning as fluid and continuous, temporal and contingent on the conditions of the event. Teaching and learning are not easily articulated so should not be commandeered by mainstream theories. Rethinking playgrounds as sites of radical encounters between materialities, temporalities and sensations challenges normative ideas about teaching and learning processes and conditions.

I have not attempted to re theorize how children play, to critique the politics...
of play, or to reinvent the playground. To do so would be to perpetuate “ongoing repetitive discussions in the modernist humanities …[and] a specific relationally, which is reductive.” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2011, p. 390). Any attempt to supersede old theories with new ones perpetuates a preoccupation with producing essentializing discourses about childhood, play and pedagogy. Mapping playgrounds helped capture, through partial recordings the playground as a constantly shifting, unpredictable assemblage of aspects, objects and movements. These unpredictable assemblages acknowledge the presence of, albeit ironic, pathologizing play discourses that declare children need time outside to engage in free play, but in places that are carefully designed and regulated.

Thinking of playgrounds as unpredictable assemblages removes the filters that block out everything except human activity, and takes notice of the sensorial, material and corporeal. Children’s playground play is designed and regulated but not entirely so: playgrounds are chaotic, complex sites where encounters and collisions work choreographically and pedagogically beyond our reach and control.

References


