

Boobs and Barbie: Feminist posthuman perspectives on gender, bodies and practice

Introduction

In this chapter our aim is to look at the complex relational assemblages by which young people's bodies are engaged in 'gendered becomings' to show a feminist post-human perspective. We draw on conceptual tools from Deleuze and Guattari in combination with Barad to re-think practice. From this perspective, gendered embodiments are not simply the reproductions of dualist gender formations; rather, gender is engaged, negotiated and produced continually through affects and micro-relations. We show this by exploring the territorialisations and micro-relations involved in the practice of cosmetic surgery (breast implants), and examples of transversality in a feminist school-based project that aimed to produce different gendered assemblages through research practice. A focus on the 'doings' of gender enables the ambiguities and complexities of gender to be explored, including, the discursive, bodily, sensate, affective and material dimensions of practice. In particular, this approach can assist in developing alternative understandings of the ways the conditions of possibility for gendered embodiments and social change emerge through practice.

Posthuman feminist ethology: what can a (gendered) body do?

While some practice theories are influenced by the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty in their emphasis on ontologies where experience is the foundation of knowledge, new material and posthuman practice theories are differentiated by their refusals of singular foundations (Lenz Taguchi 2013). Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari argued that it is impossible to secure any foundation for knowledge in human experience, and as a result, there is the possibility for invention and creativity without reference to an underlying human subject. Accordingly, it has been suggested that Deleuze's work is a 'radicalisation of phenomenology' (Colebrook 2002, p. 2). A humanist, phenomenological perspective of practice (Simonsen 2012, p. 221) would ask how (human) bodily doings and sayings constitute meanings, identities and social orders. In contrast, a post-humanist, ethological perspective of practice would ask how the social is composed by the arrangements of (human and non-human) entities. 'Ethology' approaches the body as a complex relation, which is defined by the affects it is capable of: 'what can a body do?' (Deleuze 1992, p. 626).

This focus on a body's 'doings' rather than a body's unity is part of a wider move towards posthumanist perspectives, particularly through the work of Karen Barad. Barad's (2007) work on posthuman performativity aims to retheorise human agency as constituted in dynamic intra-action with time, space and matter. Barad argues:

an agential realist notion of dynamics [...] is not marked by an exterior parameter called time, nor does it take place in a container called space, but rather iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which temporality and spatiality are produced and reconfigured in the (re)making of material-discursive boundaries and their constitutive exclusions (in van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010, p. 10)

Rather than approaching human bodies as separate unities, bodies are understood as composed through the intra-actions of a range of discursive, spatial and temporal 'matterings' that make up more than human power relations. We suggest that *intra-action*—which considers the relationality between bodies, things, objects, space and time—can be set in useful dialogue with the Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts of *assemblage*, *territorialisation* and *transversality* to develop a different perspective of practice as assembled relations of power. We use these aligned concepts to consider the different pieces of data and recollections together, which enable us to explore the discursive, sensory, affective, and material aspects of bodily practice and relations which comprise 'what a body can do', and might be able to do differently.

Barad's focus on phenomena as products of ongoing intra-actions is similar to Deleuze and Guattari's theories of agencement and assemblage. An assemblage 'designates something which happens between two terms which are not subjects, but agents, elements' (Deleuze and Parnet 2002, p. 51). An assemblage is '*always collective*, [and] brings into play within us and outside us populations, multiplicities, territories, becomings, affects, events' (Deleuze and Parnet 2002, p. 51). Thus assemblages are functional, active collections of connections (Currier 2003) that are more than human, trans-human and posthuman. Our interest here is specifically in the implications this has for the category of gender, as assemblages are not 'transcendent structures' which can be traced to an essence or mapped back onto social orders. Instead, they are 'continually in flux' (Currier 2003, p. 321). Current formations of gender can thus be reframed as an active collection of connections which operates as only a temporary articulation rather than an essential identity category. This also shifts the key orientation of discursive regulation—as found for instance in Foucauldian analytics—to a more open questioning and to a cartography of mapping flatter or more dispersed power *relations* (Grosz 1994).

The Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of *territorialisation* further assists in explaining the process by which social categories and hierarchies, such as gender, class, ability and ethnicity, can function to regulate and produce bodies (Fox 2002, p. 353)¹. Territorialization can be understood as a key dimension of a body's continual process of assembling, in tension with the 'forces of the social', such as gender, and the 'experimenting body as it becomes-other' (Fox, 2002, p.360). A Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective

offers a radical view of practice as composing a body alongside territorialisations of space and objects (bodies) and with potential for experimentation (Grosz 1994, Coleman 2009, Budgeon 2003). Therefore, in addition to mapping out the familiar repetitions of power relations (territorialisations), Deleuze and Guattari (1984) offer a language for examining the complexity of relations and affects between bodies and the world, including ruptures, 'resistances' and interruptions of territorialisation (Renold and Ringrose 2008). There is a concern for not only what the body is or has been constituted as—for example in theorisations of subjectivisation qua Butler—but also for what these relations and affects enable bodies to *do*.

We use the concept of *transversality* to assist in analysis and critique of gender from a Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective on practice. This concept was developed by Felix Guattari to theorise institutional and cultural change in assemblages through his experiments at the clinic La Borde. According to Genosko and Genosko (2009, p. 51), one of Guattari's most significant contributions is 'the political idea of (nonhierarchical) transversal relationships'. This was based on micro-practices, so Guattari re-routed the daily tasks performed by patients, staff and doctors at the clinic with a new circulating '*la grille*' or 'grid' of tasks and activities that challenged vertical power relations, for instance the patient becoming cook for the day. Transversality operates between hierarchy and accommodation within the power relations of assemblages, where openness is introduced through variations in relationships and practices that disrupt, rework but also productively inhabit hierarchies. Guattari showed how specific and tangible differences (at the level of the micro) can foster institutional changes that enable 'mutually enriching encounters . . . so that individual did not fall back into old roles and the repressive fantasies attached to them or succumb to retrogressive habits of how to respond to authority and fixed ways of communicating' (Genosko and Genosko 2009, p. 56). Importantly, changing social relations was only deemed possible when subjects were psychically contained enough (they felt safe) to engage in the experiments (Walkerdine 2013). In this case the experiments are new configurations that enable a changed set of relations to and within a body. But how did this actually work? What material conditions and objects enabled change in particular time/space parameters? How can this contribute to understanding not only how gender assembles, but also how it could be assembled differently?

In what follows, we first investigate how objects and matter work to assemble and territorialise gendered bodies with different outcomes in relation to the practice of breast implant surgery. Next we consider how transversal relations can be generated in research and how transitional, material objects may enable relational change.

The research studies: Diffractive entanglements

The first example is drawn from a study of young people's body work practices in Melbourne, Australia. The study was comprised of 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews with men and women aged 18 - 33 in Melbourne, Australia, which explored participants' experiences of body work and broader understandings of health and gender. Participants were recruited through asking personal contacts to forward electronic advertisements to their friends (not known to the researcher) through Facebook and email, which enabled participants to self-select to be involved in this research. Participants were mainly white, middle class and heterosexual; and had a range of professions and education levels. Participants discussed a variety of body work practices such as exercising through jogging, attending classes at a gym or weights training, as well as diet, wearing make-up, tattooing and cosmetic surgery (Coffey, 2013a; Coffey, 2013b; Coffey, 2016). Exploring body work practices provided a means of addressing the bodily aspects of gender assemblages and dynamics of territorialisation.

The second example is drawn from a research project, *Feminism in Schools: Mapping impact in practice*, funded by Cardiff University in 2014. Feminist clubs were set up or researched in seven highly diverse secondary schools across England and Wales, including mixed, single sex and fee paying institutions and participants from a range of religious, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools participated for at least 6 weeks, with some continuing to the present day. To date the project has generated qualitative data with approximately 85 young people (girls and boys), as well as the teachers and academics involved in each of the feminist groups. Students participated in a range of semi-structured group and individual interviews, as well as creative arts-based methodologies from which a range of material 'intra-activisms' and artefacts were documented or collected (e.g. poems, writings, blogs, sculptures, and online posts from sites like Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter)².

In bringing different data from different projects together we aim to contribute a theoretically rich analysis of the different ways gender is produced and potentially transformed through sensory, affective, discursive and material aspects of bodily practice. Of course our writing up of these data together is also an assemblage, and we 'plug in' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2011) and out of our data as researchers. The idea of the research process and writing up data as an assemblage resonates with Taguchi and Palmer's (2013) use of Barad's (2007) idea of diffraction, where diverse elements blend, intra-act and entangle. Diffraction rather than mimetic reflection allows for different data to be brought together and re-assembled to create something new.

Study 1. Breast implants and micro-relations of gender

In the study of young people's body work practices, two participants, Kate and Isabelle, both aged 24, had undergone breast implant surgery. Narrowly defined feminine bodily norms were important dimensions framing both surgeries. Where Kate described the practice of surgery as enabling her to live more fully, Isabelle describes feeling locked into a cycle of continuing surgeries ('when will it stop?'). Because they engaged differently with the regulative, territorialising gender norms which informed their body work, the ways their bodies assemble (what their bodies can do) is different. Rather than seeing these norms as providing a simple explanation for the practice of cosmetic surgery however, approaching gender as something which must be actively assembled (and intra-acts with the numerous other entities, objects and materials in an environmentspaces) assists in making sense of why Kate and Isabelle had different possibilities available to them following the surgery. Their examples shed light on the ways micro-relations of gender assemble through practice and the dynamics of territorialisation – including relations between other people (friends, mum, boyfriends), affects (fear, shame, humiliation), materials (silicone implants), environment and spaces (the pool, the shower) and objects (items of clothing such as bikinis).

Kate: 'If I'd had any boobs, I wouldn't have done it'

Throughout the interview, Kate described wanting to be 'curvy' and admiring 'womanly' bodies. She described the pain she suffered related to having a 'stick' figure with 'no boobs' throughout her adolescence. She insisted that her breasts were not just small but were 'non-existent'. She explains it was this desire to have 'womanly curves' that led her to have breast implant surgery when she was 20.

If I'd had any boobs, I wouldn't have done it. Just any boobs, an A cup, I would have been happy with that... I would always hide them from everyone. And I remember, this was the saddest thing, this is what I remember, I'd be in the shower and I'd freak out about someone coming in and going 'oh my god you have no boobs!' And then it would be winter and I'd be freaking out, worrying about summer coming around, and thinking about all my friends going to the beach, and I'd always just be stuck on the sand with this big towel wrapped around me wearing a big T shirt afraid to go in the water. And at school my friend lived really close to the school and he had a pool so in summer everyone would go there at lunchtime to swim, and all the girls would sit around the pool in their bikinis, and I would have to make up an excuse every lunchtime as to why I couldn't go. And when I say no boobs, I mean like, nothing, flat. [After I'd made the decision to have the surgery] my two very best friends were like, Kate, you have to show us your boobs! And I remember lifting up my top and both of them go,

'man, we'd get a boob job too' [laughing] It was so, so, oh – in summer I just wouldn't go to the beach, I wasn't living my life because I was so self-conscious about it. But when I went and saw the surgeon, I said, I just want to go a size A, I just want to have an 'A'. And he was like 'an A cup? I think that would be a waste of your money Kate!' and my mum said 'I think you should go bigger than an A' and I was like, I just wanted boobs, any boobs, and no one understands that, except for you going through it, and other women that are in your position, but it's about anything, any complex you have about your body. People think, oh, you should just get over it but you don't.

Kate's description is interlaced with examples of the ways shame and embarrassment about her breasts permeated her life and delimited her from 'normal' social activities. This includes specific seasons such as summer, which for young women living on the coast in Australia often denotes social activities of going to the beach or pool with friends and wearing bikinis. Kate's body-concerns, which stem from narrow gendered body-norms which emphasise the importance of breasts in producing a liveable feminine subjectivity, prevented her from fully 'living her life', proscribing the parameters of what her body can do. This gender territorialisation contextualises the intensity of the affects of 'fear', shame and sadness in the summer spaces of the beach and friend's pool which close down her potential for 'living', and help to explain why Kate was drawn to the procedure of breast implant surgery and the resulting breast-object relation.

Stemming from Barad's concept of bodies as comprised through intra-active relations between other objects, bodies and materials, the materiality of the object of the silicone-gel filled implant becomes important to understanding the way gender assembles through the practice of breast implant surgery. Objects in the environment (silicone-gel implants) and practices of surgery and alteration are drawn upon as the 'remedy' to her 'complex' about her breasts. The bringing of silicone into the body—the body becoming in some part plastic—is important in demonstrating the 'measures' that have become normative to reach the impossible ideals of feminine bodily perfection (Bordo, 2003). These are not just discourses of bodily perfection but endless regimes of bodily practice that make up the beauty, health and image industries of pharamacology and plastic surgery; a world that is more than human in its biological and material manifestations of becoming someone newer and better.

The cosmetic surgeon and Kate's mother—who convince her to have C-cup implants rather than the A-cups Kate originally requests—are also crucial actors in the micro-relations of Kate's breast-implant assemblage. This 'advice' connects the micro-relations of the encounter with the broader political terrain of body-politics, in which decades of feminist research has drawn attention to the ways in which the female body is regulated and territorialised by restrictive, heterosexist and

patriarchal gender norms relating to appearance across the fields of medicine, cosmetic surgery and popular culture. The relations and affects described above can be seen as territorialisations which comprise Kate's capacities in relation to her body and led her to undergo cosmetic surgery.

The surgery has a distinct impact on Kate's life. She describes that since having the surgery she is able to 'enjoy [her] life, just really live it':

[Since the surgery] I've had so many moments where I just feel... like I don't have this feeling in my stomach where I'm worried about wearing bathers... Like going to Hawaii, if I wanna wear bathers, or going to China and going shopping in the silk markets, going 'oh I could wear this, it would fit me!' You know, dresses are designed for women with boobs. And just, everything. Not stressing about summer, and enjoying your life, and just really living it.

The altered materiality of Kate's body through the object-relations of the breast implants has expanded the affective potentials available to her. That these expanded capacities occur in the context of normative feminine bodily presentations does not detract from their significance in understanding the complex ways in which gender is intra-actively engaged through the practice of cosmetic surgery and produces what a body can do.

Isabelle: '[my boobs] looked a bit funny'

Like Kate, Isabelle also described 'boobs' as crucial to an ideal feminine bodily appearance. However the dynamics of this ideal are more intensive for Isabelle as she works in a cosmetic surgery centre. She says, 'It's in my face every day!'

[interviewer]: I've been asking people to describe the characteristics of a supposedly ideal body...

Isabelle: for me personally, in my job, doing beauty therapy and because we work in cosmetic surgery – [pauses while server delivers coffees] - a female who is like a slender, athletic female, um, clear complexion, symmetrical face, this is like perfection – nice hair, things like that.

[interviewer]: So in terms of like body shape, is there...?

Isabelle: Yeah, just like a slim athletic build I think is nice. Like, we have a lot of body shapes at our work, like we have apples and pears, but they come to our work to change that, so...

[interviewer]: What about other physical characteristics...like boobs, or...

Isabelle: Yeah, I think boobs and arse; I've got fake boobs, I got them last year. Cos I had one [breast] that was a C and one was an A [cup], so I had to have reconstructive surgery, but they made them a

D anyway because they had to put 2 implants in each to make them look normal. And they had to move one of my nipples, so, I think that's important too. Just to feel comfortable, to feel normal, because they looked a bit funny. Um...yeah that's important too I suppose, nice skin, body image...

[interviewer]: Yeah, so what was it like having the operation? Was it everything you wanted, was it more difficult than you thought, or?

Isabelle: It wasn't that painful actually, it's made me a lot more confident with my boyfriend especially, like I didn't like to wear bathers and stuff like that cos they looked funny. But now I'm a lot happier. And people...you can't tell they're fake because I had the natural tear shaped [implants], not round, so they look nice. Yeah.

The space and context of Isabelle's employment as a beauty therapist hooks her into the broader assemblage of the consumer culture fashion-beauty-complex (Featherstone 2010; Bartky 1990) which trades on being able to surgically 'correct' (mostly women's) bodies in line with extremely narrow gendered norms of 'perfection'. Where Kate described her surgery as necessary because she had 'no boobs', Isabelle similarly emphasises the need for 'reconstructive surgery' to correct an imbalance in breast sizes. Similar to those in Davis's (1995) study, Kate and Isabelle describe their breast implant surgery as aimed at looking 'normal' rather than for vanity or advantage. Like Kate, Isabelle describes being previously self-conscious being naked with boyfriends or in wearing bikinis because she felt her breasts 'looked funny'. She emphasises the benefit of having the surgery in enabling her to feel 'comfortable', 'normal', 'happier' and 'more confident', playing down the pain and invasiveness of the surgery which she said involved inserting two implants in each breast and moving one of her nipples. Clearly, normative heterosexual gendered ideals related to the body's appearance are critical for understanding the dynamics by which Isabelle's body is assembled through the practice of breast implant surgery. This example illustrates how gendered body norms territorialise and compose Isabelle's body through practice and a body's engagements. At each turn, a body is actively produced through activities, practices and connections rather than understood as passively inscribed. The extensive relations between her body and those of her patients at work; her boyfriend; and the broader cultural norms rewarding efforts towards physical perfection (and emphasising the importance of symmetrical, 'nice, 'natural-looking' breasts in heterosexual relations of desire) compose what Isabelle's body can do: in her case, leading to breast implant surgery and further cosmetic procedures to follow.

Unlike Kate, who felt more able to 'fully live' following surgery, Isabelle describes wondering almost immediately, 'Right, what can I do next?' She has continued to have further cosmetic surgical

procedures, including Botox and Liposuction which she receives for free at work ('the nurses needed someone to practice on'). Where Kate's assembled relations through gendered territorialisations, other actors and the implant itself led to expanded capacities for living, Isabelle can see no end to the number of procedures she will have: 'I'll have everything done... but you think, when will it stop?'

A feminist posthuman perspective can assist in making sense of the different outcomes of Isabelle and Kate's breast implant surgeries which produce a different range of bodily potentials. The practice or enactment of cosmetic surgery is implicated in a broader material-discursive enactment of gender. Performative entanglements between actors—such as socio-historical aspects of gender, alongside various environments of bodily display (the beach, the pool), and heterosexual, peer and family relationships—are important features through which Kate and Isabelle's cosmetic surgeries are produced. The materiality of the objects of the silicone implants are also themselves important actors in this context. The size of the implant (A or C cup?) and shape (round or tear-shaped) are important dimensions of the object, which align to very specific and narrow cultural idealisations of women's breasts. They are the 'objects' that communicate the ideal dimensions, shape and size of this highly sexualised female-body-part, available for purchase. Purchase of these objects positions Kate and Isabelle as consumers. These objects are sold as solutions to 'deformities' such as 'tuberous breast deformity' (meaning simply breasts which are 'asymmetrical', a term invented by surgeons themselves) (Haikem 1997). Cosmetic surgery is a highly commodified market in which 'medicine' and 'beauty' intersect; the profitability of which has been likened to a 'modern gold rush' benefitting surgeons (Taylor 2012). The power of surgeons to define body parts as being 'deformed' if they are not symmetrical is key to the enormous economic success of cosmetic surgery as a market. The materialities of the implants literally alter Kate and Isabelle's bodies, and play an important role in mediating their bodily capacities which follow.

The conditions of *what their bodies can do* are produced through the specific entanglements of the cosmetic surgery assemblage which are different for Kate and Isabelle. Though the factors themselves are relatively similar (both discuss being affected by discourses of feminine bodily perfection and wanting to change their breasts to become 'more confident' in social situations, including sexual relationships with boyfriends), the material-discursive agents intra-act differently, and can therefore be understood to produce different bodily potentials for both women. The differing experiences and bodily possibilities resulting from cosmetic surgery can thus be understood as being produced by differing entanglements (intra-actions between) of similar material-discursive

arrangements. Such an approach assists in making sense of the active and unpredictable processes by which bodily practices and phenomena are co-constituted. We suggest this is useful in assisting better understandings of the highly complex and contentious phenomenon of cosmetic surgery, highlighting the import of conceptual frameworks which move us beyond reductive readings of such practices through constructionist lenses of structure/agency for example. Both bodies are produced in intra-action with the gendered phenomenon of cosmetic surgery, but they are produced and lived differently³. This suggests the contingent, rather than predetermined, embodiment of gender produced through a broader palette of intra-actions between myriad material-discursive elements. Such a reading suggests that the specificities of micro-context is a productive way in which to explore complex phenomena, and—more than this—neglecting micro-contexts risks reductive readings that perpetuate non-productive understandings of bodies and how they are practiced.

A feminist posthuman perspective lends detail to understanding how gender currently assembles through cosmetic surgical procedures such as breast implants and why such bodily practices are undertaken. Approaching Kate and Isabelle's bodies as passively inscribed by unequal gender relations would miss the significant detail relating to how their bodies are actively composed in this context. Through territorialisation we can understand how social forces 'impinge on individuals', but this occurs through a process of engagement rather than being simply imposed on a passive body. As Fox (2002, p. 360) describes, '...for anyone, the social may impinge to territorialize (a body) to establish limits from which it is hard to fly. But these limits can be redrawn, especially if one has a little help'. This connects to the concept of transversality, explored in the following examples, which specifically attempts to redraw the social relations in assemblages to alter or extend what a body can do.

Study 2. Body image, Barbie and transversality

In the following examples we focus on the feminist group at West End High—a small, fee paying, prestigious co-educational performing arts school in London for students aged 10-16—where three days of the week are based around their academic education and two days are focused on training in drama, dance and singing.

As noted earlier, this school was one of several schools studied as part of a larger project, which involved researchers working with feminist group, clubs or societies in secondary schools. The project was framed as an explicit attempt to impact the school community through a feminist 'intra-activist' research assemblage to enable transversal relations between students, teachers, school management and academics (Ringrose and Renold 2016). In this school, twelve year 9 and 10 girls at

the school met through weekly 'fem club'—as they became known—meetings that were facilitated by a committed self defined feminist teacher.

The school operates as a professional agency and, despite the school's admission policy stating that it makes decisions free of any discrimination, the children appear to be given a place on the basis of their marketability for professional work (a striking number of students are slim, able-bodied and white). Market values and commodification are central as students become constituted in 'economic terms' as competitors for uptake in London's entertainment industry (Retallack et al. 2016). Such social forces can be thought of as territorialisations or modes of discursive, material and affective 'capture' (Ringrose 2013) that shape the potentialities of the students' embodiment. Unsurprisingly given this context, discussion was largely oriented around body image, sexual objectification and self-esteem, which emerged as significant issues in the context of the school's dramatic and performing arts focus. These issues came up at nearly every meeting and were captured in the interview talk about body shaming, including even of women that are 'too skinny':

Demi: Like people who are kind of curvy go to skinny people, 'God you are just anorexic'.

Robyn: And they go 'Real women have curves' stuff like that, and every woman is a real woman. It doesn't matter what they look like.

April: That is on social media so much.

Demi: It's ridiculous.

Interviewer: Social media?

Demi: Yes skinny models saying, 'Is this what sexy is?' and then they do like -

April: This is what a real woman looks like. But some people are just naturally skinny and they see that and they think ...That is skinny shaming and there is a shaming for everything and there really shouldn't be.

Robyn: People should stop focussing on how people's bodies look and more on what their personality is because that is what means more than how someone looks or their body shape and everything.

Interviewer: So what if you don't fit these ideals at all?

Robyn: then you are going to have really poor self esteem.

Demi: You are not going to feel comfortable with your own body

Robyn: we go on and on saying oh people who look like that should just feel happy... but I just feel that no one likes their own body... your own shape...

Interviewer: How did you become critical of these images?

Robyn: When I looked in the mirror and didn't see that... If other people put you down for the way you look then you are going to put yourself down for the way you look later on in life... It really depends on who is around you...

Looking “in the mirror” here is discussed as an element of lack in relation to ideals of femininity. The practices of power, in this case are explicitly contextualised by Robyn as depending on the material relations of ‘who is around you’—in this case the repressive theatre school where star grooming has led to a difficult context of bodily perfectionism. However, the group was convinced that talking about it with each other was key:

Demi: The only way that we can get to that point is that if we get rid of the discomfort we have talking about these issues.

In order to tackle their discomfort the group worked on various projects, including art and blog entries to discuss body objectification, and using social media to challenge the sexist bodily relations. Here we want to focus on one participant Robyn who had a particularly difficult time of things as she was the only ‘over-weight’ (as she termed it) girl, not only in the feminist group, but in the entire school. In the discussion that follows, we consider the possibilities of the affirmation of difference in practices that resist and transform the norm. Part of Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology is micro-political in its recognition that the capacity to be otherwise is implicit in the assemblage because of the ways it is continually in process. But an activist-research assemblage can also enable difference and transversal relations through the creation of conditions whereby subjects and objects in assemblages can enter into power relations differently to challenge binaries (e.g. male/female, fat/fit, pretty/ugly, confident/low self-esteem etc.). Below we consider how Robyn uses her criticality with her feminist group to materially reconfigure ‘fat’ through her relationship with an object—a Barbie doll.

Robyn’s ‘talent’ was singing and opera, and she noted her ‘ultimate goal is to be an opera singer at *La Scalla*... or as a starring part to play Christine in *Phantom of the Opera* or Mimi from *La Boheme*.’ While becoming an opera singer could accommodate her size somewhat better than other theatrical ambitions (like dancing/drama), she was nonetheless deeply concerned about the fat shaming that went on at school, particularly by the boys at school. For one of her blog entries Robyn undertook a research interview on ‘male image of women and what they expect us to be’ with a friend in her

peer group—a boy Ian—who had previously attended the school, and then told a story about being called ‘fatsuma’ at school:

Robyn: What is your idealistic woman?

Ian: Thin, smaller than me. She has to be talkative and fun but she has to be pretty. Blonde hair and blue eyes...

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Robyn: What do you think is more important in a girl, their appearance or their personality?

Ian: Looks over personality cause their face is what I see every day...

Robyn: would you date a girl who is wider than most others?

Ian: She would have to be super nice and have a pretty face but no bigger than, say, you.

We discussed the interview in a feminist group session, with the researchers in particular expressing some shock/horror that Ian would openly suggest that he couldn’t possibly date anyone ‘bigger’ than Robyn, to her face. The callousness of Ian’s sense of entitlement struck a chord with all of the girls, but Robyn seemed to face it with a stony sense of resignation about that being how boys are. Indeed she seemed to imply that being able to get this type of frank response was part of the very criticality needed to then confront these power relations. She continued to debate these issues in the blog entry that accompanied the interview extracts.

Robyn: I find it really annoying when girls think they need to change themselves for a boy. All my life I’ve been friends with boys and after a few years to develop a hard skin when it comes to insults or ‘jokes’ as they call it. I’ve been called so many things... I just cry for 10 minutes and get over it. I did have a friend in my old school who used to love playing sports-football especially we used to always meet up with the boys in our class for a game but then one day one of our friends called out to her on the field that she should stop playing because her fat distracts them flopping about when she was running. And she cried for about a week, mostly glued to my shoulder, and I tried to comfort her saying that your body doesn’t matter and that what he said was just a malicious comment that had no meaning but the damage was already done. Comments like that just confuse me because I just can’t decipher their thought process and how someone can think something like that won’t hurt a girl. I did talk to him later and he was sorry for what he said, he claimed that he wasn’t thinking and an insult like that would just bounce off someone else... lets just say he wouldn’t be upsetting any of the girls in our class like that after I had talked to him!

However, because we are in a theatre school I do think that the boys in this school are kinder than that but still a few comments can sting. For example when I was in year seven a boy in my class started spreading rumours about my weight and used a particularly unbecoming word (fatsuma) to highlight how fat he thought I really was. It went around the whole school and I was one of the last people to find out, not even from him. And he still denied what he had said. I knew I wasn't (and still aren't) the skinniest or prettiest or bubbliest person and I think knowing that for years at my old school gave me a defence but when I came here I didn't know anyone and that guard kind of slipped and that's why a comment like that which probably wouldn't have affected me in my old school really upset me. I do think that generally boys don't really understand how some of their comments can affect a girl as it wouldn't affect them themselves because in my opinion, boys have a lot more confidence and can push away a comment a lot easier than a girl can because we are made by the media especially to be very self-conscious and to take pride in our appearance.

This blog entry was accompanied by four images. First an image of 'all women are real all bodies are beautiful' featuring different shaped models from the Tumblr site 'All bodies are beautiful'; second a photo of Julia Lawrence saying 'it should be illegal to call somebody fat on TV'. There were also two images of Barbie, the first of a woman holding Barbie with plastic surgery lines drawn all over her body to slim her to Barbie proportions and the second of Barbie on the cover of Sports Illustrated (See Figure 1)

<insert Figure 1 'The doll that started it all' here>

During the session discussion we also decided to try to think further about Barbie and what her body could not and could do. We had the usual discussions of her top heavy body and high-heeled feet, so she would always be on her tippy toes. Afterwards at home Robyn constructed what she coined a 'curvy Barbie' who was 'more like her' (See Figure 2). Robyn adapted Barbie's body by adding plaster to her arms and middle, she dyed her hair brown and changed the eye colour to green and also created a new outfit of looser clothing, bar the sash pulling in the waist.

<insert Figure 2 'Curvy Barbie' here>

Curvy Barbie was met with much discussion in the feminist group. The girls took pictures of it and it led to a discussion of how a range of material artefacts from childhood—such as Barbie underpants—were both loved and despised at the same time. These are more than human object relations. The materiality of engaging with and altering Barbie's material form and proportions (engaging Barbie's plasticity) are significant. In our analysis, curvy Barbie is a more than human

transitional object, which is part of how Robyn works to challenge the territorialising relations around fatness at her school and in her peer group.

The data we have explored above—from Kate but particularly from Isabelle—demonstrated a form of internalised and externalised set of practices undertaken to reach the ideal proportions of objects like Barbie as part of a much wider global assemblage of consumer-based norms of feminine beauty, where participants brought silicone into their bodies to materially change their shape. In contrast, we see Robyn’s creation of curvy Barbie as a remarkable example of girls’ practices that work to change the material object itself. Refusing the fixity of the plastic form they adapt the material object. Robyn makes Barbie more like her, rather than adapting to fit the prototype. This practice is discussed as helping girls feel better about their bodies.

In this example it is obvious that gender is not simply discursive. Gendered and sexualised matter is worked upon and in important ways. Also crucial to foreground was how it was the assembled relations and practices of the feminist group that allows for conditions of possibility for something different to emerge together. ‘Fem Club’ is the spatial and temporal pedagogical-research assemblage that enables a transversal disruption of hierarchical power relations (much like Guattari’s clinic) and possible practices of positive transformation. We suggest that the repeated territorialisation through normative feminine bodily norms is disrupted through the transversal relations which occur in the group as well as through the ‘thing power’ of curvy Barbie (Bennet 2010).

Conclusion

We have drawn on conceptual tools from Deleuze and Guattari in combination with Barad to re-think practice. Deleuze and Guattari’s call to move from representationalism to a topographical mapping or cartography has been welcomed by qualitative researchers, who wish to incorporate more than ideological notions of axiomatics of power (van der Tuin 2014); and, instead, to consider multi-modal power relations organised spatially, temporally and through the multi-modalities of sound, touch, feel *and look* (Ringrose and Coleman 2013). Karen Barad’s work—specifically her theorisation of human agency as constituted via material intra-actions—enabled a revaluing of matter and an exploration of how agency is distributed beyond a human subject to a more than human set of intra-active relationships and practices.

The empirical examples explored in this chapter show how such Deleuzo-Guattarian and Baradian posthuman perspectives contribute to our understandings of how gender assembles through the body and informs what a body can do (or not do), and how these assembled relations may enable

disruptions to oppressive norms (in this case the idealised forms of embodied femininity) or not. The examples of Kate and Isabelle's breast implant surgery drew on this feminist posthuman approach and used concepts of assemblage, territorialisation and intra-action to understand the complex ways gender materialises differently to inform 'what a body can do'. From this perspective, the practice or enactment of cosmetic surgery occurs in a broader material-discursive enactment of gender. Performative entanglements between actors such as socio-historical aspects of gender, alongside various environments of bodily display (the beach, the pool), heterosexual, peer and family relationships and the material-object relations of the implants are important aspects through which Kate and Isabelle's cosmetic surgeries were produced. Narrowly defined feminine bodily norms were of course also important dimensions framing both surgeries. However rather than seeing these norms as providing a simple explanation for the practice of cosmetic surgery, a posthuman feminist perspective reframes gender as an intra-active assemblage which composes a body's possibilities (what a body can do). This perspective assists in making sense of why Kate and Isabelle had different possibilities available to them following their surgeries. This approach aims to sketch a more complex picture of the way gender is intra-actively assembled through myriad environmental contextual factors such as the 'problematic' practices of cosmetic surgical procedures and highlights the micro-relations through which such bodily practices are undertaken.

In our second examples we drew on the idea of transversality to show how changing the social relations of power in and around school may be possible via feminist politics and practices. We suggest that the re-assembling of subjectivity that occurred through the girls' intra-actions in the feminist group—through their discussions, practices and object relations—enabled transversal relations that disrupted normative hierarchies of pupil/teacher and toy industry/consumer. The concepts and examples we drew on aimed to show 'what a body can do' through gender as a process produced in continual tension between the potential for territorialisation and transversality. This contributes to understandings of both how gender currently assembles, and how it could also be assembled differently.

Overall we have shown how the tool kit from this posthuman concern with matter disturbs notions of discrete human centred subjective agency as well as re-staging the onto-epistemological logics of social and ecological change. A focus on the more than human 'doings' of gender enables the ambiguities and complexities of gender practices to be explored, including the bodily and sensate dimensions, beyond the discursive and including consideration of materiality and objects. We have also shown what transversal relations can look like, particularly those that interfere with normative

contexts of idealised femininity organised through competition, comparison, shaming and self-hatred. Our configuration and deployment of the concepts of assemblage, territorialisation, intra-action and transversality offered us useful explanations for the ways the conditions of possibility for gendered embodiments are relational, and are in constantly motion, and are sometimes open to transformative change depending upon the types of practice in play.

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¹ The concept of affect is also crucial to Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of bodies and the process of territorialisation. For a useful overview and discussion see Fox (2002). The concept of territorialisation is prioritised in this chapter as it denotes the 'capturing' of affect that occurs through gender as a (current) hierarchical social category.

² The ethical protocol involved getting informed consent from parents and students to participate in interviews and to document and share some of the group productions, including social media posts and messages through screen shots. Please see Ringrose and Renold, 2016 for further methodological and ethical details about the process of working in this way with schools - what we call creating intra-active feminist research assemblages.

³ The different outcomes and bodily potentials stemming from Kate and Isabelle's cosmetic surgeries are explored in more detail elsewhere (Coffey 2013a, 2016).