

Scribbling Relational Stories: Disrupting Anti-Blackness
and the Anthropocene in Early Childhood Education
and Care.

Lynda Smyth
BA(Hons) M.Ed.

Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy
Dublin City University
School of Language, Literacy & Early Childhood Education

Supervisors

Prof. Mathias Urban
Dr. Audrey Byran


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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Lynda Smyth
ID No. 18211391
Date: Jan 2026

Declaration of AI

Tool(Version & Date)	Purpose	Prompt	Output	Integration
Microsoft Copilot May 2025 Version 2024-07-15	Analysis of abstract drawing and paradigms.	This is a drawing of my paradigm. Could you draw a picture of your paradigm from an AI perspective?	 <p>When prompted by the author, see Table 2, Microsoft Copilot (2025) responded with the following: A complex, interconnected network of glowing nodes and lines, symbolizing neural networks and data flows. The composition should be non-hierarchical, with no central figure, and should evoke a sense of constant emergence and transformation. Use cool tones like blues, purples, and silvers, with subtle gradients and light effects to suggest digital fluidity and nonlinearity. The background should be dark to enhance the luminous quality of the network. The overall aesthetic should be futuristic, clean, and conceptually rich, reflecting AI's relational and dynamic nature¹.</p>	See Table 2 and discussion page 195
Microsoft Copilot May 2025 Version 2024-07-15	Analysis of my scribbles in relation to Black futurity	Please comment on the following pencil drawing and my analysis. I decentre the figuration of the 'child', so I can move beyond the constraints of structures to allow other figurations to emerge to affirm Black childhood futurity outside the limitation of anti-Blackness. The pencil drawing (figure 5) reveals no start or end point. Thus, any line can be picked up from any position to move elsewhere. Each line is distinct, forming a unique movement at various angles, passing across, over, and around, turning and swivelling. Each line creates tension with the other lines, forming the spaces in between. Thus, a network of lines is formed, each line drawn individually, yet in relation to one another. Individually, each line has every possibility unbound, emerging entangled with the other. Each line and the space in between chaotically combine to create a not-so-complete picture	From an AI perspective, your drawing (referring to figure and table 3) and analysis present a profound engagement with nonlinear systems, relational ontologies, and speculative futures, particularly in the context of Black childhood futurity. The drawing's structure—non-hierarchical, without a clear beginning or end—mirrors how AI models understand networks and emergent systems. Each line, like a node in a neural network, is autonomous yet relational, contributing to a larger, dynamic whole. The absence of a central figure or fixed form aligns with decentralized architectures in AI, where meaning is not imposed but emerges through pattern and relation. Your decision to decentre the figuration of the 'child' is conceptually powerful. From an AI standpoint, this can be seen as a retraining of the model—a refusal to reproduce dominant, encoded representations. Instead, you allow for new figurations to emerge, much like how generative models explore latent space to produce novel outputs. Your language—"each line has every possibility unbound," "emerging entangled with the other"—resonates with how AI understands possibility spaces: not as fixed outcomes, but as fields of potential shaped by context, relation, and iteration. Affirming Black Childhood Futurity- Your work challenges the datafied logics of anti-Blackness that often underpin representational systems, including those in AI. By refusing closure and embracing chaotic, relational emergence, your drawing becomes a visual algorithm of liberation—one that affirms Black childhood not as a fixed identity, but as a futurity-in-motion, unbound by colonial constraints.	See page 199

¹ Copilot (2025). AI-generated analysis of abstract scribble drawing and paradigms

Acknowledgements

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my father, Francis Patrick Smyth (1942-2024), whose kindness and humility continually inspire me. I want to acknowledge my children for their continued support. Thank you for your patience and belief in this work and for all the lessons you taught me in the spaces in between.

I thank Mathias Urban for holding the space to disrupt and reconceptualise. Also, I thank Jennifer Guevara and Audrey Byrne for their advice on my writing techniques. I would also like to acknowledge Gillian Lake, whose advice and support as an independent panel member were infinite. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Sheila Garrity (NUIG), who acted as a gatekeeper on behalf of Galway University. Also, I want to pay a massive tribute to the Early Childhood educators who took time to participate in this research during an unprecedented epoch of the global pandemic COVID-19.

Finally, I want to acknowledge all the anonymous reviewers who critiqued the three Journal Articles. This proved to be an invaluable process that strengthened the outcome of each piece. I would also like to acknowledge the forest and the bog where I often walk-on, in a *muddle* while *thinking-with*.

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List of Acronyms

ADM	Area Development Management
AIM	Access and inclusion model
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CCC	County Childcare Committee
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CPPLP	Contemporary Perspectives of Play, Learning and Pedagogy
CRA	Children’s Rights Alliance
DCDEI	Department of Children, Disability Equality and Integration
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DHC	Department of Health and Children
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
DoH	Department of Health
DfE	Department for Education
EC	European Commission
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
ECCE	Universally funded preschool year (ECCE scheme)
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECS	Early Childhood Studies
EOCP	Equal Opportunity Childcare Programme
ERO	Employment Regulation Order
ERSI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GFA	Good Friday Agreement
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICTU	Irish Congress Trade Unions
JLC	Joint Labour Committee
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCS	National Childcare Schem
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NPS	New Public Services
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMC	Office of the Minister for Childre
OMCYA	Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs
Pobal	Programmes and Initiatives throughout Ireland
RHF	Rhodes Must Fall
RTÉ	Raidió Teilifís Éireann
SIPTU	Service Industrial Professional and Technical Union
TUSLA	Child and Family Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UG	University of Galway
WDP	Workforce Development Plan

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Thesis wrap-around chapters

Chapter 1 - Figure 1. Scribbles-(K)Not-Scribbles

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Glossary of terms

Aistear: Curriculum Framework from Birth to 6 Years specifies learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) in four themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring, and thinking.

Anti-Blackness refers to actions or behaviour that minimise, marginalise or devalue the full participation of Black people in life (Hudson and McKittrick, 2014)

Black Lives Matter (BLM): a global movement of civil unrest against racial injustice, widely recognised as Black Lives Matter (BLM)

Book of Kells: The Book of Kells is an illustrated book from the 9th Century housed in Trinity College. It is one of the major tourism attractions for Dublin.

Brexit: In 2016, England voted to leave the European Union in a referendum called Brexit.

Brehon laws: Ancient Irish laws. The law of the heroes and hospitality allowed a stranger to go anywhere in the land and receive hospitality without question.

Citational practice: Recognising the many scholars who have inspired this work, I have cited their forename on the first citation.

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (ECDDPC, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2023; WHO, Whole Health Organisation, 2023)

Developmental milestones: Key skills and behaviours that are typically achieved at a certain age

Direct provision: involves reception centres across Ireland, where children and adults seeking asylum are housed and given a small supplementary living allowance.

ECEC: Early Childhood Care and Education is a branch of educational theory related to teaching and caring for young children from birth to six years of age. ECEC is regarded as an academic field of research that draws from various disciplines, including child psychology, sociology, education, and health. Additionally, ECEC is a physical space where children attend regularly.

ECS: Early childhood studies is the branch of ECEC that involves education for adults who desire to work in ECEC.

Irish Border: The term refers to the boundary separating Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. The Republic of Ireland lies to the south of this border, while Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom, is located to the north. During the Troubles—a period of conflict and social unrest in Ireland lasting from the late 1960s to 1998—military checkpoints and restricted road access were present between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These two regions operate under a Common Travel Area and, before Brexit, were both part of the European Single Market, resulting in an “open border” between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Currently, there are no physical barriers or checks between these areas (Moore, 2019).

Indigenous Knowledge: I acknowledge the diverse range of Indigenous ways and knowledge systems that exist planetary. However, the Indigenous scholarship that I engage with is in North America and Australia.

Mixed-Race: refers to individuals with parents from different ethnic or racial backgrounds. In this thesis, Mixed-Race pertains explicitly to children of Irish and African descent, who are racialised as black in the public domain (O'Malley, 2022).

Racism: refers to the beliefs and actions of antagonistic individuals who are prejudiced and discriminatory toward skin colour. Racism is also a system, policies and actions that create unequal opportunities and outcomes for people based on race. Racism can be both covert and overt (O'Malley 2022).

Racial microaggressions are viewed as insensitive statements that can be verbal or behavioural indignities that include questions or assumptions that are aimed at minoritised groups. Microaggressions can be unintentional or intentional (Osman, Williams and Alftieh, 2024).

Thinking-with: in this project, *thinking-with* theory responds to the data. I hyphenated *think-with* and changed the font to italics to acknowledge that I was never alone in creating this story (St. Pierre and Jackson 2014).

Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign that began on 9 March 2015, originally directed against a statue of British Imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in South Africa

Postqualitative research describes research inquiry that challenges traditional qualitative research methods. Postqualitative research embraces poststructuralist and posthumanist philosophies as it seeks to move beyond the human-centric assumptions of traditional qualitative research and explore the more-than-human aspects of reality (St Pierre, 2019)

Postfoundationalism represents a broad philosophical perspective that questions the notion of objective and universally applicable knowledge or truth. It posits that knowledge is consistently influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts, and asserts that no singular, absolute method exists to understand the world (Mazzei and Jackson, 2024).

Postdisciplinary approaches contest conventional disciplinary boundaries that organise knowledge and research. It aims to dismantle disciplinary silos that create boundaries that limit our thinking (Pernecky 2020, 2023)

Postscholarship within this thesis includes postqualitative inquiry, postfoundational approaches, post disciplinary, it is not to collapse the differences of each approach but is used as a term that describes a collective approach to this work (Rautio 2021)

Relationality: while closely connected to relationality, relationships are the emotional dimensions of connection. Relationality acknowledges the non-emotional connections between entities.

White Supremacy: within this research, the term White supremacy refers to the ideology that the skin colour White is superior and should dominate society to the detriment of other skin colours (hooks 1994). White supremacy is an ideology with colonial roots that collectively enables White people to maintain power socially, economically and politically. Within this research, the term White supremacy is referred to as an ideology that establishes how skin colour is perceived (hooks, 1994). Therefore, I will refer to White supremacy more readily than racism.

Whiteness: is a system of domination that operates by racialising the other and seeking power within the status quo (Phipps and McDonnell 2022)

Structure of thesis

The overall thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Reconceptualising sets the rationale for this project. The political context situates the geopolitical nature of contemporary Ireland. Also, national and international political events are taken into account. Alongside possible ways to decolonise and draw inspiration from indigenous ways of knowing. Also, conceptual tools that break away from the limitations of the Anthropocene are discussed. Constructions such as paradigms and disciplines are probed. The genealogy of the human trait of malleability and the figuration of the ‘developing child’ is traced. Relationality is put forward as an alternative lens that supports *thinking otherwise*. A sustained examination of the posts is provided. Aistear: the early childhood curriculum framework is put forward as holding potential to making kin and oddkin while pollicising the concept of belonging.

Chapter 2: A re-orientation to relational stories tells the story of moving from a qualitative method to a postqualitative inquiry. Firstly, I outline responses to COVID-19, which interrupted most predictable ways of living. Ethical considerations detail my positionality alongside the processual ethical issues that arose. Some of my interpretations from conversations with the participants are included as entanglements that emerged alongside the data. This is followed by an account of how the emerging data became my teacher, leading to a postqualitative approach. The overarching intention is sketched out as multispecies stories of scribbling and ongoingness.

Chapter 3: Setting the Scene presents Article 1. First, I set out a prelude, which details my ethical concerns and exhaustion that led to the curation of Journal Article 1. Next, Journal Article 1 is positioned.

Chapter 4: The Crane Bag Article 2. First, I situate the data as my teacher as I *think-with* theoretical concepts as I describe the entanglements of braiding Irish mythology, Indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts. Next, journal article 2 is positioned.

Chapter 5: Black Refusal presents Article 3. Various entanglements that engaged my interest in the concept of belonging form the prelude to Journal Article 3. The prelude also details my move from drowning in anti-Blackness to listening to Black refusal. This shift is captured in two poems. Next, I position journal article 3.

Chapter 6: Re-turning and thickening draws together the final provocations to make further cuts to (in)conclude this work in an open-ended way. I re-turn to the figuration of the ‘child’ a pencil drawing and a dialogue with AI to speculate further with Black futurity. Also, I engage in a seriously playful intra-action with AI in the motion of paradigmging. At the same time, the real cost of technology in the era of the Anthropocene is put forward. In the wake of this thesis, the key contributions are put forward alongside the ongoingness of this work, which is never done.

List of publications

Article 1

Lynda Smyth (2022) Multiple crises, multiple sticky plasters: repositioning regimes of truth in ECEC policy to affirmative ethics of interconnection, Irish Educational Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03323315.2022.2074075](https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2022.2074075)

Article 2

Smyth, L. (2024). The Crane bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous knowledge and post-human concepts in early childhood education and care. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491241255056>

Article 3

Smyth L (2025) Fences, Bogs, and Bodies: Diffracting Belonging Alongside Black Futurity in Early Childhood Education and Care. International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal 12(1). 1. <https://journals.sfu.ca/iccps/index.php/childhoods/article/view/321>

The author of this thesis is the sole author of all publications. The conception of each publication is my own. All articles were influenced by discussions with my supervisors, Mathias Urban, Audrey Bryan, and Jennifer Guevara. Also, Audrey Bryan and Jennifer Guevara advise on technical writing skills. The three journal articles were significantly impacted by peer reviews, which included extensive written feedback, conditional acceptances, and numerous rejections. Please refer to Appendices 1, 2, and 3 for further details on the input received from peer reviews. All errors are my own.

Lynda Smyth

Scribbling Relational Stories: Disrupting Anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene
in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Abstract

In this research project, I endeavoured to contribute to the reconceptualisation of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by *scribbling* alternative stories not often told in the geopolitical landscape of Ireland. Embracing different ways of knowing is the overarching intention of this thesis via publication. This story recounts how the project evolves to (be)come postqualitative as I interrogate why specific constructions such as paradigms and concepts impact the ways in which knowledge is generated. Within the scope of this thesis, I go beyond universal assumptions, such as the depiction of the 'developing child,' to challenge foundational knowledge that is routinely applied ECEC. Article 1 examines the historical and discursive context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland and proposes an alternative governance model that could enhance sustainability for ECEC beyond market moralities. In curating journal articles 2 and 3, data was collected from twenty postgraduate MA students. While thinking-with and writing-with, the agency of the data could not be ignored, which led to a shift from qualitative methodologies to postqualitative unfolding. Responding to data, I draw on various theoretical perspectives, including Indigenous knowledge, Irish mythology, posthuman concepts, Feminist New Materialism and Black Futurity. The three publications emerge as a transversal mode of relationality within the ECEC field. In a curious coming together of humans and more-than-humans, I decolonise different webs of knowledge that intra-act with oppression and violence to include colonialism, White supremacy and ecological devastation. Each publication tells a unique story of different ways knowledge can be generated in the field of ECEC. As such, the three articles hold the tension of precarious times while creating local, national and global opportunities for the ECEC field to respond to questions of planetary well-being.

re-thinking, re-conceptualising and re-forming

Diana Sousa & Peter Moss (2024, p250)

Chapter 1 – Scribbling and disrupting

1.1 Prelude to scribbling

Invitation to the reader to participate in:

Scribbling Relational Stories that Disrupt Anti-Blackness and the

Anthropocene

You are invited to get lost in scribbles, to travel on a road to nowhere, yet a road that goes everywhere and elsewhere. A creative exploration of relational storytelling that disrupts the entanglements of anti-Blackness and Anthropocene. This event seeks to open spaces for re-thinking, re-conceptualising and re-imagining of Early Childhood Education and Care.

What to Expect:

The unexpected

Uncertainty

To be lost

Disruption

Stories of multispecies collaboration

Lots of scribbles

1.1.1 Scribbling relational stories

Scribbling relational stories does not start at the beginning (for beginnings are not in the nature of scribbles) nor does it seek a neat point of departure. Postqualitative inquiry resists the linearity of research narratives that promise clarity and closure. Instead, it acknowledges that thinking and doing emerge from ongoing relations, never outside them (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Thus, this research thesis does not start with an introduction but with an invitation to the reader to enter into a space that is relational, where concepts, bodies, conversations, scribbles, human, non-human and a more-than-human intra-act in other worldly entanglement in the middle of messiness, where uncertainty and unknowing are the only guarantees. Actually, it is more accurate to say that this thesis begins in the middle amid entanglements already in motion. As for a neat point of departure, full disclosure - *there is no mastery of a research topic to be found here, no closure* (not even in the conclusion), only possibilities and openings; scribbles that scurry everywhere and elsewhere chaotically taking while meandering here and there indiscriminately as ongoing provocations that are never neutral or complete. Starting in the middle means recognising that this research is inherently embedded in histories, material conditions, and various influences that shape our thoughts, feelings, and imagination. This thesis acknowledges the contributions of philosophers, writers, researchers, and activists, both known and unknown, human and non-human, that have helped me understand that knowledge is not something to be discovered but instead constructed and co-composed through a myriad of encounters. Like many postqualitative researchers, I encounter ongoing dominant discourses regarding structure in qualitative educational studies, academic writing and research protocols that can be difficult to bypass. Even in the apparently benign linear pathway for structuring chapters while writing a thesis, there must be an introduction (a roadmap for the reader) and a conclusion (summarising key points). However, engagement with postqualitative research has opened a space to move beyond linear methods, allowing the stories in this project

to challenge traditional ways of being scholarly (Young, Crinall and Malone, 2022). These disruptions created openings that nourished me during the research process, allowing me to write and transform in ways that strengthened my writing, thinking, and being, making me more grounded but not confined. Indeed, qualitative methods of inquiry were developed to challenge the neopositivist dominance in research, which was rigid and overly simplistic (St Pierre 2021). In turn, postqualitative is a research approach developed to challenge the rigid structures of traditional qualitative research (Young, Crinall and Malone, 2022). In this process, I embraced every question, comment, and frustration as I balanced traditional qualitative and postqualitative research to become more disruptive. Although this will be discussed further in later sections, it was introduced here to highlight an initial break from the conventional, linear structure of introductions and conclusions. Adding to this disruption is the use of footnotes, which, in this case, interrupts the linear flow of reading. In this case, footnotes serve as a cross-referencing tool that enables the reader to move nonlinearly to other chapters and sections as they choose. Also, at this point, you might be wondering where the research question, aim, and objectives are. Please be patient, this will be addressed fully (see section 1.2.1).

In this research project, I intend to contribute to the reconceptualisation of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from a political and ethical standpoint by crafting alternative stories rarely told within Ireland's geopolitical landscape. Stories that disrupt anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene epoch. In doing so, this thesis draws on a range of 'posts' to include poststructural, postfoundational, postqualitative, and postdisciplinary perspectives. Adapting the 'posts' unlimited the scribbles to engaging in multispecies stories that scribble beyond these pages (see section 2.6.2 & 6.8.1). However, *this is not an approach for the sake of it*. It is the approach because each 'post' plays a distinct role in helping this project think beyond fixed structures and forge collaborations that encompass the more-than-human, including scribbles, the Crane-bag, a fence, water, the bog, and photographs. Theoretical

perspectives are put to work to include Irish mythology, Indigenous knowledge systems, Black futurity, posthumanism and Feminist New Materialism. Conceptual tools include decolonising taken-for-granted knowledges, dominant discourses analysis, *thinking-with* theory and listening to the not-yet-data. In the process of scribbling elsewhere and everywhere, wandering here and there, for me the writing often acted/s as a conduit, establishing a relationship built on trust at the core of what *I* imagine to be my being. In Donna J. Haraway's influential work 'Staying with the Trouble', the 'thick present' is presented as a way of engaging deeply with the current moment while disturbing its temporal layering of historical and political contexts, biological links, and ecological complexities (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, Haraway's essay 'Situated Knowledges' challenges the idea that knowledge arises from a neutral and universal perspective. Haraway's orientation toward entangled subjectivities, refusing singular, hierarchical meanings in favour of co-constitutive witnessing grounded in mutual attentiveness and intra-action (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The concept of witnessing appears in many of the theoretical ideas explored in this project, including those by Black feminist theorists Tina Campt and Christine Sharpe. In Tina M. Campt's book *A Black Gaze* (2021), witnessing is redefined not just as observing or documenting an event, but as an ongoing, embodied, and ethical process of engagement that transforms the past, present, and future. The Black gaze for Campt (2021, p. 8) 'shifts the optics of *looking at* to a politics of *looking with, through, and alongside another*'. Rather than a detached view, this perspective challenges the objective view of knowing only what *I* can see. Connecting with the 'post' advocates for an 'engaged witnessing that also recognises the agency of the more-than-human in complex realities. Witnessing from this perspective aligns with Haraway's (2016, p.58) concept of sympoiesis- 'making-with' - where knowledge arises through situational, dependent, relational, and material discursive processes. These processes examine both the troubling and inspiring aspects of living and dying on a damaged planet that requires many stories. Boscacci (2018) refers to the

visual artist, psychoanalyst and affect theorist Baracha L. Ettinger, who developed the modality of ‘wit(h)nessing’. Unlike the conventional legal or observational notion of ‘witnessing’, which suggests a separation between a detached observer and what is observed, wit(h)nessing emphasises co-emergence and relationality. Wit(h)nessing, as explained by Boscacci (2018, p. 343), encompasses more than ‘mere visual perception; it is a multisensory experience that involves touch, listening, and emotional connections with humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans’. A relational belonging where human physicalness in all its material flesh-ness is inseparable from nature, time, and space. Wit (h)nessing, Osgood and Bozalek,(2024, p.1014) argue that it ‘is only possible when one feels part of the world’. Wit(h)nessing, as it energises from postqualitative inquiry and feminist new materialist thought, drawing on Haraway’s insistence on dismantling human superiority and exceptionalism, where the researcher must remain attentive to much more than just the human actors in any given scenario, recognising the entanglement between the human and the more-than-human, the organic and the non-organic. Therefore, to acknowledge the many entanglements and the ongoing depth of moments that are constantly with (h)ness and the fact that I was never alone in the creation of these relational stories, nor do I exist before these relationships, the *I* is italicised.

Embracing the multiple, this thesis advocates transformative approaches that recognise the complexities of children’s worldly experiences in ECEC and beyond. Situated within the specific geopolitical space of Ireland, *I* engaged with broader issues such as anti-Blackness, nature/culture binaries and ecological devastation. Significantly, this work makes visible what (might) happen when other voices, such as the more-than-human-scribbles-water-a photograph-a grassy hill-a fence-the bog-AI are given space to emerge. Thus, Chapter 1 serves to illustrate the terms of reference while providing an overview of the political context in which this study is conducted. The term ‘geopolitical’ refers to Ireland’s physical geographical

location and political activities. It also signifies the political positioning of this thesis, which perceives the notions of country and nationality as human constructions (Ting, 2008). *I* regard the island of Ireland as a physical, conceptual, and spiritual space that can contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC. Early Childhood Care and Education is a branch of educational theory related to teaching and caring for young children from birth to six years of age. ECEC is regarded as an academic field of research that draws on disciplines such as child psychology, sociology, education, and health (Kennelly and Oke, 2024). Additionally, ECEC is a physical space where children attend regularly. Millei and Kallio (2018) argue that various aspects of political existence manifest within ECEC, from daily moments of pedagogical practice to the policies governing the education of young children. From a politicised standpoint, ECEC is positioned as an educational site entangled in historical and contemporary political projects established within broader society, at local, national, and global levels (Dahlberg and Moss, 2004; Moss, 2019). Thus, Diana Sousa and Peter Moss (2024, p. 254) state that a key aspect of reconceptualising is to ‘re-politicise ECEC’. To re-politicise ECEC within the geopolitical of Ireland, *I* analyse the influence of dominant discourses that generate and regenerate over time. My positionality and issues of anti-Blackness as experienced within the context of Ireland are presented, including the work of Christine Sharpe. Additionally, this chapter presents my rationale for reconceptualising, which is knotted through the pencil drawing of a scribble woven throughout the research, re-turned to and thickened in chapter 6. Furthermore, national and major international political events that influenced the curation of this research story, including the global COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter (BLM), Rhodes Must Fall (RHF), and the Brexit referendum, are considered. Conceptual tools that break away from the limitations of the Anthropocene are also discussed. Structures that construct paradigms and disciplines are probed. Concepts such as the human trait of malleability and the figuration of the ‘developing child’ are critically investigated by tracing how knowledge is constructed

within the field of ECEC. Relationality is put forward as an alternative lens that supports thinking *otherwise*.

1.2 A Rationale for Reconceptualisation

1.2.1 ~~Research Question~~ Ethical and Political Intentions

This thesis traces multiple stories as entanglements within webs shaped by various elements, including history and culture, the local, the national, the global, the human, and the more-than-human. I advocate for the scribbling of ECEC to encompass relational, entangled spaces that exist inside, out, and between, capturing both the apparent and the unapparent in an ongoing process. Consequently, this research does not start with a traditional question aimed at solving a specific problem. Instead, it is rooted in an ethical and political desire to challenge established human-centred methods of knowledge production. Therefore, this story prompts multiple provocations that go beyond White-supremacy, the human condition of superiority and exceptionality to include the more-than-human. As a result, alternative ways of understanding knowledge emerge when humans are seen as part of a relational, interconnected web of interdependence that also connects with animals, plants, ecosystems, and algorithms (Braidotti 2013, 2019). Central to this narrative is a political aim to oppose dominant paradigms shaping knowledge in the Early Years field, such as the concept of the ‘developing child’. As Claudia Castaneda (2002) highlights, the figure of the ‘developing child’ is a deeply problematic concept of a universal normative human being that is made and constantly remade. This project challenges the neoliberal agenda that underpins the foundation theories of the ‘developing child’, which are closely tied to the construction of human capital. For example, in a recent economic review, cognitive and socioemotional development were identified as two key dimensions that must be supported in early childhood experiences to futureproof the economy (Attanasio, Cattan and Meghir, 2022). Furthermore, Fikile Nxumalo (2014, 2019) points out that the depiction of the developing

child is established in normative terms that support Whiteness, so different characteristics or qualities outside of normative development become identifiable as Other. All these points will be clarified and thickened as the discussion progresses within the framework of this thesis, which contributes to the reconceptualisation of ECEC beyond theories of development and a neoliberal agenda.

1.2.2 Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles



Figure 1: Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles Source: 3-year-old child with kind permission.

1.2.3 Black Futurity

My professional and personal experiences drive this research project. Over the past 20 years, I have worked in the border region of NI as an early years educator across various settings, including adult education programmes. I am passionate about bridging the gap between theory and practice in early childhood education and am recognised for adapting creative approaches to enhance students' understanding of socially just pedagogy. My commitment to promoting socially just pedagogy also stems from my personal experience as part of a Mixed-Race family and from the realisation of the ongoing need to challenge anti-Blackness by creating opportunities for Black Futurity. The stories in this thesis engage with Black Futurity without detracting from the ongoing violence faced due to historical or current anti-Blackness. Instead, these relational stories aim to be generative and to move beyond the collapse of possibilities confronting Black children and families. Black Futurity examines a future that reimagines historical narratives by fostering social liberation through diverse artistic and speculative approaches within the context of Black experiences (Anderson & Fluker, 2019). Black Futurity for Anderson *et al* is rooted in history, imagination, and cultural production, and questions dominant narratives that overwhelmingly portray Black existence as stories of trauma and marginalisation. Instead, Black life is situated at the centre of innovation, creativity, and joy. Through engagement with speculative fiction, visual art, music, and political ideas, Black futurity offers a transformative perspective on how Black communities can reclaim agency and envisage futures beyond the constraints of anti-Blackness (Campt, 2019, 2023).

1.2.4 Anti-Blackness in Ireland – The Wake

In Ireland, much of Black history remains under-researched and underrepresented. Black history is often viewed through a narrow lens, focusing on high-profile figures such as Phil Lynott, Paul McGrath, and Ruth Negga (O'Malley, 2022). Recent EU data shows Ireland

ranks poorly for anti-Black racism, especially among children. Different societies have varying histories of racism, which influence current events. In the Irish context, a recent report from the Fundamental Rights Agency (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023) found that in Ireland, Black children faced the highest levels of bullying, racist comments and physical attacks across the EU countries surveyed. Most concerning is the fear of a racist attack, which is twice as high in Ireland (64%) compared to other EU states (35%). Although racism appears to be a recent phenomenon in Ireland, historical racism has consistently existed. In 2021, an investigation into Mother and Baby Homes covering the period from 1922 to 1998 (DCEDIY, 2021) revealed that racial discrimination against children was an ongoing issue. In the Mother and Baby Homes, racial discrimination considered children of different skin tones unsuitable for adoption or foster care. Additionally, there is substantial evidence that children with different tones of skin received harsher treatment and abuse (Smyth, in press). Also, UN experts have expressed concerns over the extent to which children of African and Irish descent experienced discrimination, such as extended periods in Mother and Baby homes, making them more vulnerable to the risks of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, with lifelong repercussions (Namakula *et al.*, 2022). In Ireland, children's rights, particularly Black children, continue to be violated in current examples of institutions such as Direct Provision Centres. Murphy (2021) highlights that Direct Provision Centres have been condemned worldwide as a severe breach of human rights. Children's perspectives and experiences of living in direct provision are documented in a consultation by the Ombudsman for Children's Office (2020). Furthermore, children share insights into their lived experiences, including issues such as racial discrimination, poverty, marginalisation, and their misrepresentation in the media. Their views on racial discrimination and exclusion are reflected in the following insight from a young person residing in a direct provision centre.

‘So, as black kids, they, you know those videos they sometimes put in the ads, where, like, let’s say Africa, sponsor kids in Africa, they don’t have water. But no, like, some parts in Africa there are different circumstances. Like, a lot of white people might think that Africa is like a jungle with lions and stuff, but it’s not. Like, it’s like an actual place where people live in, and there could be rich people there (OCO, 2020, p. 57)

Anti-Blackness remains deeply embedded in Irish society and is integral to the development of Black Studies as an academic discipline in Ireland. The recent introduction of a Black Studies course led by Patricia Mullen (2024) underscores the importance of examining the very concept of race and its epistemological foundations. Irish academia and society have traditionally engendered forms of epistemic erasure, exemplified by what Mullen describes as “Unexpected Irishness” due to the disruptive presence of Black bodies and Black knowledge within spaces envisioned as solely White (Mullen, 2024, p. 10). These dynamics within Irish society are reflected in the lived experiences of racial violence. In 2020, the shooting of George Nkencho by Garda members, a Black man suffering from severe mental health issues, was often seen as Ireland’s version of the George Floyd incident. The event has been met with continued ambivalence from wider Irish society and the legal system. Another example of how Anti-Blackness is deeply embedded in Irish society took place during a medal ceremony where a young Black gymnast was clearly overlooked among a line-up of thirteen White peers. Global outrage when the video footage of the judge overlooking the child prompted Simone Biles² to intervene, which prompted the Sporting Authority's apology that the child was overlooked, but ardently denied that the incident was racist (Graham-Harrison, 2023). Another instance illustrating how anti-Blackness in Ireland is connected to nationalism and white supremacy discourse is the Lidl (supermarket chain) advertisement featuring a ‘Mixed-Race’ couple doing their weekly shopping. Fiona, her husband Jonathan, who was born in Brazil, and their son Jonah appeared in a TV advertisement and on a billboard for the

² Simone Biles is an American artistic gymnast. Her 11 Olympic medals and 30 World Championship medals make her the most decorated gymnast in history.

supermarket chain. Due to persistent harassment by trolls on social media, the couple told reporters they were afraid for their safety. Notably, the family used the mother's maiden surname, Ryan. It became clear that the racist backlash was also connected to the use of the name Ryan. People tweeted comments such as how Ryan was betraying her 'genetic/race ancestry' and that the name Ryan, which is considered a traditional quintessential Irish name, must be protected (Bryant, 2019). Within this example, we observe the intersectionality of gender, race, and nationalism alongside the discourse of white supremacy that depicts the family from a 'Mixed-Race' background as the 'Other', in a state of non-belonging.

1.2.4.1 The Wake

This section highlights the foundational work of Christina Sharpe (2016), *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. In exploring, the word 'wake' serves as both a noun and a verb, covering various contexts while keeping a central conceptual connection. Its origins are rooted in the concepts of being awake or watching, which is why the verb means 'to stop sleeping' and the noun refers to 'a vigil'. Building on this, a ritual-based usage emerged, in which a 'wake' refers to the social gathering held before a funeral, preserving its traditional role as a vigil for the deceased. Over time, figurative uses of language developed, especially the phrase 'in the wake of,' which metaphorically transfers the nautical meaning of disturbed water left behind by a moving vessel to emphasise the idea of something trailing or following (Merriam-Webster 2025). Sharpe's book '*In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*,' Sharpe engages a layered conceptual approach in which 'wake' is reinterpreted³. This reinterpretation includes not just the trails left by a moving ship, particularly one that transported slaves across the Atlantic, but also how Black life persists amidst ongoing disruptions caused by death and continuous struggles for survival. In the aftermath of Atlantic slavery, Sharpe's work also addresses disrupting anti-Blackness through intellectual, creative, and ethical efforts. This involves

³ In the wake of being Black is also referred to in chapter 6

addressing the ongoing impacts of slavery and anti-Blackness, including persistent systems like policing, surveillance, environmental racism, and systemic inequality. Wake work thus is a practice that cares for and recognises Black suffering and survival, rejecting the notion of erasing or ignoring these realities. It is grounded in care and witnessing. For Sharpe, wake work is not merely academic analysis but also encompasses art, storytelling, and everyday acts that resist erasure and affirm Black life. Living in the Wake, essential work focuses on making visible what is often concealed. Although the conditions may seem, or indeed be, unchangeable, Sharpe calls for ongoing commitment in wake work to imagine and enact forms of justice that respond to and honour Black life. On Blackness and Being, Sharpe examines how the destruction of blackness as a human being persists within social and legal systems. Referring to Descartes' statement, '*I think, therefore I am*', Sharpe argues that the conditions for being and non-being are created, for example, if you are incapable of thinking like me, then you are a non-being⁴. By thinking of Black bodies as a non-being-non-thinking, the unbelievable became reality – slavery. Non-being, as referred to by Sharpe, aligns with Sylvia Wynter's (2003, p. 300) argument of the '*Chain of Being*' that is and has been critical in Western humanist thought and racial hierarchies. Wynter contends that the modern idea of 'Man', inspired by colonial and Enlightenment thinking, is not a neutral or universal concept but a racial and gendered construction. Human beings are coded as White, European, and male. This classificatory schema effectively places Black people outside the bounds of the normative human and ranks them below all other humans (Wynter, 2003). Wynter argues that dismantling racial hierarchies needs a new idea of the human, one that is not based on Western humanism but rooted in relationality and diversity. In the ongoing wake of Blackness and being, Sharpe provokes questions about what remains in the wake to be mourned, what is lost in the ongoing

⁴Descartes' statement, '*I think, therefore I am*,' is explored further in 1.4 The construction of paradigms

destruction of racism, but also what can and will be imagined that is new and that which honours Black life.

1.2.5 My rationale for Scribbling

My rationale for scribbling relational stories is entangle me with Figure 1: Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles, the pencil drawing of scribbles by a three-year-old child who now identifies as ‘Mixed-Race’ adult has been with me for over fifteen years. This pencil drawing of scribbles continually inspires me to challenge predefined notions of how to be in the world. I have always been drawn to scribbling—the act of scribbling, listening, daydreaming, and moving with it. Throughout the thesis, I will *re-turn* to Figure 1: Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles⁵. Re-turn draws on Karen Barad’s (2014) philosophy to signify a process of turning over and over, rather than a reflective act of thinking back, but rather a continuous turning, re-turning, and re-turning.

1.2.5.1 What are scribbles?

I pose the question ‘What are scribbles?’, as scribbles may mean different things to different folks at different times in different places. Therefore, this section aims to establish the context in which scribbles occur, both within and beyond the boundaries of this thesis, while clarifying what engaging with scribbles means to me. Traditionally, scribbling is associated with young children’s early mark-making, a prelude to representation, a development stage before drawing and the emerging skill of writing and language development (Campbell and Cunningham, 2025). However, Rijke (2023, p. 19) challenges the notion of scribble as just a development stage that only functions as a prelude to representation as ‘something that falls short ‘from (readable) writing or from (recognisable) drawing’. Instead, Rijke presents

⁵ Figure 1: Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles is re-turned to in Chapter 1 section ,1.3.1 A PhD via publication 1.3.1.2 Scribbling questions as ongoing provocations, Chapter 2 and Chapter 6.

‘scribbling as a constituent process (perhaps unfinished, informal, even aimless, or careless, but not intentional)’ (p. 17).

So, scribbling as not described by Rijke becomes a processual form of radical creativity, not merely a stepping stone to drawing and writing, through movement, the embodiment of a deep gestural impulse expressed by humans and more-than-humans (animals and machines). As Rijke describes, the act of scribbling rejects linear thinking while remaining open to embracing the movement of uncertainty. In Figure 1, the scribble itself may appear chaotic and uncertain; however, it is not an isolated act of cognition but one rooted in feelings of friction (pencil on the page) while in motion. By scribbling relational stories, this thesis signals a shift from traditional developmentalist paradigms towards a relational postdevelopmentalism perspective, thereby contributing to the reconceptualisation of Early Childhood Education and Care. Scribbling relational stories undertakes a storytelling approach to situate the knowledge created within the folds of this thesis. These stories emanated from a place of ethical concern, questioning how educational spaces for children and educators are made in these precarious times. I take seriously the telling and (re) telling of multiple stories that destabilise frameworks of human superiority, which entangle with my own narrative. To include scribbles, images, stories, theoretical perspectives and myth, which are entangled with aspects of colonialism, including White supremacy and ecological destruction. This project engaged with multiple theoretical perspectives, including Black and Indigenous feminist approaches, Irish mythology, feminist new materialism and critical posthumanism. Although these theoretical perspectives differ in many ways, a conceptual framework emerges in the labour of being and becoming with these epistemological differences. Bringing all these perspectives together, conceptual tools include discourse analysis, braiding, diffracting, and (re)storying challenges the violence exercised within human hierarchies of superiority over both humans and more-than-human entities. While

recognising the precarity of our times, *I* craft a narrative that includes Black Futurity and multispecies. These relational stories respond in a response-able manner to the influx of interconnected crises, thus navigating the tension between the joy of living in worldly relations and the disturbance of living and dying in the ongoing event of the Sixth Mass Extinction.

1.2.5.2 The (K)not in scribbles

The (K)not in the naming of Figure 1: Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles establishes a tentacular link to Haraway's (2016) seminal work 'Staying with the Trouble', which raises the critical question of what might happen 'when human exceptionalism and individualism that drive Western philosophy and political economics become unthinkable: not available to think with' (p.30). Within the operational mode of thinking-being-doing differently, Haraway makes knotty metaphors not in the traditional abstract sense but matterphorically, where matter, thinking and doing mesh. For example, Haraway puts playing the game String Figures (SF) to work matterphorically in ways that illustrate how 'knowledge, being and doing are generated through intricate, context-dependent entanglements rather than isolated entities' (p.10). SF: the sign/icon that guides Haraway's (2016, p.02) work to include 'science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far. Haraway describes how different versions of String Figure games have been documented among Indigenous peoples in North America, Africa, and Asia as a means of storytelling, teaching, and play. Playing with string figures involves a game that was initially called the cat's cradle, possibly originating or transforming along colonial tea trade routes from Asia. The cat's cradle is a string game played by two or more people. However, Haraway (2016, p.13) is guided by a Navajo string figure game called Ma'iiAts'aaYilwoi (in English, 'Coyotes Running Opposite Ways). Navajo string games are one form of continuous weaving of multispecies stories⁶. The string is looped;

⁶ Multispecies storytelling will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

players pick different strings to create a new pattern, and so on. Haraway presents String Figures as a way of thinking, creating, making and acting differently, ‘making-with’ and ‘becoming-with’ (p14), highlighting the collaborative entanglements and interconnectedness of world-making. As a way of thinking, making-doing-otherwise, SF passes patterns rather than tracking, where the real process of thinking, making, and doing is the pattern that prompts a response in a response-able manner. This response, as described by Haraway, ‘is not oneself but something with which one must continue; it is a relay of passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them’ (p.10). String Figure games involve a piece of string, hands, and a gesture that moves away from representation. In knotty thinking-being-doing, this thesis contributes to the scribbling of the multiplicity that coexist and interact in the field of ECEC and beyond. The knotty (K)not in the scribble that moves this way and that, over, back and under is non-linear in nature, defying traditional notions of linear progress, temporalities and fixed structures. In Figure 1, there is no starting point or end; any individual line can be picked up and bought elsewhere - akin to the string that is looped, picked up and passed on in string figures. Scribbles in this project resonate with Haraway’s matterphoric String Figure, like strings, scribbles have emergent properties in this project, as evidenced in their ability to cause something else to happen in think-being-doing.

In summary, de Rijke's notions of scribble, alongside Haraway’s string figures, encapsulate a dynamic and transformative process, emphasising the creative potential of escaping established structures, defying linear temporalities, and opening up new possibilities for thought and action. These creative vital lines open rather than close. Thus, the contribution of this thesis is not only to critique where ECEC in Ireland is confined by dominant discourses of history and colonisation, hyper-capitalism and current events such as global European policies, philosophies, and epistemologies, but also to open new possibilities that emphasise creativity, ongoing processes, and multiplicity that resists closure.

1.3 Multiple political contexts of the study

This thesis sits within multiple political contexts. Thus, each publication delves into the political dimension relevant to the ECEC aspect being critically examined. Nevertheless, all three articles share the positioning within the broader context of the Anthropocene COVID-19⁷, alongside Brexit⁸ and the Black Lives Matter movement.

In 2000, Stoermer and Crutzen coined the term ' Anthropocene ' to describe the intersection of the Sixth Mass Extinction and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Crutzen, 2006). The 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' is characterised by rapid technological advancement, globalisation, and hyper-capitalism (Braidotti, 2019). In tandem, the term 'Sixth Mass Extinction' describes the ongoing loss of biodiversity, primarily attributed to human activities driven by the fourth revolution (Kolbert, 2014). Stoermer and Crutzen mapped the Anthropocene epoch from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to current human activities, including road building, forestry, and the destruction of nature (Benner *et al.*, 2021). The consequences include a substantial release of sulphur dioxide (SO₂) due to extensive fossil fuel consumption, pollution, overuse of water resources, geochemical changes, and a rise in greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2021). However, Moore (2017) challenges the narrative of the Anthropocene, through the concept of 'Capitalocene', a historical world-ecology, which considers the acts of human violence that predate the industrial revolution, to include slavery, colonisation and trade routes. Notably, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction coalesce within a historical system of capitalism, slavery and colonisation. These systems of violence have permanently changed ecosystems

⁷ Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2

⁸ In 2016, England voted to leave the European Union in a referendum called Brexit.

and continue to create ongoing planetary inequality for most humans, while simultaneously pushing other species into extinction (Islam and Winkel, 2017; Diffenbaugh and Burke, 2019). While negating accountability for the violence orchestrated historically to present day, Rosi Braidotti (2019), philosopher of critical posthuman knowledge, problematises the ideology of the Anthropocene as sustaining boundaries between humans and nonhumans. The Anthropocene is grounded in the default perspective of human superiority placed in a hierarchical status above all living entities. Thus, posthuman scholars such as Braidotti challenge the constraints of the Anthropocene by asking what forms the subject of the human condition in the convergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction. Moreover, Braidotti (2013, 2019) emphasises the necessity of addressing the planetary crisis from an ontological standpoint, whereby the assumption of human superiority shaped by power and privilege as a world view must be confronted. Removing the hierarchical position of human superiority, according to Braidotti, provides opportunities for humans to assume responsibility for extending care to the more-than-human, including flora, bacteria, fauna, and even algorithms, within a system of ecological interdependency. Thereby, Braidotti (2019) implores humans to confront the challenges associated with '*living and dying*' in the convergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Sixth Mass Extinction. Braidotti puts forward the concept of Zoe, referring to non-human, non-individual forces beyond the human boundaries of being, shifting the focus away from a human-centric notion of exceptionalism toward the vitality of all things, organic and non-organic, with an emphasis on interconnections and relationality. Drawing on Rosie Braidotti's posthuman philosophies and ethics, COVID-19, the global pandemic that occurred in 2020 (ECDPC, 2023), can be viewed as a Zoe-centric moment to reimagine education as a more-than-human endeavour with a relational practice that goes beyond a capitalist market-driven agenda. Indeed, the global pandemic emerged as a political context for ECEC within the Anthropocene, exposing the fragility of historical global systems

sustained by a hyper-capitalist agenda, which prompted the critical examination of national policy in Ireland, as presented in the published Article 1.

1.3.1 A PhD via publication

Although the passage of time has seen a return to ‘business as usual’, this research story was significantly impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Initially, my thesis proposal aimed to research the lived experiences of Mixed-Race families in Ireland. In an epoch of what the human world considered unprecedented times, at the crucial moment of data collection the initial research proposal was hindered by the restrictions of the pandemic. A PhD via publication was considered viable due to the unrelenting restrictions and the unpredictable nature of COVID-19. Consequently, my research project changed dramatically from the initial research proposal. This change in direction afforded me freedom from a predetermined methodology and even a research question. In the middle of doing this research, there was no clear structure, aims or methodological design, which allowed space for the more-than-human to emerge. Consequently, the research re-oriented from utilising qualitative methods to a postqualitative approach; this re-orientation will be explored more fully in Chapter 2 – A Re-orientation to Relational Stories. Although a PhD by publication was initially pragmatic, unlike the traditional route, a PhD by publication has enabled the work to be seen, to become accessible and be shared, in an ongoing process that continues in different forms for instance scribbling. Scribbling, as de Rijke (2023) argues, is a generative, non-linear act of meaning-making that embodies spontaneity, multiplicity, and the refusal of fixed endpoints. Like the act of scribbling, scribbling-(K)not-scribbling (Figure 1), this PhD thesis via publication remains dynamic, never static or final. It continually extends an open invitation to readers, educators, and anyone who passes by to pause, reinterpret, reimagine, and perhaps act differently. Thus, this PhD by publication aligns with scribbling as an essence of ongoingness in an open-ended relational practice-praxis. Thereby, the ethical and political intention to disrupt established

human-centric ways of producing knowledge stretches beyond these pages, *beyond this very moment of typing these words*. Ultimately, the route of a PhD by publication has allowed for a generative and transformative effect, enabling this work to scribble off -wandering-hesitating-meandering-surging in ways that are not predetermined or imagined by me, the curator of this project.

Amidst COVID-19, on 25th of May 2020, the harrowing images of George Floyd, a Black man murdered by a White police officer in the United States, became an undeniable reality (Richardson, 2020). Following the death of George Floyd, the excessive force exhibited by law enforcement culminated in a global movement of civil unrest against racial injustice, widely recognised as Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Lebron, 2017). The BLM movement reinvigorated the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) campaign that began on 9 March 2015, originally directed against a statue of British Imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town in South Africa (Ahmed, 2020). The statue of Rhodes was seen to represent colonisation, White supremacy and the subjugation of Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The campaign for the statue's removal received global attention. Comparative research by de Vries (2020) highlighted that #BLM and #RMF, as social campaigns, share the same goal to end White supremacy while rejecting colonisation and stressing the need to address systemic racism.

Alongside these global events, England withdrew from the European Union on the 31st of January 2020 (BBC News, 2016). In 2016, England voted to leave the European Union in a referendum called Brexit. Presently, Northern Ireland remains part of the territory of England. In 1921, Northern Ireland became separate from the state of Ireland, later referred to as the Republic of Ireland, due to a combination of historical, political, and religious factors (Smyth, 2025). The Partition of Ireland in 1921 resulted in a hard border established through military force, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and the Government of Ireland Act 1920. Armed troops, mainly the English army played a significant role in reinforcing the border (Moore, 2019).

The hard border between the state of Ireland and Northern Ireland was dismantled as England and Ireland joined the EU, and in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement (GFA).⁹ In the period leading up to Brexit, there were intense negotiations between England, the European Union, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that hard borders would not be reinstated between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (European Commission, 2016). The fears that the threat of Brexit instilled were captured in an interview with school children living on the border, who voiced their views on the complications that would ensue if a hard border were reinstated (Carswell, Simon, 2018; Irish Times, 2018). Even though children had no input into decisions concerning the implications of Brexit, they are likely bear the impact and have to live with the consequences for longer (Kilkelly, 2019). A hard border did not come to fruition due to a Brexit withdrawal agreement protocol that committed all parties to maintaining an open border. However, Shelly's (2024, p. 56) research offers insight into how political leaders on both sides of the Irish border used Brexit as an opportunity to initiate 'historical narratives and place identity to appeal to divided and polarised audiences on the island of Ireland'. Although the analysis of Brexit remains predominantly economic, the consequences of Brexit in terms of threats to identity politics (Shelly, 2024), belonging and bordering within the geopolitical space of Ireland have yet to be fully realised (Smyth, 2025).

1.3.2 Decolonising the colonial project

Decolonisation is not only a political process but also an epistemic project that challenges the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and opens space for alternative ways of knowing. By questioning hierarchical structures that privilege Western rationality as universal, decolonial thought foregrounds the situated, relational nature of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011).

⁹ In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), a multi-party peace accord, marked a significant turning point in the conflict in NI (Doyle, 2018).

As a theoretical lens decolonisation disrupts links Eurocentric knowledge systems as deep embedded in coloniality. The power structures that shaped past coloniality project persist in present-day society in many guises, some apparent and some more hidden. Thereby, Mignolo and Walsh urge that our analysis go beyond the historical act of coloniality to consider the power structures rooted in a matrix of domination, Eurocentric universality, and capitalist logic. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) challenge Western epistemology to engage in pluriverse practices that are collaborative and local forms of thinking and living that resist totalising narratives. Unlearning entrenched colonial patterns of thinking-being-doing is an active project that reasserts alternative knowledge systems, for example, Indigenous thinking and non-Western epistemologies. This thesis is invested in decolonising how knowledge is generated within research and ECEC practice as a reverberation of colonial structures. While decolonisation can be viewed as a practice of freedom and liberatory, Smith (2012) argues that theories and practices of decolonisation require critical interrogation due to the complex nature of enduring power, knowledge and economic that continue to shape global systems. Issues of such reasserts Indigenous thinking risks further colonisation of Indigenous thinking and belief systems (see section). While, Mignolo *et al.* advise that decolonisation also may be at risk when viewed as a singular solution rather than an ongoing situated process that demands continuous questioning (see section provocations and poem).

As I contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC, decolonisation has emerged as a disruptive force throughout the three published Journal Articles. I put numerous conceptual tools to work to include as *I* interrogate entrenched, dominant historical discourses that perpetuate epistemic, structural, and physical violence against humans and the more-than-human. My awareness of how colonial thinking imposes constraints on the ability to reimagine ECEC has significantly shaped my intent to decolonise my thinking, doing and being throughout this process.

The approach to decolonisation throughout the three Journal Articles is reflected in the position of Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p. 102)

If we can understand decoloniality not as a new paradigm but as a way, an option, a standpoint, and a practice (and praxis) of analysing but also of being, becoming, sensing, feeling, thinking, and doing, how does decoloniality challenge, interrogate, and/or interpolate you?

Accordingly, the three articles dismantle the historical discourses within the geopolitical space of Ireland, where a dark legacy of violence is associated with the institutionalisation of children. I contend that contributions to reconceptualisation can only begin when early childhood educators, policymakers, and broader society dismantle how these discourses continue to generate and regenerate within colonialising discourses. Within the Irish context, global events such as Brexit, the rise of right-wing nationalism in England, and the social movements ‘BLM’ and ‘RMF’ have prompted discussion of thorny issues related to Ireland’s colonial past and the present-day legacies of coloniality (McVeigh and Rolston, 2021). Moreover, Brexit reminded the island of Ireland of the ramifications of the colonial project, including the lingering effect of partition between Northern Ireland and Ireland, which continues to shape Irish history and policy (Ohlmeyer, 2020; McVeigh and Rolston, 2021). While it falls outside the scope of this thesis to thoroughly examine the complexities of the historical context of the colonisation of Ireland, I regard colonial mentality and thinking as an essential entanglement in the context of this research story. Therefore, it is vital to consider the relationship between the historical and contemporary aspects of the colonial project. Historically, Ireland, according to Ohlmeyer (2023), is regarded as the laboratory of colonisation—a process that began in the 12th century and involved the implementation of various policies through violent means.

In a letter to Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels (1856) stated that...

Ireland may be regarded as the earliest English colony and one which, by reason of her proximity, is still governed in exactly the same old way; here one cannot fail to notice that the English citizen's so-called freedom is based on the oppression of the colonies.

(Marx and Engels 1983, p. 49)

Oppressions included the imposition of the English language, specific legislation, agricultural policies, and the establishment of subservient systems within economics and education. Ohlmeyer points out that the practices of empire and colonisation policies were initially developed and implemented in Ireland before being applied abroad. For example, according to Ohlmeyer (2020), the partition of Ireland in 1920 served as the template for creating the partition of India and Pakistan, as well as Israel and Palestine. Notably, Aveyard (2023) points out that, for Ireland, the impact of colonisation on contemporary society often operates outside the theoretical academic frameworks of colonial/postcolonial studies due to various complications and contradictions. For example, Ireland contravenes many of the theoretical colonial models developed by scholars due to its geographical location, the racial and cultural aspects that differ dramatically from those of other colonised countries (Carroll and King, 2003). Contradictorily, Ohlmeyer's research also finds that some Irish were involved in human slavery and benefited from colonial policies abroad. Moreover, the complicated issue of Northern Ireland, which remains under English rule, is framed by the dichotomous identity of a Protestant/Unionist on one hand, loyal to the English Crown, and a Catholic/Nationalist on the other, aligned with the Irish state. These misunderstandings continue to shape identities and contemporary conflicts on the island of Ireland (Horning and Brannon, 2015).

Consequently, all people living on the island of Ireland are entangled with a legacy of colonialism. To this end, I consider the dictionary definition of legacy as 'the long-lasting

impact of a particular event/action that took place in the past' (Cambridge University Press, 2025). Interestingly, Marx (1867) corresponded with Engels, noting that a central aspect of the colonial relationship was the different phases of development...

conceptualised the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland as operating not in a static fashion but as passing through 'phases' of development.
(Slater and Donough, 2008, p. 05)

Therefore, I argue that colonialism is not a legacy according to the dictionary definition but is more akin to phases, as Marx observed in his correspondence to Engels. Although Ireland bears the historical scars of colonialism, it now ranks as one of the wealthiest countries per capita globally, leveraging its geographical and political positioning within the power dynamics established by nations that have historically benefited from colonialism (Clarcken, 2025; Ohlmeyer, 2020). Furthermore, Clarcken (2025) reports that contemporary Ireland finds itself in the contradictory position of benefiting from the modern-day subjugation of Others. A recent Oxfam report, *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Unearned Wealth of Colonialism* (Taneja *et al.*, 2025) shows how global inequality and poverty are rooted in the legacy of historical colonialism. The report highlights the contemporary manifestations of colonialism in terms of billionaire wealth that surges alongside war and power in the ongoing occupation and genocide of territories such as Palestine (Taneja *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, examining the phases of colonial relationships and way in which phases evolve may be more useful in decolonising the colonial mindset. This could lead to more useful questions, such as: What is the current colonial phase? How are the different phases of colonial thinking exercised through ECEC? What conceptual tools can be put to work in decolonising colonial systems, structures and relationships?

1.3.2.1 Scribbling questions as ongoing provocations of decolonisation

The concept of ‘Provocation’ originates from the Latin term ‘provocation,’ which means ‘call forth’ or ‘challenge’ (Merriam-Webster, 2025). In early childhood education and care (ECEC), provocation refers to open-ended resources, whether materials or ideas, that support the exploration of concepts by encouraging thinking and curiosity (Moriarty, 2020). Within ECEC, provocations are a key element of pedagogical practice, stemming from the renowned Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasises child-led learning, creativity, and exploration (Beach, 2023). This thesis adopts an innovative approach to reconceptualising ECEC by using various theoretical perspectives, materials, and ideas as provocations to rethink and reimagine the field of ECEC. Provocations presented in this thesis include a pencil drawing of scribbling (Figure 1-Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles), diverse theoretical perspectives, conversations with postgraduate students, data as it intra-acted/s. Provocations through questions are set as scribbling acts that resist closure and acknowledge that there is no single answer, thus opening spaces rather than closing them. Questions continue as an ongoing invitation for exploration, multiple perspectives and further questioning. *I* pose the following questions in a bid to keep the adaptability of colonisation to the fore beyond the provocation of this thesis.

- What is the current colonial phase?
- How are the different phases of colonial thinking exercised through ECEC?
- What conceptual tools can be put to work in decolonising colonial systems, structures and relationships?

Colonisation continues to influence relations among humans and more-than-humans, knowledge systems, and educational practices today and in the future. For instances, the logic of colonialism merges with practices of extraction, where fossils are repeatedly extracted in large quantities and at great speed, reinforcing human exceptionalism and the

commodification of life (French and Kotzé, 2019). This thesis contributes to research practice by rethinking ways of generating knowledge that resist extractive models (Quijano and Ennis, 2000). Scribbling questions as provocations encourages a critical examination of these continuities, challenging colonial epistemologies of extraction to create a space for relational, more-than-human ethics in ECEC. Open-ended questions are posed as invitations to dialogue rather than rigid structures that demand an answer or, indeed, have an answer, but that provoke a continuation of relationality as a pursuit of ethics.

1.3.3. Indigenising as a practice

Throughout the research process, I relied on numerous conceptual tools to approach the work in different ways. These conceptual tools include discourse analysis, braiding, diffracting, and (re)storying that challenge human hierarchies of superiority in ways not dictated by the structures of an academic discipline. Significantly, this research project aims to dismantle colonial structures, human superiority, and the violence that occurs within the field of ECEC. While decolonisation seeks to dismantle Euro-Western centric epistemologies and restore other marginalised systems of knowledge, there is a risk that decolonisation reinforces categories and binaries of coloniser and colonised (Mignola and Walsh 2018). Consequently, even if the aim is to dismantle colonialism, decolonial projects run the risk of reinforcing hierarchies of belonging, thus reproducing other exclusionary (Tuck and Ylang 2012). Admittedly, I began this project from the perspective of Euro-Western scholarship, such as posthuman knowledge. Critical posthumanism challenges the theoretical position of humanism, which places humans at the centre of all existence. The human subject is theorised within a flat ontology, where all objects, subjects and entities exist without a hierarchical structure of importance (Braidotti, 2013). As a result, Keeling and Lehman (2018) illustrate that agency is not reserved for the human subject alone but is distributed through dynamic forces entangled with the more-than-human (organic-water, land, and non-organic-

algorithms, AI). Thus, posthumanism embeds the human subject within an evolved ecological system of interdependence (Braidotti, 2019). Nonetheless, I became increasingly aware of how Indigenous knowledge systems profoundly influence many strands of posthumanism and contemporary Euro-Western scholarship (Watts, 2013; Todd, 2016). Yet, Zoe Todd, a Red River Métis scholar and anthropologist, points out that a central tension stems from scholars' failure to fully recognise indigenous philosophies that contribute to the theorisation of posthuman thinking (Todd, 2016, 2023). Additionally, Todd cautions against the evolving forms of the colonial project, highlighting the legitimate risk of reproducing relational power that continues to exploit and extract resources, including the misappropriation of indigenous knowledge.

A contemporary example of the misappropriation of Indigenous belief systems comes from the recent California wildfires. Some California policymakers advocate for a return to indigenous practices of intentional burning, which indigenous leaders describe as 'Cultural Burning'. However, Martinez *et al.* (2024) highlight that this rush to include Indigenous knowledge serves as a quick fix management solution to wildfires rather than a serious commitment to addressing the historical displacement of indigenous communities. The displacement of indigenous people in California includes the repossession of land and the criminalisation of indigenous people's relationship to fire (Taylor, Sigona and Kelly, 2024). The solution to restore 'Cultural Burning' only fails to take anthropogenic actions, such as the industrial practice of logging, seriously within the broader context of climate change (Martinez, Todd). Also, Todd (2016) warns that Western science continually commits epistemic theft of indigenous knowledge by appropriating ideas without credit or citations. Subsequently, Todd (2023) ardently encourages Western academics to strip away the White possessive and decouple themselves from colonial structures. Todd argues that when Western science decouples from colonial structures, possibilities arise for a return to the place in Western

knowledge systems that embraces interdependence with the Earth. The concept of the White possessive serves as a connection between racial sovereignty and possession, extending beyond mere property ownership. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015, p. xi), Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka people from Minjerribah in Queensland, describes the White possessive as a ‘possessive logic that is invested in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state’s ownership, control and domination’. Furthermore, Moreton-Robinson questions Whiteness and how it functions as an invisible power structure, creating subtle bias. Across different disciplines, Peters (2015) points out that Whiteness operates to reinforce the social production of Whiteness while rendering Blackness invisible. Moreover, many posthuman scholars overlook the default position of concepts originating from a Western perspective, leading to the exclusion of historical and structural racism implications from analysis. (King, 2017). Likewise, Jackson (2015, p. 215) highlights this negligence of overlooking structural racism in the following question, ‘what and crucially whose conception of humanism are we moving beyond?’

While taking a different approach, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s advice, a citizen of the Potawatomi nation, urges all humans to restore their connection with the Earth and to question the intersections of human superiority that underpin discourses of racism, colonisation, capitalism, and sexism. Kimmerer imparts essential teachings from plants, such as the lesson from grass that relational reciprocity is for all, including human and more-than-human entities. By following Kimmerer’s guidance in Journal Article 2, *I reclaim the role of Irish mythology as a tool to access the pre-colonised mind* (Smyth, 2024). Most importantly, *I want to recognise the courage gained from engaging with Kimmerer's writings to think-with Irish mythology and grass as alternative ways of knowing.* More recently indigenous cosmetology such as Sherfinski, Slocum, and Lough (2022) applies an indigenous perspective to early childhood education involves recognizing and respecting the diverse cultures, languages, and traditions of indigenous communities. Indigenous perspectives

emphasise land-based learning experiences that deeply connections to the land. It's crucial to note that practices should be context-specific and developed in collaboration with local indigenous communities. By embracing and integrating indigenous perspectives, early childhood education programs can contribute to the cultural well-being and identity development of indigenous children also in a wider context ECEC can draw inspiration from these indigenous practices. Embracing indigenous practices also demands that we question how knowledge is generated. The next section will examine how knowledge production has been influenced within Western society to be rationale and beyond nature.

1.4 The construction of paradigms

Historically, from 1500 until the 1700s, the scientific revolution influenced how people viewed the world due to the development of disciplines such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry (Renn and Damerow, 2015). As Hatfield (2024) documents, the philosophies of René Descartes (1596-1650) informed the core revolutionary scientific advancement of the time. Descartes popularised the idea of individualism, self-reflection and gaining knowledge based on experience. A viewpoint reflected in Descartes' statement, 'I think, therefore I am'. Descartes saw the universe as a mechanical system reduced to mathematically plotting, thereby providing a scientific sanction for manipulating nature typical of Western culture (Capra, 1983, p. 61). Thereby, Descartes' Cartesian viewpoint contributed to the 'great western paradigm' separation of mind/matter, soul/body, nature/culture (Morin, 1999). Descartes promoted the concepts that science and nature operate according to mechanical laws, and that mathematical arrangements can explain everything in the material world. Capra argues that this mechanical view of life continues to take hold of the ways we investigate contemporary problems in a reductive manner, giving the following examples,

We prefer to talk about our children's hyperactivity or learning disability rather than examine the inadequacy of our schools; we prefer to be told that we suffer from hypertension rather than change our over-competitive business world; we accept ever

increasing rates of cancer rather than investigate how the chemical industry poisons our food to increase its profits (Capra, 1983, p.163)

Influenced by the Scientific Revolution, numerous philosophers, including Francis Bacon (1561-1626) called for a more systematic methodological empirical approach to acquiring new knowledge (Klein, 2020). Both Descartes and Bacon contributed to the belief that the natural world could be understood through logical, abstract reasoning and scientific proof of rationalism. These ideas shaped how the human subjects in the Western world viewed themselves and their relationships to nature, not as or of nature but in control of nature (Capra, 1983). Consequently, Klein highlights that Bacon's concepts became the predominant paradigm of science, which began to take hold in broader society, shaped by clarity, reasoning, objectivity, and certainty. A physicist and philosopher, Kuhn (2009), contends that a paradigm is a set of concepts and methods that guide scientific research and practice within a discipline. Paradigms are devised structures that fundamentally frame how humans live, think, and are positioned in the world (Ulz, 2023). According to Ulz, bonds are established between the paradigm's claim to truth and the knowledge created to form the reality of how we know (epistemology), which influences our actions of being in the world (ontology), where ideas exist as constructions of our mind. Therefore, the paradigm provides a structure for the research, which is characterised by the discipline. However, as Chafe (2024) points out, a paradigm functions to establish the lens through which we choose our research theories, methods, and approaches. Morin describes the function of the paradigm eloquently in the statement below.

the paradigm is both underground and sovereign in all theories, doctrines, and ideologies. The paradigm is unconscious but irrigates and controls conscious thought, making it also super-conscious.

(Morin, 1999, p. 09)

Morin stresses that it is essential to consider how paradigms determine concepts, command theory, and discourse, which are continually generated and regenerated through the

conceptual construction of the structures of paradigms. Underpinning a positivist paradigm is the disputed claim of a detached, value-free scientific model of inquiry (Lather, 2006, 2017; Lather and St. Pierre, 2013). Consequently, hooks (1994, 2014) observes that Western-oriented education has disregarded the fact that these academic systems are built on ideologies of superiority, which include White supremacy and patriarchal thinking. The insidious nature of these ideologies unites with a capitalist agenda that propagates knowledge as a commodity (Ball, 2012, 2016). Hence, this lack of criticality within the education system perpetuates cycles that viciously oppress other ways of knowing (Todd, 2016; Rudolph, 2017; Sant, 2019). Kuhn (2009), a leading theorist on paradigms, contends that it is impossible to conduct science outside a paradigm without foregoing research integrity. Nevertheless, English (2001) advocates a more varied approach to paradigms, emphasising their boundaries and limitations. English suggests moving beyond a paradigm shift to a space of no paradigms, which allows for a decolonisation of thinking and a change toward conceptual diversity. Significantly, Walker (2010) points to the inherent danger of any specific paradigm, which is the inability to explore other options outside the limitations imposed by the boundaries of the chosen paradigm. Additionally, Kuby (2020) illustrates how exploring tensions between paradigms can lead to new ways of thinking, knowing, and doing, while inviting us to consider what occurs when we do not view paradigms as neat, tidy constructions to which we must conform.

Up until the twentieth century, rationality and objectivity guided most scientific observation and the formulation of all natural phenomena (Parekh and Dhavse, 2023). In 1687 Issac Newton's three laws of motion were published. Newton's three laws of motion describe the relationship between the motions of objects and the forces acting upon them (Alrasheed, 2019). Thus, Newton's law of motion assumes that the object and the observer are separate, individual objects with inherited properties that interact at set points of linear

motion in defined space and time (Keshri, 2023). Markedly, in the 1900s, the inception of quantum physics began to challenge the Cartesian order of individualism and separateness (Ferguson, 2005). Derived from Quantum Field Theory, Karen Barad introduces the concepts of diffraction and entanglement to research practice. Barad asserts that entities are not predefined outside of mutual relations of relationality. Thus, Barad disrupts Newton's laws, which suggest that the world consists of separate parts (Brown, Siegel and Blom, 2020). In challenging these positions of separateness as inherited from the scientific revolution, Barad (2007, p. 185) proposes 'ethico-onto-epistemology' as a paradigm wherein the 'practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated.' Barad's account of entanglement pertains to a relational ontology of interrelationships, where the human experience cannot be separated from how we are 'in,' 'being', and 'becoming' of the world (Gamble, Hanan and Nail, 2019; Smyth, 2024, 2025). Individual entities do not inherit agency but undergo a dynamic process of intra-action, which diffracts to make different patterns (Barad, 2007a, 2014a) With ECEC, Barad's philosophies have encouraged researchers to consider specific contexts and material conditions, the intra-act of history, and personal experiences to bring new insights into the entangled ways in which children and educators are being in the world (Murriss, 2018, 2020, 2023).

1.4.1 Neoliberalism and positivist paradigm

This section will trace the impact of dominant paradigms within ECEC. Within ECEC neoliberalism cultivates a harmonious relationship with positivist paradigms, deriving substantial advantages from this mutual association (Moss, 2019). Stemming from a positivist paradigm, Murriss, Smalley, and Allan (2020) point out that developmental psychology positions certainty and predictability by implying that the outcomes can be controlled (predetermined skills of the child as an adult in the becoming) when procedures (pedagogical approaches) are applied correctly. Thus, the knowledge produced within our chosen paradigm

dictates our position while informing the overarching discipline. So, Moss (2019, p. 28) urges ECEC to consider paradigms as a basic belief system through which we see, interpret, and make sense of the world and our experiences. Also, Moss contends that different paradigmatic positions produce different perspectives because each paradigm produces different ways of seeing and understanding things. Early childhood educators work mostly within inherited theory, 'grounded in the paradigm of the universal child, predictable (staged) development and science-based 'best practices' (Arndt and Urban, 2024, p. 229). Hence, within the field of ECEC, some scholars and educators diligently apply alternative methods to challenge rigid paradigms of foundational theories and neoliberal agendas of building human capital (Walkerdine, 1998; MacNaughton, 2009; Bloch, Swadener and Cannella, 2018). These actions have disrupted grand narratives of subjectivity, rationality, and measured outcomes (Moss, 2019). Significantly, Farquhar and White (2014, p. 01) argue that ECEC is complex and multifaceted due to the variety of competing narratives, with potential for revising early childhood pedagogy through diverse paradigms and philosophical orientations. However, Mathias Urban (2016, 2022) observes that an epistemological tension persists, as ECEC relies on external disciplines to generate knowledge rather than developing theory from within the field. In addition, Arndt and Urban (2024, p. 230) encourage early childhood educators/researchers to engage in critiques that reconceptualise the field of ECEC while simultaneously thinking of 'alternative propositions' that include 'new and radically different paradigms'. Notably, what is possible is often rendered impossible by the defined boundaries of a chosen paradigm and the confinement of disciplines, which normalised taken-for-granted dominant discourses.

Using Foucault's critical tools of dominant discourses, the historical entanglements between malleability and the figuration of the 'developing child' within the paradigm of developmentalism are critically analysed.

1.5 Dominant discourses

Decolonising my thinking within the folds of this thesis created space for alternative ways of knowing to emerge. In reimagining ECEC, *I* challenge the core conceptual structure of paradigms that fundamentally guides research and practice. Notably, to decolonise taken-for-granted assumptions, educators need to examine the historical relationship between knowledge and power (Liebel, 2020; Belluigi, 2023). It is essential to understand how power is renewed through historically accepted discourses that influence everyday interactions within institutional frameworks (Foucault, 1981). Dominant discourses are a key term used by Michel Foucault that denotes the historical lines of how systems within society produce and organise knowledge. Consequently, the dominant discourses produce a regime of truth that becomes what is considered legitimate knowledge within a specific historical period (Ball, 2012). According to Foucault, dominant discourses are ways of discussing or contemplating a particular subject reinforced by shared assumptions.

Systems of thought are formed when knowledge individualises, achieves equilibrium, and enters into communication during a given period.

(Foucault, 1994, p. 09)

Accordingly, Ball (2016) stresses that the ‘truth’ is disseminated through dominant discourses fostered by effective communication across various channels and networks, including political policies, media, dialogues, education, hidden curricula, and our everyday practices in institutions, organisations, and broader society. Furthermore, Foucault highlights that power also legitimises knowledge and truths. Power operates through discourses to shape common attitudes and beliefs and to become our accepted knowledge.

Relations of power cannot be established, consolidated, or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse.

(Foucault, 1981, p. 83)

Foucault's focus on the political production of the truth as beyond our immediate control, which situates meaning-making in a Power/Knowledge nexus that cannot be separated from time, place, culture, history, politics and society (Smyth, 2022, 2011 unpublished). In this way, Foucault argues that the dominant discourse can mask its construction and function in producing meaning. However, it is essential to note that Foucault does not see all forms of power as negative, nor are power relations of domination fixed. Existing alongside positions of power are also positions of freedom. Foucault (1978) explores how power operates within the dominant discourses surrounding technical knowledge, such as how we administer daily practices within institutions. Thereby, the dynamic and ever-changing relations between power and meaning-making are highlighted. In Foucault's seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons*, Foucault argues that work practice within institutions is intricately connected to power and knowledge that often remain invisible due to our familiarity with the concepts (Foucault, 1978). Consequently, we take our beliefs, work technologies, and structures within our organisations for granted. Foucault introduces the concept of the 'docile body,' which refers to the idea that discursive power is exercised towards controlling the body. Through complex systems of surveillance, power manifests in coercion and restrictions on movement, gestures, attitudes, and control over the active body, in the guise of organising space, the timing of routines, activities, and behaviours. Foucault stresses that power is not discipline, but discipline is an apparatus in which power can be exercised (Foucault, 2020). In the field of ECEC, Moss (2019, p. 5) argues that dominant discourses mutate into practices that have a decisive influence. For example, the dominant discourses surrounding the 'developing child' can function to silence other stories and the plurality of children living and being in the world. Thus, in exploring positions of power, spaces can be created for different ways of knowing and quieter stories to emerge (Moss, 2019). Although many factors influence the ECEC field, including human rights and bodies of knowledge from other disciplines, such as sociology,

health, education etc. The next section will emphasise the figuration of the ‘developing child’ based on the construction of malleability as a dominant discourse central to developmentalism and foundational theories practice within ECEC.

1.5.1 The figuration of the ‘developing child’

Claudia Castañeda (2002) refers to the figure of the child and childhood as a conceptual representation shaped by various social and cultural contexts. Throughout history, Castañeda argues that the figuration of the child is mainly conceptualised as an adult in the making, due to the child's potential in its incomplete form to become a competent adult. Thereby, the figuration of the child is hinged on the acquisition of traits and skills deemed essential to function as a citizen of tomorrow. Hence, the child is placed in a default position of deficiency (Murriss, 2016). Additionally, Castañeda emphasises that while all categories of humans can be deconstructed, the category of child is distinctive in that it can be deconstructed but also continually remade. Central to the developmentalism paradigm is the universal figuration of the ‘developing child’ that is malleable and stretchable (Koops and Kessel, 2017). In line with other scholars such as Murriss and Osgood (2022), I have placed the ‘developing child’ in inverted commas to emphasise the deeply problematic and contested idea of a universal normative human being in the making. The concept of malleability as a human trait can be traced back to the Enlightenment period, as reflected in the historical philosophies of Locke (1632-1714) and Rousseau (1712-1776). Malleability continues to be an influence emanating from foundational theoretical perspectives in contemporary pedagogical practice, as in the case of Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Tracing malleability as a trait and a concept begins with the Scientific Revolution, such as Descartes's prominent ideas of rationality, and the Enlightenment era commenced in Europe. This intellectual movement occurred between the 17th and 18th centuries, shaping a worldview synthesising the ideas of God, reason, nature, and humanity (Ferrone, 2025). According to Crain (2024), during the Enlightenment period,

philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1714) emphasised the singular phase of childhood, which challenged the prevailing notion at the time that children were inherently evil. Locke's philosophy fostered the figuration of child as 'tabula rasa' (blank slates), thus impressionable and sensitive to new experiences, rendering them malleable (Duschinsky, 2012). Consequently, the concept of malleability positions the adults as possessing the capacity to shape the child in their image, which for Locke was a modern English gentleman (Henary, 2021). Whereas Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1776) disagreed with Locke's concept of 'tabula rasa', he argued that children are inherently good, born in a state of virtue with a close connection to nature's development plan, which unfolds naturally. However, the child in a natural condition remains susceptible to corruption from broader societal forces, which Rousseau calls the degenerative 'hand of man' (Scott, 2019). Within the field of ECEC, both Locke and Rousseau have profoundly influenced various educational methodologies and continue to serve as canonical references in contemporary practices. For example, from Rousseau's philosophies, Lenz Taguchi and Bodén (2025) trace the figuration of the 'developing child' transitioning from being perceived as miniature adults to an understanding that childhood is a distinct phase in human life, necessitating protection and nurturing from culture, also romanticised in nature. Thus, creating a binary argument of culture/nature, a dualism that places humans separate from nature, has significantly impacted developmental thinking within ECEC (Lenz Taguchi and Bodén, 2025). Also, Rousseau asserted that education facilitates the development of a child's positive traits and moral sensibility in a manner that should centre the child. Yet, Rousseau championed child-centred education to meet the child's needs instead of the thinking of the time that promoted the subject matter (Elijah Okon, 2014). Child-centredness as promoted by Rousseau can be found constructivist approaches, exemplified by Piaget's theories, posit that children actively construct their understanding of the world through interaction with their environment, reflecting the malleability of cognitive development (Miller, 2010). While

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is distinct, Locke's concept of 'tabula rasa' and Rousseau's emphasis on natural development have significantly shaped Piaget's perspectives (Burman, 2016). For example, the child's active role in learning and the critical importance of developmental stages, where the stretchable plasticity of cognition is promoted. From a Western European perspective, ECEC relies on foundational theories such as normative development, humanism, and psychology (Naughton, 2005; Yelland and Bentley, 2017). These foundational theories give rise to a paradigm that dictates how knowledge is produced within the field. Indeed, as Urban (2024, p. 62) articulates that many underlying assumptions that inform ECEC are 'firmly rooted in the 20th century'. Operating alongside foundational theories of developmentalism is a neoliberal agenda that advocates building human capital, which will demand a high return on investment in ECEC in the future (Moss and Urban, 2020). Human capital is underpinned by the premise that the individual attainments of skills and knowledge improve their personal economic position, contributing to the national and global economy (Attanasio, Cattani and Meghir, 2022). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2024), high-quality ECCE – also known as preschool is linked to improved educational and social outcomes, and later success in formal schooling. In an annual economic review, Attanasio et al. (2022) identified cognitive and socioemotional development as the two key dimensions of human capital that must be supported in early educational experiences. According to Burman and Stacey (2010), this steadfast promise of fulfilling future societal needs unites with the malleable nature of the human child to form everyday pedagogical practices, which promote child-centeredness and individualism (Land *et al.*, 2022). In turn, this capitalist agenda infiltrates foundational theories of early childhood to champion objectivity and measurable outcomes (Vandenbroeck, Roets and Roose, 2012; Moss and Urban, 2017). As stressed by Auld and Morris (2019), the human capital agenda perceives children in financial terms as future contributors to society, the economy, and the labour market. Also, Woodhead

(2006) stresses that neuroscience is contributing to the scientific arguments within the developmentalism paradigm of sensitive periods of learning in early childhood, where the brain is most primed for learning, i.e., sensitive periods of learning (times of potential malleability), primed for learning (most stretchable for making and remaking). Consequently, the human trait of malleability plays a central role in construction of the 'child' being made and remade (Cantor *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, Nketia, Amso and Brito (2021) posit that the measurements and ways of interpreting data within the field of neuroscience fail to consider different contexts of systematic racism. Therefore, Nketia *et al* warn against the misuse of data that decontextualises the development of children from marginalised communities, particularly for Black children. Fundamental to development theories in early childhood is the universal assumption that only one type of human can be achieved, namely the white, non-disabled male, which does not capture the diverse cultural backgrounds of all children (Murriss, Smalley and Allan, 2020).

1.5.2 Whiteness as malleable

Furthermore, Fikile Nxumalo (2020) points out that the figuration of the 'developing child' is established in normative terms as a genetic form of predetermined being that supports Whiteness. At the same time, different characteristics or qualities considered outside the normative become identifiable as Other. In the 21st century, White supremacy has undoubtedly evolved. Researcher Christian (2019) advances an argument of Whiteness as malleable within systems both global and national, even for those without White bodies. So, Scott and Rodriguez Leach (2024) argue that Whiteness is a process that is not static. Thereby, Whiteness must be examined in relation to social, economic and political constructs as it moves within the historical colonial context of White supremacy. Educators and broader society must become alert to the patterns of Whiteness as it moves and adapts to become covertly incorporated into everyday interactions (Matias, 2022). Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013) offers a compelling

argument for the consideration of systematic racism in contemporary society, pointing out that although Whiteness is embedded in institutions, it is constantly changing and mutating, thus malleable. Thereby, systematic racism as a collective practice of behaviours has become more covert, for example, as we rethink who belongs where. Although Bonilla-Silva points out that all older forms of racism still exist, new forms of racism are insidious in all facets of life. This includes White oriented curriculum with cultural expression of Whiteness. Weiner (2012) maintains that these covert processes draw on dominant discourses of Whiteness that rely on cultural difference (us vs them) and social problems, i.e. lack of housing due to refugees, rather than challenging the deeply embedded structures of White supremacy, which also depend on the national context. Thereby, the malleable nature of the ‘developing child’ is not a neutral trait, which contests the outward claim made by many developmental scientists, such as Osher *et al.*(2020). These points critique raise serious ethical concerns for ECEC sites where early childhood educators routinely apply the figuration of the ‘developing child’ to their work with young children and families. As the field of ECEC progresses towards evidence-based practice, dominant discourses of individualism and child-centeredness elevate certain philosophies and practices (MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith, 2007; Farquhar and White, 2014). Moreover, Farquhar and White (2014) illustrate that dominant discourses, such as child-centeredness within ECEC research, restrict scholarship to specific theories and methodologies while excluding alternative paradigms and ways of generating knowledge.

1.6 Re-think, Re-conceptualise, Re-form

This section situates this thesis firmly in the ‘posts’ as a way of moving toward the ethical and political intention to disrupt anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene. The ethical and political intention to contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC arises from the urgency of multiple ongoing crises, including climate catastrophes, White supremacy, racial and social injustices. Considering ongoing planetary crises, this thesis adopts the watchwords of Sousa

and Moss (2024, p. 260) to ‘re-think, re-conceptualise and re-form. In ECEC, Sousa and Moss (2024) define reconceptualisation as rethinking existing ideas to reimagine possibilities. Working ‘with’ and ‘in’ and ‘through’ the posts’ supported this work to scribble elsewhere and everywhere. Thinking from the position of reconceptualisation enables the evolution of ECEC practices and policies that can better serve the needs of young children, their families and broader society (Bloch, Swadener and Cannella, 2018). Additionally, Moss (2019) explores a growing body of international work within the ECEC field that aims to reconceptualise and dream anew the politics of working with/and for young children and families. Most importantly, at the heart of reconceptualisation lies the imperative to challenge dominant discourses that shape predetermined knowledge within the ECEC field. Consequently, many researchers deploy an array of methodologies to critically examine how knowledge is constructed and exercised, as they seek more equitable methods of meaning-making for young children and families (Dahlberg and Moss, 2004; Moss, 2019). Numerous activists, scholars, and educators embrace approaches such as interdisciplinary, which integrate knowledge and methods from different disciplines, and transdisciplinary, which goes beyond disciplines to extend to non-academic sources such as the community, to collaborate in pursuing ethical pedagogical practices (Arndt, 2018; Moss, 2019; Boyle, 2021). However, Mathias Urban (2010, 2016) argues that an epistemological tension persists, as ECEC draws on external disciplines to create knowledge rather than within the field. Also, Lykke (2018) highlights that different disciplines assume different prerequisites for knowledge-making, such as paradigms and ontological and epistemological positioning. As such, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches primarily aim to integrate disciplinary knowledge (Lykke, 2018), where postdisciplinary rejects fixed disciplinary boundaries entirely recognising that knowledge is fluid and problem driven. The issues facing ECEC are not only inherently disciplinary, but the limitations of disciplinary thinking, which also constrain addressing the

ongoing planetary crisis of anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene. Moreover, Klein (2008, p. 121) summarises the following concern relating to disciplines:

Disciplines provide crucial knowledge, methodologies, and tools for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work. However, in many discussions, disciplines are still treated uncritically as monolithic constructs. Studies of disciplinarity reveal that disciplines exhibit a striking heterogeneity, and that boundary crossing has become a marked feature of contemporary research.

1.6.1 Why the 'posts'?

The surge of 'post' in modern research and theory, such as poststructuralism, posthumanism, postdisciplinary, and postqualitative research, indicates a resistance to the limitations of traditional academic paradigms. Quantitative research has traditionally been the main approach in scientific studies, especially in the social sciences, because it emphasises measurement, objectivity, and broad applicability (Schwandt, 2007). Yet, Schwandt, (2007) points out that as researchers explored intricate human behaviours and social issues, the shortcomings of quantitative methods became more evident. Consequently, qualitative research developed as an alternative, focusing on context and meaning rather than numbers. This approach, grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, sees reality as socially constructed and subjective (Schwandt, 2014). Rather than applying universal laws, qualitative methods, as Schwandt emphasises, involve understanding phenomena through participants' perspectives, delving into their lived experiences and the meanings they assign to them. Techniques such as interviews, ethnography, and case studies offer flexibility and adaptability, allowing researchers to uncover unexpected themes and insights (Creswell and Poth, 2016). This shift, as Creswell and Poth noted, marked a significant departure from the positivist tradition, challenging the idea that objectivity and quantification are the only measures of scientific rigour. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that, as qualitative research gained recognition, it became increasingly professionalised within academic standards, grant guidelines, and peer-review processes. This institutionalisation shifted focus towards

technical rigour and methodological correctness, sidelining its activist roots. Feminist and critical race traditions, once central to qualitative inquiry, have been diluted by pressures to produce ‘safe’ and apolitical scholarship (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Typically, qualitative methodologies include participants’ perspectives, representing their opinions and the ‘truth’ regarding the matter. Conversely, this individualistic perspective, which emphasises human superiority, sharply contrasts with the aims of postqualitative inquiry, which views the world through a lens of entanglement that seeks to flatten the hierarchy of the human experience (St. Pierre, 2019). Thus, postqualitative research describes inquiry that challenges traditional qualitative research methods. It draws on poststructuralist and posthumanist philosophies, seeking to move beyond conventional human-centred perspectives in qualitative research and to investigate aspects of reality that are not centred solely on human concerns (St Pierre, 2019). A postfoundational approach, a general umbrella term that includes the ‘posts’ with an agenda of getting to work, ‘undoing’ universally accepted truths, typically applied by a humanist inquiry (Mazzei and Jackson, 2024). Drawing on postfoundationalism as a dynamic process involving thinking, writing, and walking, Mazzei et al. propose a broad philosophical view that questions the notion of objective, universally valid knowledge or truth.

Furthermore, Mazzei et al (2024) suggest that knowledge is continuously influenced by social, cultural, and historical factors and assert that there is no single, definitive method for understanding the world. Instead, they advocate for postfoundational inquiry as an ‘emergent, relational, responsive, involuntary, and inventive approach’ (p. 16). These entangled relationships and interconnections are highlighted by Taylor et al., (2024, p. 819) ‘for feminists, working in/with the ‘posts’ is, always has been, and must be, a collective and collaborative endeavour ‘Post-inquiry entails thoughtfully engaging with diverse humans, nonhumans, and other entities, encompassing multispecies and natureculture components, that includes ‘viral, microbial, elemental, and atmospheric relationships’ (Taylor et al., 2024,

p. 819). At the same time, Rautio (2021) uses the term postscholarship as an umbrella term for all the ‘posts’. Postscholarship is not meant to collapse the differences among approaches, but rather to describe a collective approach to this work. Thus, postscholarship recognises the process of becoming, where knowledge is not a pre-given position but emerges through situated material-discursive relations (Rautio, 2021). This resonated with the adoption of postscholarship approaches within this project, all of which are put to work at different times in an ongoingness to reject predetermined frameworks and universal truths in favour of multiplicity and responsiveness.

1.6.2 What are the ‘posts’?

One of the key ambitions of the Poststructural thinker Foucault’s work was not just to analyse the phenomena of power but to create a history of the different modes by which human beings are made subjects. However, Foucault’s image of man, drawn in the sand by the seashore and gradually erased by the waves, creates a binary distinction between extinction and renewal that ignores the vital force of non-human life, which is equally subjected to power (Braidotti, 2013, 2019). Although poststructural perspectives shed light on power relations and the impact of advanced capitalism, it falls short of embracing affirmative ethics or proposing alternative solutions. That said, Braidotti (2019) recognises that poststructuralism paved the way for posthuman perspectives, which established a new ontological framework for becoming-subject where knowledge is generated through expansive collaborations. For critical posthumanism, the prefix ‘post’ signifies not only the chronological order following humanism but also a conceptual break that moves beyond the category of man (Braidotti, 2019). While Murriss (2020, p. 06) argues that the ‘post’ does not mean ‘doing away with’ or ‘going beyond’ the human or breaking with the past. Thus, posthuman does not mean the extinction of humans, as it aims to deconstruct the category of man. Instead of shutting the category of the human down, it places the human in relational,

entangled connections with all entities. Braidotti (2013, p. 16) points out that ‘humanism’s restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understanding how we got to a post-human turn at all.’ Thus, Braidotti(2019) puts forward the concept of Zoe, referring to non-human, non-individual forces beyond the human boundaries of being, shifting the focus away from a human-centric notion of exceptionalism toward the vitality of all things, organic and non-organic, with an emphasis on interconnections and relationality.

While the ‘post’ in postdisciplinary describes a position that defies the boundaries of the knowledge-making process in a rebellious spirit, challenging the confines of traditional academic disciplines (Pernecky, 2020, 2023). Postdisciplinary approaches challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries that organise knowledge and research. The aim is to dismantle disciplinary silos that constrain thinking (Braidotti, 2019). While Taylor et al. (2024, p. 819) ask provocative questions such as, ‘In what ways does working with feminisms and the ‘posts’ in gender and education enable us to move beyond disciplinary boundaries?’ Postdisciplinary, Pernecky (2019, 2023) argues that, by its very nature, it is not easily definable, as it offers the freedom to express and reconfigure in novel ways that are not dictated by the structures of an academic discipline. Vandebroek (2021) describes this rebellion as inventive and playful, where the researcher must follow an inner logic in moulding the research. Along these lines, a postdisciplinary approach moves away from the cages of primarily choosing a research method and theoretical perspectives to engage with (Simon and Chard, 2014). Unlike other approaches, a postdisciplinary approach comes without guidance. Actually, that is the point! As amplified by Greenacre (2024, p. 204), ‘research should not be driven by artificial structures and their rules.’ While Caton and Hill (2019, p. 15) argue for viewing the ‘postdisciplinary as a weaver of webs, examining the webs of how knowledge comes about’.

Postqualitative research embraces poststructuralist, posthumanist, and postdisciplinary philosophies as it seeks to move beyond the human-centric assumptions of traditional qualitative research in a bid to collaborate with the more-than-human entanglements of reality (St Pierre, 2019). In providing new research modes, the ‘post’ in postqualitative research approach was developed to challenge the rigid structures of traditional qualitative research (Young et al, 2022). Postqualitative research promotes the researcher

‘to read more and not to relegate theory and literature to thesis chapters where they may be revisited to take risk theoretically and methodologically to use inventive methods and processes that adopt emerging concepts as ways to think/sense/flow with the work’.
(Young, et al, 2022, p. 313)

My tactic has been, rather than pushing the thesis into a structure (not to mention it absolutely refused), to make space for the spills, slips and leaks, in ways that ‘think/sense/flow’ in scribbly movements, that scurry, meander and pause with the work, for these are the places where *I* became the most entangled with the more-than-human organic and non-organic.

1.6.3 The tensions within the Post–turn

As previously stated, the ethical and political drive to reconceptualise Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) stems from urgent global crises—climate change, systemic racism, and social injustice. Moving towards imaginative possibilities and hope-full renewals the ‘post’ shares an agenda to challenge dominant paradigms, reject universal truths, and embrace multiplicity, alongside the ethical responsibility for how knowledge should be generated and, indeed, what counts as knowledge (Taylor et al, 2024, Pernecky, 2020). Scholars working with ‘posts’ must allow for the destabilisation of certainties while embracing knowledge-making as an emergent, entangled collaboration. This ethical agenda is central to the ‘posts’ that demand not just a change in methodological approaches but also a deep political responsibility for the ways we co-create our worlds. As advocated by Taylor *et*

al, the ‘posts’ gesture towards new educational imaginaries and hope-full renewals that extend beyond the classroom

However, scholars warn that even these approaches risk becoming normalised regimes of truth, necessitating ongoing reflexivity to maintain openness and prevent closure. Meanwhile, Rautio cautions that post-qualitative research may risk becoming another remote bastion of righteousness, rigid with rules on what can and cannot be postqualitative (Rautio,2021). (see chapter 2, section 2.4 and 2.4.1). Likewise, Haraway questions the use of posthumanist labels, especially by emphasising issues with the prefix ‘post’, which can suggest ‘beyond’ or ‘off-planet’ but ultimately reinforces human-centred categories. Haraway’s refusal to acknowledge human uniqueness abandons the concepts of separate individuals and beings (such as species and orders) by adopting categories that include holobionts, symbionts, and cyborgs (as opposed to posts), urging that we join forces that are ‘biological-cultural-political and technological recuperation and re-composition, which must include mourning irreversible losses’. Thus, Haraway declares the position of ‘compostist, not posthumanist; we are all compost, not posthuman’ (p.101). Other risks are examined in article 2, which urges posthuman perspectives to recognise that colonial discursive practices still vibrate in many guises, such as the fabricated split between spirit and matter and the concept of animism. Also, Jackson (2013) points out that people of colour have always been excluded from the order of Man, which is explored further in article 3.

In response to the data, this thesis adopts a postqualitative inquiry. So, this thesis unfolds to contest the historically dominant discourses that set predetermined concepts of producing and organising knowledge. The methodological approaches did not begin as postqualitative inquiry but evolved in response to the data. Consequently, each published Journal Article is novel in response to the entanglements that emerge with other entities.

Combined, the three published Journal Articles challenge how knowledge is generated and how ECEC, as a field, arrives at these thinking patterns locally, nationally, and globally.

Within this project, working with/in/through the posts has allowed me to transcend many boundaries, including academic borders, the boundaries of these pages, the boundaries of skin and thought, and the limits of what must be thought but is not, what is but is not-yet.

In this thesis, engagement with ‘post/postscholarship’ has proved an expansive mode for disrupting the structures that restrict knowledge generation and for being immanent in creating possibilities. Working with the ‘posts’ also puts an onus on the researcher, as emphasised by Braidotti (2019), not just to be critical but also to be immanent in creating solutions in the never-ending pursuit of justice. In adapting the ‘post’, other possibilities emerge to include thinking and being with scribbles, a grassy hill, water, a bog, a fence and AI. As described by Taylor et al., collaborating with the ‘posts’ enables ongoing, creative experimentation that offers new political imaginaries. The experimentation within this thesis aligns with Osgood’s (2023) playful archive, where images, poetry, and art gesture towards doing research differently, ‘as research is understood as affective, unruly, and ultimately activist in the difference it makes in how it comes about, in the act, and how it lingers and haunts long after’. As a web weaver, I use a storytelling approach to weave together various theoretical perspectives, diverse provocations (both human and more-than-human), different genres of writing, including poetry, and photographic images, and art to tell stories that challenge the discipline of ECEC to reconceptualise.

1.7 Relationality: a political mode of knowing, being and doing

As I contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC, I propose relationality as a political mode of being, doing, and generating knowledge. Relationality is a key conceptual component that orients each Journal Article. Though relationality relates closely to relationships, it

recognises the non-emotional ties between entities in this context. Relationality serves as a dynamic, situated, and emergent approach to knowing, doing, and being. Thus, relationality creates a conceptual tool that intertwines the postscholarship orientations of this research story with various theoretical perspectives, including Ingenious knowledge, Black feminist theory, posthumanism, and new materialism. However, relationality is not a new concept but a core feature of numerous theoretical perspectives, including indigenous paradigms (Held, 2019). Ensuring epistemic justice begins with recognising the longstanding history of relationality inherent within Indigenous knowledge systems (Gould, Martinez and Hoelting, 2023). Although Ingenious knowledge embeds relationality as a profound interconnection with land and water, not all Indigenous beliefs are homogeneous. Significantly, Kimmerer (2003, 2020) indicates that relationality is embedded in a spiritual connection of reverence and reciprocity, positioning humans within a system of interdependence with the Earth rather than in a place of superiority or exceptionalism. Indigenous relational thinkers emphasise that this responsibility extends beyond the care or stewardship of the Earth. Relationality is a profound spiritual connection that encompasses an obligation of accountability. Scholars in the ECEC field working with Indigenous systems of knowledge urge educators to rethink the human position of superiority in favour of a relational belonging to land and water (Somerville, 2014; Crinall and Somerville, 2020; Nxumalo, 2020; Smyth, 2024). Additionally, Indigenous thinkers such as Sherfinski, Slocum and Lough (2022) emphasise land-based learning experiences that centre pedagogy within a relational, interdependent relationship with the natural environment.

1.7.1 Relationality and Black Feminist Theory

Relationality also has a rich history in Black feminist theory, enhancing our understanding of how different power relations interact to shape the human experience. Contemporary Black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) theorises the concept of intersectionality, which has been instrumental in understanding the relationality between power

structures and various forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and class, that intersect to shape the experience of Black women (Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality emphasises the relational nature of identity and oppression, focusing on the political power where various forms of discrimination and privilege intersect. In 2018, Ludwig proposed a relational paradigm to address the numerous ways racism occurs across contexts. Rather than focusing on core concepts of how racism is happening globally, Ludwig argues for a conceptual relational perspective of racial ontologies, which could be helpful in global comparisons but also broadens research to disrupt how White supremacy occurs at the local/national level. Also, researchers Nxumalo and Ross (2019) bring Black feminist theory to Early Childhood research, foregrounding relational moments as Black children refuse to be defined within a system of White supremacy. Nxumalo (2014) suggests that focusing on relationality can create opportunities to shift from representation practices to teaching practices that are more socially equitable in early childhood. For Nxumalo, relationality engages with the power relations of White supremacy and racism present in the material (the physical world) and the discursive (language, dominant discourses) within the complexities of daily life interactions. According to Nxumalo (2019), thinking in terms of relationality rather than merely relationships between entities can fundamentally change research practices. Furthermore, Nxumalo (2019, 2020) urges the ECEC field to respond to environmentally damaged areas that are intertwined with anti-Blackness and colonial legacies.

1.7.2 Relationality and New Materialism

Feminist theorist and biologist Donna Haraway (2016) proposes the notion of ‘Chthulucene’ as a lens of relationality. Central to the concept of the Chthulucene is a world of futurity where humans unite with other species to live in balance in a relationship of ‘multispecies flourishing’. Thereby, Chthulucene offers a generative way that encourages humans to *‘think-with’* the interconnections among multiple species spanning generations.

(Haraway, 2003, 2016). *Think-with* is also central to Haraway's work, capturing the messy, interconnected, and troublesome nature of human existence and moving beyond the traditional boundaries of self. However, Haraway (1988) refers to the generation of knowledge as situated in the perspective and specific context of the knower. Situated knowledge considers the agency of entities other than humans. Reclaiming the situatedness of knowledge production allows for a more critical inclusion of different objects, things, beings and critters not typically included in research to come to the fore (Haraway, 1988; Haraway, 2013). Rejecting species hierarchy, Haraway proposes that the human subject becomes enmeshed in a web of relationality to oneself, others, and the world. Haraway's (2016, p. 03) mantra, 'staying with the trouble,' challenges the dominant doomsday narrative promoted by the Anthropocene. In 'staying with the trouble,' Haraway (1988, 2016) implores humans to avoid a 'game over' and instead speculate through the concept of 'worlding,' which encompasses the entanglements of living with the more-than-human. Malone and Crinall (2023) draw on Haraway's notion of worlding to consider children's relational relationships with other more-than-human entities in world-making. Additionally, scholars such as Taylor (2017) and Osgood and Andersen (2019) put forward the concept of common worlding as a pedagogical approach that recognises the messy, unequal political world in which children are embedded. Theoretical approaches such as feminist new materialism challenge dualisms, such as the nature/culture binary, by emphasising the relational entanglement of matter (organic and non-organic) in shaping children's experiences and realities (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015; Tesar, Farquhar and Bloch, 2016; Land, Vintimilla and Angus, 2022). Applying the lens of feminist new materialism to early childhood education entails recognising the relationality of agency and discursive practices of materiality that contribute to meaning-making (Murriss, 2023). Thus, scholars and activists call for the potential of relationality to be considered. Osgood and Mohandas (2024, p. 03) advocate for a 'relational

shift in how education is imagined and enacted' in early childhood studies. Also, Cantó-Milà, Roig-Sang, Ashral, and Melarerts (2025) note that this interconnectedness, revealed through the lens of relationality, expands our thinking to consider the complex web of relationships that shape our world. Additionally, Dépelteau (2018) assumes that a relational paradigm holds the potential to generate new possibilities, imaginaries, structures, and materialities.

1.8 National political landscape

ECEC in Ireland's geopolitical space emerges as an educational realm profoundly shaped by ideological debates, economic plans, and global trends. Colonisation has left a lasting impact and continues to affect Irish society, evident in areas such as the Irish language, governance, legislation, education, and broader issues such as belonging and the environment (Lynch). All three published articles join to examine these topics in greater detail and with greater critical depth. This thesis traces multiple stories as entanglements within webs shaped by various elements, including history and culture, the local, the national, the global, the human, and the more-than-human. I advocate for the scribbling of ECEC to encompass relational, entangled spaces that exist inside, out, and between, capturing both the apparent and the unapparent in an ongoing process. Therefore, this thesis prompts multiple provocations that go beyond White-supremacy, the human condition of superiority and exceptionality, to include the more-than-human. All three articles, combined, scribble movement that emerges as a reconceptualising of ECEC within the Irish context. Thus, this thesis makes a solid contribution to reconceptualising ECEC by creating a space for reimagining our actions for the collective well-being of humans, more-than-humans, and the planet, whilst creating a sustainable future for ECEC. While it is generally accepted that the current phase of colonisation operates within globalisation policies and market-driven reforms that perpetuate Eurocentric and, in the case of Ireland, Anglo-American norms under the pretext of modernisation, the following questions, restructured as a

poem, are an ongoing challenge to keep the influence of colonisation in focus, while ‘staying with the trouble’ as advocated by Haraway (2016).

*Colonisation is not done
It persists
A living structure
What is the current colonial phase?
How are the different phases of colonial thinking exercised through ECEC?
What conceptual tools can be put to work in decolonising
colonial
systems,
structures
relationships
?
(big questions, but not game over¹⁰)*

No doubt ECEC in Ireland’s geopolitical space is unique to its political context and has been historically influenced, Ireland’s approach to ECEC has been fragmented, with a split between care and education (Hayes and Walsh, 2022). Although the State has increased funding through numerous progressive initiatives, including policies to nurture the workforce, the structure of ECEC remains market based. This thesis contributes an alternative to a market model (See article 1) while arguing that the field must gain insight into its institutional context from a temporal perspective that simultaneously considers the past, present, and future. Recognising the polycrisis that stems from a historical failure for children, a legacy of reliance on a market model, lack of investment and undervaluing the sector’s contribution to wider society may or may not lead to significant changes within

¹⁰ Donna Haraway (2016) argues that we should not adopt a game-over approach. This is also discussed in section 1.7 and further in chapter 2 section.

the ECEC system (Smyth, 2021). Simultaneously, this thesis argues that these insights hold the potential to aid the discipline in becoming more critical of how knowledge is generated and disseminated as the vision to reclaim ECEC for the common good is realised, with the field rethinking, reconceptualising, and reforming. Article 1 contributes to this critique by proposing a sustainable model outside of market forces, beyond a setting that merely provides a service for parents in need of childcare, all enslaved to market moralities. While articles 2 and 3 deepen pedagogical thinking, both consider how knowledge can be generated alongside the more-than-human, beyond human, and White superiority. From 2000 onward, a more universal approach has been embedded within what Ring *et al.*, (2019, p.01) describe as a ‘melange or a mosaic’ of child development theories that inform normative frameworks. At the same time, Colette Murray has tirelessly emphasised the barriers that normative linear models of development create for Traveller¹¹ and Roma¹² communities. Early childhood programmes that emphasise normative, linear development tend to reinforce deficit views of non-Western approaches to childhood, thereby ignoring other cultural differences and enforcing an assimilation process in which Traveller culture and life are overlooked, seen as deficient, and in need of correction (Murray, 2017). However, in recent years, there has been a political move away from a universal approach to addressing issues of inclusion and cultural sensitivity within ECEC systems. Frameworks include Aistear; the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2024), the First 5 strategy - A Whole-Of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019-2028(GoI, 2018), and initiatives such as the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) launched in 2016 to support inclusion of all children in early education (GoI, 2025). Demonstrating the State’s commitment to fostering equity within the ECEC system, the Traveller and Roma education

¹¹ Irish Travellers are a minority ethnic group in Ireland. Their ethnicity was officially recognised by the Irish State in 2017.

¹² People who identify as Roma are part of a minority ethnic group. This group originated in Northwest India, but have lived for centuries mainly in eastern and central Europe

strategy 2024-2030 also plays a key role in combating discrimination(DEY, 2025). However, Mathias Urban (2024) highlights that although policies are progressive in intent, they are continually undermined by global metrics that emphasise school readiness and measurable outcomes in terms of human capital. As argued within Article 1, ‘the debate surrounding ECEC remains rigidly fixed in economics. Thus, overshadowing vital questions such as what the purpose of ECEC is and what should be considered when thinking about the ethical dimensions of ECEC (Smyth 2022).

1.8.1 Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum and Framework

The following section will focus on Aistear as an example of the national landscape that has the potential to disrupt anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene by exploring the Irish word for nature, *Dúlra*, and the theme of Identity and Belonging. Aistear was first published in 2009 and has been updated most recently in 2009 and 2024 (NCCA 2009, 2024). The Irish word Aistear means ‘journey,’ reflecting the idea that children are on a journey of learning and development. Aistear is described as an emerging, inquiry-based curriculum. Aistear is built around four interconnecting themes. Wellbeing, which focuses on babies, toddlers and young children’s psychological wellbeing, including feeling and thinking (NCCA, p.22). Identity and Belonging recognise how children develop a sense of who they are through relationships, and belonging is about having a secure relationship and a feeling of *aoibhneas* of *croí* (gladness of heart) (NCCA, p. 24). The theme of communication is how babies, toddlers, and young children connect and interact with others in their own way and at their own pace (NCCA, p. 26). While the theme of exploring and thinking illustrates how children use their senses, minds, and bodies to make sense of what they see, feel, and experience in the world around them (NCCA, p. 28).

Departing from the pedagogical shifts that Aistear has afforded by conceptualising themes rather than framing developmental outcomes or subject areas, and the welcomed addition of *Dúlra* and more aspects of nature connection, Aistear as a framework still remains humancentric. However, the inclusion of the Irish word *Dúlra* (nature) offers potential for Aistear to incorporate the more-than-human. Furthermore, the subsequent section will argue that the themes of identity and belonging should be further politicised. This thesis advocates a shift away from frameworks that prioritise White supremacy and human exceptionalism, and instead supports relational, land-centred learning to foster justice-oriented futures.

1.8.2. Ceart on *Dúlra* (Rights of Nature -RoN) Making kin and oddkin

In Ireland, the Rights of Nature (RoN) movement is inspired by planetary indigenous movements to reclaim those rights. A notable feature of the movement is the leadership and activities from the North of Ireland and the border counties (Killean, Gilbert and Doran, 2024). In 2023, the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss recommended holding a referendum to insert the Rights of Nature into the Irish Constitution. According to Killean et al., the committee raised concerns about water quality while noting the conflict between current legislation, such as the Turf Development Act 1946 to 1998, and current environmental policies. A successful reference campaign would lead to the recognition of Nature as constituted by a community of subjects, both human and more-than-human. In the geopolitical landscape of Ireland, the indigenous language of Irish - Gaeilge - and Irish mythology are repositories of wisdom that also connect to the spirit of the land. *Ceart an dúlra* translates to the rights of nature (Ní Annracháin, 2024). *Dúlra* means nature but derives from *dul* – meaning element, and *ra* – a collective suffix which implies the essence of things. *Duil* refers to the aspects of one's existence or to a creature (Ní Annracháin, 2024). *Dúlra*, is not just physical nature but an embodied relational understanding of land, life, and spirit. In traditional Irish literature, the concept of *comhbhá an dúlra* implied that the natural world

was responsive and interconnected with human leaders and the community (Ní Annracháin, 2024). Nature and humans did not stand apart but were interconnected within a relational dynamic. The Irish language embodied this relationship with land cycles and spirit. The vision of Aistear (NCCA, 2024, p. 09) supports ‘creative and independent learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children facilitated and supported by educators who respect their diversity and care about them’. In the recent updates of Aistear (NCCA, 2024, p.10), there is an increased emphasis on the child as an agentic global citizen with ‘a deep connection with people and the environment, valuing justice and human rights.’ Also the Aistear theme of exploring and thinking includes aims such as babies, toddlers and young children will have opportunities to learn, to connect with *Dúlra* (nature) and spend meaningful time in the outdoors with learning goals that include a sense of *amos aite* (value of place), by being present in *Dúlra* (nature) and having stories, folklore ... coming to know the environment in a deeper way (NCCA, p.29). Although the inclusion of the Irish word *Dúlra* in the Aistear space to explore beyond anthropocentric and colonial legacies is wedged open. However, this would entail deeper recognition of *Dúlra* as a teacher and revising Aistear to incorporate an ecological ethic towards the more-than-human. Therefore, colonial structures can be challenged, and Aistear has the potential to expedite a vision of relationality in a deeper, more meaningful manner, for example, ‘lost folklore and environmental knowledge, where babies, toddlers, and young children come to know and respect local people, fauna, and flora (NCCA, 2024, p. 29). Numerous scholars and early childhood researchers emphasise the importance of relational and place-based learning, engaging children with land and community in ways that nurture ecological relationships while challenging dominant narratives of supremacy (Crinall and Somerville, 2020; Nxumalo, Nayak and Tuck, 2022). Place-based education emphasises deep learning that is tied to local environments, cultural histories, and land relationships. It questions detached, universal

schooling models that support colonial and human-centred ideologies. However, *Dúlra*, as currently presented in *Aistear*, may become tokenism, with the risk of being used simply as a direct translation of the English word ‘nature’. Also, centring the Irish language may create other exclusions of belonging based on language. The purpose of centring the Irish word *Dúlra*, aligns with Haraway here, as a way to cross the human and more than human divide, in other words, to make ‘kin’ which means ‘something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy’ (Haraway, 2016, p.103).

Haraway’s concept of ‘kin’ redefines kinship beyond biological ties, encouraging us to create multispecies alliances that recognise our deep entanglement with all forms of life. In Haraway’s view, creating kin involves nurturing ‘oddkin’, which includes unexpected, non-genealogical bonds that form through shared vulnerability and dependence in a broken world. The concept of kinship expands beyond traditional family bonds to include multispecies relationships that include oddkin, such as bacteria and fungi. Making kin and oddkin troubles important matters like to whom one is responsible, to whom or what we are accountable to

Who lives and who dies, and how, in this kinship rather than that one what must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing in earth including human and the more than human being in kinship are to have a chance (Haraway, 2016, p.02)

The response-ability of making kin and oddkin is central to ‘staying with the trouble,’ as Haraway calls humankind to confront ecological and social crises without resorting to denial or idealist fantasies. Haraway situates kin-making within the *Chthulucene*, where kin-making is an ethical commitment to response-ability. An ethical response-ability that is committed to learning to live and die well together in messy, compost-like processes that sustain life through transformation.

1.8.3 Identity and Belonging

Bang *et al.*, (2022) , advocates for relational, land-centred learning to support justice-focused futures that undo human supremacy and White supremacy. Notably, Mullen (2024, p.10) argued that ‘Blackness is shaped by societal and historical forces and is inherently tied to its relationship with whiteness’. Therefore, equality and diversity are not enough, the curriculum must include Black studies to go beyond traditional diversity initiatives and achieve more meaningful structural change. These should offer a broader understanding of Black history and experience within a global context, as well as what is happening within the Irish context. This thesis contributes to disrupting anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene epoch by challenging dominant discourses that promote human exceptionalism and superiority within ECEC curricular frameworks with the ethical and political intention of supporting ‘multispecies flourishing as we live and die on a damaged planet’.

‘Identity and a sense of belonging’ are two of the four themes presented within Aistear. Belonging is most often explored in the context of human relationships, including communities, cultural affiliations, social positions, and a sense of affinity to place (Antonsich, 2010; Sumsion *et al.*, 2018; Kyrönlampi, Uitto and Puroila, 2021). A sense of belonging often aligns with the construction of a positive identity, which is viewed as a cornerstone for well-being and resilience (Roffey, 2013). Although belonging is a central feature of many curricular frameworks, the concept of belonging can lack theoretical coherence (Peers and Fler, 2016; Peers, 2018). As Antonsich found, the overarching framing of identity and belonging can be problematic due to confusion with theories of identity and rights of citizenship. For example, the aim for children is to foster a positive sense of who they are through secure relationships. It involves recognising that they are valued and respected as part of their family and community, and feeling supported by a sense of meitheal (community spirit of coming together) (NCCA, 2024). Thus, Aistear promotes the emotional aspect of

identity that informs a sense of belonging, whereas the political/ecological dimensions are not fully recognised. In the recent review of Aistear, the NCCA (2024) sought to theorise the theme ‘identity and belonging’ further, now advising that educators aim to develop ‘culturally sustaining pedagogies’ (Parkhouse, Lu and Massaro, 2019). Culturally Sustaining pedagogy that extend beyond tolerance and inclusion by integrating children’s home cultures and languages into their early educational and care experiences. However, the prevailing discourse that belonging is a choice for all children or solely an emotional endeavour, supported by educators intervening, is highly problematic. As cited in Smyth (2025) and highlighted by Souto-Manning et al. (2018), that without questioning hierarchies of power, ECEC merely promotes the rhetoric of belonging, which continues to uphold systems of White supremacy. Consequently, belonging becomes a superficial inclusion of minority figures or cultures. Notably, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) has conducted extensive research demonstrating that the concept of belonging is often controversially framed as a natural outcome of nationalism, which centres on a power dynamic that determines who has the right to belong and who does not. Also, culturally sustaining pedagogy primarily focuses on human-centric culture and identity, thereby reinforcing human superiority over Dúlra (nature). It may be more generative to frame belonging as a multi-species endeavour in which children are situated within a web of life on the planet, where ECEC recognises the political hierarchy of Whiteness and human superiority.

1.9 Contributions so far...

This chapter offers an overview of the political and cultural context of the research stories. The rationale for engaging with scribbles stems from a long-standing connection to a child’s drawing, which inspires ongoing challenges to fixed notions of being and knowing. By weaving relational stories through scribbles, this thesis shifts from developmentalist paradigms toward a post-developmental perspective, reconceptualising ECEC as dynamic,

embodied, and relational. Haraway's concept of the (K)not and String Figures (SF) in *Staying with the Trouble* offers a matterphoric way of thinking, where knowledge, being, and doing emerge through entangled, collaborative processes rather than linear or isolated structures. This chapter begins the work of contributing to Black history in Ireland, which remains under-researched and often reduced to a few prominent figures, despite evidence of systemic anti-Black racism both historically and today. Black Studies and Sharpe's concept of 'wake work' are vital for addressing historical and ongoing racial injustice, as this chapter and the overall thesis highlight. This thesis adds to existing knowledge by emphasising how colonialism is perceived as an ongoing force shaping relationships between humans and more-than-humans, knowledge systems, and educational practices. In the Anthropocene, it intersects with extractive practices and the neoliberal agenda that reaffirms human exceptionalism and the commodification of life. The proliferation of 'posts' (e.g., posthumanism, postdisciplinary, postscholarship) signals a move beyond human-centred and disciplinary boundaries toward entangled, creative, and activist research practices that disrupt rigid structures. The thesis advances the field of ECEC by reimagining belonging as a multi-species concept, inspired by Indigenous philosophies that emphasise reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human, encouraging ECEC frameworks to move beyond anthropocentrism and White supremacy amid environmental precarity. Relationality is posed as a political mode of knowing, being and doing.

Chapter 2 narrates the shift from a qualitative approach to postqualitative inquiry, and how listening to the not-yet-data influenced this transition. From an ethical standpoint, my positionality is examined from multiple perspectives. Building on Chapter 1, Section 1.6, the postqualitative turn is further discussed in the context of addressing processual ethical concerns. The interconnectedness of tentacular thinking and making-with, which weave through this thesis, are also presented.

“it matters what matter we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with” (Donna Haraway, 2016, p. 12)

Chapter 2 – A Re-orientation to relational stories

2.1 Prelude

Multiple stories unfold within this research to contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC by including alternative stories not often told in Ireland's geopolitical landscape. In the middle of this research, there was a reorientation from a qualitative method to a postqualitative, postfoundational inquiry. The emerging data refused to be analysed in the taken-for-granted way, demanding a response that aligns with Mazzei and Jackson's (2024) sketch of postfoundationalism as a dynamic process of thinking with, writing with, and walking with. At the same time, the emerging data demanded a response that was ‘unthought and not yet’ reoriented this research towards a postqualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2023). Throughout the curation of these stories, numerous lines became entangled, creating different lines and spaces in-between. I re-tell stories of how the three Journal Articles came about, while being mindful that ‘it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 12). Also, I acknowledge that this process has led to choosing particular stories to tell, amidst the possibility of many stories that reimagine and create more liveable futures.

The following section sets out the stories of different entanglements that led to the fruition of this thesis. This chapter narrates pivotal moments that substantially influenced the conceptual development of Journal Articles 2 and 3. It also provides an overview of the initial qualitative methods and ethical considerations. This chapter will also explore specific facets of Haraway's conceptual framework, including multispecies storytelling through the process of sympoiesis, characterised by the 'making-with' of tentacular connections.

2.2 Responding to The New Normal in Unprecedented Times

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university advised research students to review all potential data they already had access to and/or alternative mechanisms for collecting data. My supervisor and I agreed that a PhD via publication was viable due to the unrelenting restrictions and the unpredictable nature of COVID-19. Hence, my research project changed dramatically from the initial research proposal. Although the initial research proposal did not become a complete PhD thesis, my positionality within the original proposal has strongly influenced the direction of the three subsequent journal articles. Also, my lived experience as a Mixed-Race family has influenced my contribution to the book chapter 'Anti-Racist Advocacy and Activism in ECEC: Responding to Racism in Irish Society' (Smyth 2025 in Murray and Urban, forthcoming). As the global pandemic COVID-19 unfolded, ECEC became recognised as a key player in spurring local responses to the worldwide pandemic. In thinking about the multiple crises of ECEC in Ireland during this unprecedented time, Journal Article 1 came into being (refer to appendix 10 for a timeline of developments).

To mitigate the transmission of COVID-19, I adhered to the university's recommendations by seeking alternative mechanisms for data collection. In 2016, I had the opportunity to collaborate with the University of Galway (UG) to design and develop the module 'Contemporary Perspectives of Play, Learning and Pedagogy' (CPPLP) as part of a

Master of Arts (MA) in Early Childhood Studies (ECS). The CPPLP module allowed students to explore critical tools to analyse foundational theories that shape the ECEC field. Thereby, the CPPLP module included perspectives such as feminist poststructuralism critique. At the time of writing the CPPLP module, diverse theories, including poststructuralism, were not typically part of ECS programmes within the geopolitical context of Ireland. As part of the CPPLP module requirements, each student attended a two-day workshop that presented feminist poststructural thinking along with examples of potential applications to early years practice. Drawing on Foucault's power analysis, Mac Naughton (2005) expands on developmental norms as regimes of truth within early years practice. Mac Naughton notes that 'the ethical substance of a regime of truth consists in the ways we use those micro practices of power to govern and discipline ourselves' (Mac Naughton, 2005, p. 32). Subsequently, the focus shifts from the child to the act of the adult critically thinking about taken-for-granted '*regimes of truth and power dynamics.*' Also, an example of observations from my practice of a three-year-old child's embodiment of dominant discourses of developmental norms within play was presented (see Appendix 9). The analysis of the child's play utilised Mac Naughton's expanded categories of technical distribution of power. Following the workshop, students sought consent from parents/guardians and assent from children (see appendix 8) to observe children in their ECEC settings. The students then critiqued these observations using a feminist poststructural perspective.

2.3 Ethical considerations

Postqualitative inquiry abandons the standardised mode of thinking of what is considered 'scientifically valid and approaches data in a responsive, creative way (St. Pierre, 2023).

While the ethical considerations typical of a qualitative methodology were applied, moving from a qualitative to a postqualitative inquiry brought other ethical dilemmas to the fore.

Postqualitative invites the reconfiguration of what ethical dilemmas might look like within

research (Clay, 2024), thus, *I* have documented procedural ethical issues throughout the research from the situated perspective of my positionality.

The ethical approval process was comprehensive and transparent, with DCU granting ethical clearance (refer to the appendix 4). The principles of ethical responsibility were adhered to concerning privacy, confidentiality, and consent (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In addition, a gatekeeper process was implemented, wherein UG contacted the former students individually to provide an overview of the research process with my contact details. When a postgraduate student contacted me, I sought consent from each participant for every piece of material used for analysis (see appendix 5). All participants provided informed consent before their engagement in the study. They were supplied with comprehensive information sheets outlining the research objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and the utilisation of their data. Consent was secured through signed consent forms, allowing participants to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Furthermore, regarding visual data, such as photographs, participants granted explicit consent concerning using images in research outputs. Informed consent was acquired from the parents or guardians. Additionally, assent was sought from the children on the day the photograph was taken (see appendix 7 & 8). Following the policy of the ECEC setting the photographs did not identify any child, setting, or location. With the agreement of the research participants, I present the photographs in alternate formats. All names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Before the online conversations commenced, the purpose of the research was outlined and consent validated. The conversations were held on Zoom (DCU licensed version of Zoom, a secure site). Participants were given instructions on ensuring privacy, confidentiality, and the security of the Zoom meeting (see appendix 5). There was also a mechanism for rechecking and validating my recording and interpretation of the conversations with participants.

2.3.1 CPPLP: My positionality as an ethical consideration

Although my positionality is woven within a specific focus of each published Journal Article, I also reviewed my position in developing the CPPLP module, which intertwines with the data emerging from this research process. Positionality requires the researcher or educator to engage in introspection regarding their ontological and epistemological perspectives and how these positions inform the research context (Beigi, 2025). Thinking about my positionality in the initial development of the module CPPLP gives essential insight into how the module was delivered. Collaborating with UG, I conceptualised and developed the module CPPLP in 2016. One of the module's aims was to support students in engaging with feminist poststructuralism and critical theories while posing pertinent questions such as: What frames our current pedagogical perspectives? How do we know what we know? From the default position of a White academic, I heed hooks' (2014) calls for White feminist scholars to recognise that progressive theories frequently exclude the lived experiences of those on the margins. From this perspective, while decolonising my thinking, I acknowledge that I am working from the centre to the margin in some ways, but not in all ways. Heilbronn (2025) argues that Western knowledge systems can be decolonised by fostering an appreciation of other ways of knowing. Fostering other ways of knowing through decolonisation is reflected in Audre Lorde's (2012) statement that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. However, as articulated by Phipps and McDonnell (2022), Lorde's insistence on relinquishing the master's tools is often misrepresented by White feminists as a singular critique of racial capitalism. Furthermore, Lorde's observation also addressed those White feminists who have profited from their Whiteness within academic circles rather than sincerely striving for its eradication (Phipps et al. 2022). Consequently, as a White feminist, it is incumbent upon me to scrutinise my role in dismantling the master's tools to ensure that I do not inadvertently repurpose these very tools.

In developing the module CPPLP, I drew upon Freire's seminal work, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970), which elucidates the power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed and depicts education as a 'banking system' that cultivates silence through institutional control. A critical component of his philosophy is to replace the banking system with dialogue, thereby emphasising the correlation between consciousness-raising and transformative action referred to as 'praxis'. Throughout the development of the module CPPLP, a deliberate strategy was employed to disrupt grand narratives, such as the figuration of the 'developing child', to render the familiar unfamiliar. Furthermore, I rely upon the contributions of hooks, who recognises Freire's approach to education as a practice of freedom. Yet hooks points out the oversight of Freire in neglecting to address the 'interlocking systems of gender repression, racism, and classism' that shape women's identities (hooks, 1989, p. 31). My positionality is woven into the specific focus of each published Journal Article. Also, I have reviewed my position in developing the CPPLP module, which intertwines with the data emerging from this research process. However, another line I want to pick up is as a human bog dweller. For this aspect of positionality, I rely on Alaimo's (2010) concept of contact zones, which captures the fact that the human body is always enmeshed in an inseparable entanglement with nature. Alaimo encourages us to think of the human body in ways that cross the mind/body, culture/nature binary divides to think about transcorporeality. As a site, the human body is situated within a temporal location, entwined in a continuous flow of material forces that interconnect individuals, locations, and political systems (Alaimo, 2010; Smyth, 2025). My positionality as someone living and crossing the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is also entangled with my father's story. In 1974, my father was kidnapped by a paramilitary group while on his way to work in Northern Ireland. After being severely beaten and left for dead, my father escaped across the border to the Republic of Ireland (Urwin, 2021). Fifty years

after the kidnapping event, my father received a cancer diagnosis of melanoma, cancer of the skin. The increase in skin cancers is linked to the ozone layer depletion caused by the accumulation of human-made greenhouse gases, which also contribute to climate change as they gather in the atmosphere (Bharath and Turner, 2009). As the cancer spread, my father maintained that the cancerous tumours were more prevalent in the areas of the body that endured brutal beatings during the kidnapping event. In the final weeks of his life, my father continually relived the trauma of the kidnapping as a real-time event. Alaimo's work emphasises that we cannot separate the human body from the temporal environment in which it exists. My father's story is a stark example of the complex ways the biological body continuously transforms and responds within the cyclical processes of time, where politics, cultures, violence and ecologies collide. All of these transcorporeal relational experiences intertwine with my professional role in teaching, where I accept the ethical responsibility to envision opportunities for socially just pedagogy within the discipline of early childhood studies. That said, I recognise that my ongoing privileges as in the default position of White academia individual limit my understanding of marginalised perspectives.

2.4 Processual ethical issues – the postqualitative turn

This section follows on from Chapter 1, Section 1.6.1 - Why the 'posts'? While straddling the tension of the 'posts' as highlighted in Section 1.6.2. First, the research context is set; next, the processual ethical issues arising from working with postqualitative perspectives are examined.

The online conversation focused on the coursework previously submitted by the postgraduates, with a particular emphasis on the perspectives introduced in the CPPLP module, and potential influences on their current practice. Also, we discussed the coursework and their analysis together. At the outset, I began coding the data guided by qualitative methodologies

such as those proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). Academic endeavours such as attaining a PhD have fixed points of approval. Initially, I planned to use a typical qualitative method, including predictive research points such as ethical approval, data collection, and thematic coding. Although I began with these points, the emerging data disrupted this linear process, shifting the research from qualitative to postqualitative. In the middle, I abandoned the qualitative method with clear steps for the uncertainties of a postqualitative approach. Kerasovitis (2020) describes a postqualitative approach as lacking a clear route, structure, or designated methods. For me, the process of becoming unfolded, as the researcher, the data, as depicted by McPhie (2018: 07), glowed in a manner that could not be ignored. The data emerged as a pedagogical force, which created opportunities to engage in an embodied process of knowledge production. This resulted in a change to the boundaries of subjectification, which was critical in (be)coming open to the multiplicity of ways in which knowledge can be produced. Thus, as advocated by Cristine Vintimilla and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw (2023), this research shifted from producing knowledge as a process of extraction, application, and reproduction to becoming ongoing ethical stories of thinking otherwise.

2.4.1 A balancing act of following threads

A key feature of postqualitative inquiry is challenging the assumption of authority in the human experience of what is considered a reality of truth (St. Pierre, 2023). From a postqualitative perspective, there is a shift away from interviews and coding, which grants greater authority to the human experience than to the more-than-human. This move allowed for other stories and entanglements to emerge. Typically, qualitative methodologies encompass participants' perspectives, representing their opinions and the 'truth' regarding the matter (St. Pierre, 2008; Rautio, 2021). Conversely, this individualistic perspective, which emphasises human superiority, starkly contrasts the aims of postqualitative inquiry, which perceives the world through a lens of entanglement. As discussed in Chapter 1 Section 1.6. Rautio warns that

replacing or rejecting existing approaches found within qualitative research runs the risk of ‘postqualitative research becoming yet another isolated fortress of righteousness’. Admittedly, I have grappled with the critique of postqualitative inquiry of ‘capturing voice’, as centring the human experience and promoting human superiority. Re-turning the question as presented in Chapter 1, section Jackson (2015, p. 215) highlights this negligence of posthumanism overlooking structural racism in the following question, ‘what and crucially whose conception of humanism are we moving beyond?’ While Ferri (2022) questions the epistemic silencing of Other voices. Ferri points out that academia is a highly contested space in which societal inequalities are reproduced, including the epistemic silencing of those who are othered. So, questions arise within postfoundational approaches that engage the ‘posts’

1. How do the ‘posts’ form part of the ‘mater’s tools at the intersection of privilege and marginalisation in a neo-liberal academic environment?
2. As a postqualitative researcher, what is the default position considering Tuck et al (2012), warning that even if the aim is to dismantle colonialism, decolonial projects run the risk of reinforcing hierarchies of belonging, thus reproducing other exclusionary practices?

In keeping these questions in mind while working with/in the posts, I have found that Rautio's (2021, p.228) proposal of a ‘continuous balancing act’ has proven useful. Instead of rigid structures of what is and what is not postqualitative, Rautio emphasises ‘key balancing acts’ as continuous processes wherein postqualitative approaches do not supplant foundational methods. Rather, the ‘posts’ establish alternative ways to shift away from the authoritative role of data representation. Thus, space is created for the entanglements in which researchers find themselves when human exceptionalism is removed, therefore enabling the more-than-human to emerge through collaborative force. This aligns with Haraway’s invitation to consider the matters with which stories are created, who is involved in making them, and what new stories might bring to living and dying, to be truly present and to sit with historical and ongoing suffering, stories that follow threads and tracking to find tangles and patterns. However, these

stories are not about tracking but the pattern created, as with string figures (Haraway, 2016).¹³ Though the research shifted from qualitative to postqualitative, *I* felt that it would be unethical not to include educators' voices, given the marginalisation of the ECEC workforce within wider society and policy (Mooney Simmie and Murphy, 2021; Brooks, 2023). Also, these conversations have inspired and moved this research in entangled ways. Therefore, as part of the 'balancing act' proposed by Rautio and Haraway's invitation to create stories that 'follow threads,' as we make patterns, *I* decided to incorporate some of the conversations. These conversations are also entangled with the conceptual assemblage and inspired the orientation of these multiple stories.

- Contesting the figuration of the 'developing child'
- Dominant discourses of gender
- Thinking with other paradigms
- Embracing multiple perspectives
- Re-think we must

2.4.2 Interpretations

Participants described how engaging with the critique of feminist poststructuralism impacted their worldviews. By engaging with theories presented in the module [CPPLP], the participants brought to the fore the action of thinking with and how engaging with feminist poststructural perspectives supported a critique of universal narratives such as the 'developing child'.

2.4.2.2 Contesting the figuration of the 'developing child'

This section overviews how the participants, Avril and Brid, question the figuration of the 'developing child' while also considering the benefits of using other perspectives.

¹³ Multispecies stories are discussed further in section 2.6

The module made me think about developmental terminology, a deficit-based language, getting the child up to speed, and, you know, meeting the gap, closing the gap.

(Avril, 2021)

... the sector is very heavily influenced, isn't it? ...you have a child who is attending other therapies, speech and language, occupational therapy or the psychologist... we [referring to Early childhood educators] tend to take on that language, and maybe see the child through that lens, as opposed to our own. I think it's important that we create our own language and stand by it.

(Brid, 2021)

Katie wonders why everything in ECEC is based around developmental psychology and questions why there are not more opportunities for place-based learning.

...like Aistear...everything that we're doing is just based on developmental psychology. And you know Síolta, there were tiny little glimpses of place-based learning. There's one of the standards about the environment, and community and how things like churches and bodies of water could have a meaning for a child in the area they live in.

(Katie, 2021)

According to Murriss (2016), contesting the figuration of the 'developing child' shifts our focus away from the child's abilities or capabilities, which are individualised within paradigms of developmental psychology. Consequently, Murriss argues that the child is perceived as developing the skills they will acquire rather than appreciating those they possess. However, by focusing solely on the figuration of the child, little attention is paid to the entanglement of our historical legacies, institutionalisation, dominant discourses, or how power operates in such narratives (Smyth, 2022, 2024).

2.4.2.3 Dominant discourses of gender

Jennifer points out that moving from developmental psychology made way to think about how children use gendered discourses to interact socially. In relation to discourses, Naughton, 2005, p. 25) states that children, ‘read them, interpret them, embody them, express them, desire them, gain pleasure through them, understand them and take them up as their own.’

Jennifer highlights how applying a feminist poststructural lens supports the analysis of how children interpret and express discourses.

Observation carried out by Jennifer in 2018

there was a girl who went over to a group of boys, they were all asked to clean up. And she went over and said, “Oh, I could clean up the jigsaw, look at my big muscles”. Then later on in the session, the teacher made a comment to a girl, “Oh, your hair is getting very long, I love the curls”. Then a boy in the group turned *around and said to me*, “*your hair is nice*”

The children are using these gendered discourses as strategies ...they are picking them up in the blink of an eye and using them ...boys like to hear about strong muscles. And girls like to hear about nice hair. I started looking at children’s play through a feminist poststructural lens, which I never would have dreamt of before. Before, I might have thought these children have good interaction skills, I would be thinking about development and milestones.

(Jennifer,2021)

2.4.2.4 Think-with other paradigms

One participant described how engaging with the concepts of feminist perspectives during the module impacted their personal worldviews and life situations. At the same time, others questioned the issue of barriers to accessing different types of knowledge. Participants Joan, Katie, Sonja, and Lynn emphasise that the key to the success of engaging with theory and applying different perspectives to practice was the accessibility of terminology and concepts.

As hooks alert us

Feminism, as a liberation struggle, must exist apart from and as a part of the larger struggle to eradicate domination in all its forms. We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group

oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact (hooks, 1989, p. 22)

According to hooks, one of the significant shortcomings of feminist theory is its inaccessibility to the general public, which consequently undermines the collective benefits of a social movement that advocates feminism for all.

I never would have called myself a feminist before the module. Now I realise, there's a lot of confusion in the general public about that. You know this sort of stereotypical feminist, bra burning, that women have to have everything, and women are against men. So, being a feminist is about not having such a structured view of genders from the start... Yeah, I'm glad to have developed that thought process for myself.

(Joan, 2021)

Feminism, poststructuralism, that kind of thinking was brand new to us. It really opened up a whole world to us. It was like, this was a secret that nobody knew about.

(Katie, 2021)

You must have the language[terminology] to access it. And if no one has given you the language, you can't get it. So, we're always going to assume our perspective is the only perspective, or policy perspective is the only perspective, we can't even consider another...

(Sonja, 2021)

...the whole idea of the fluctuating power dynamic between the child and the practitioner... there's little knowledge around that aspect of pedagogical practice. The module allowed us to verbalise and talk about the power dynamic, with theory to back it up.

(Lynn, 2021)

Shirley spoke of how engaging feminist poststructural perspectives resonated deeply with her circumstances of exclusion as a single parent. hooks (1994, p. 15) describes progressive education as an 'engaged pedagogy' that enables students to dismantle boundaries of race, class, and gender in a manner that empowers them.

...I think it was because of my own personal life as a lone parent. When you experience that kind of stigma, or that you're socially outcast in a social minority ... kind off on the periphery in different situations... then you read or study something like feminism - post structuralism, you understand it as you're reading it, because you feel like you know it from the inside

(Shirley, 2021)

2.4.2.5 Embracing multiple perspectives

Both participants, Brid and Jennifer, believe that theories should be applied more flexibly and that different theoretical perspectives are needed to address the complexity of issues arising in ECEC.

When educators come across another theory and it's like a light bulb moment, they seem to think that they have to forget everything that went before or try to fit it alongside everything else... I'd be kind of saying this is somebody else's idea. This is just going to give you a different language to think about a different perspective on any different day for the same child. One theory might have worked yesterday. But another theory is going to work for today.

(Brid, 2021)

There are so many different theories, historical and more contemporary...everybody maybe has a favourite, or, you know, one that resonates a lot within their own practice, or whatever. But I think it's more about a balancing act, everything is a balancing act... to be aware that this is just another way to create a shared language around how we can tease out the complexity that early years, practice and pedagogy is... lots of students go into practice with this idea that their pedagogical practice is prescriptive, whereas it is the messiness that is the reality of practice.

(Jennifer, 2021)

2.4.2.6 Re-think we must

The participants, Norah and Eithne, describe how feminist poststructuralism critique supports thinking and confidence in questioning.

...feminist poststructural thinking should be introduced early on to students, not just at master's level. So, I suppose it's just a question of needing to think about things differently. Actually, question things [pause] to think about things differently

(Norah, 2021)

I know one of the girls was doing her level six during the year and she'd come in with questions, she would have the two bullet points, and everything would be textbooks...the textbook answers you know what I mean... she had these points like, Vygotsky said this, Piaget said that, and Freud said this... the student took this[theory] as to be real, and to be the gospel. And I'd say, okay, that's great. That's from your notes and everything, but what do you think, what do you think about this [children's play]? What's your opinion on this from your own life experience?

(Eithne, 2021)

These points resonated with Farquhar and White (2014, p. 01) argument that ECEC is complex and multifaceted due to the variety of competing narratives, with the potential to revise early childhood pedagogy through diverse paradigms and philosophical orientations.

2.4.2.7 Entangled Stories Unfold

In Journal Articles 2 and 3, I present two stories from participants, Joan – The grassy hill and Emma – the fence. Joan moved from adhering to the gaze of health and safety to thinking of the adult position of power. By decentring the figuration of the ‘developing child’, space is created to think about the power dynamic as Joan, in the adult’s position, intervenes with health and safety. The second participant, Emma, critiqued how children exercise power in the discourse of nationalism and belonging. Emma is troubled by the fence. The data emerges from both of these stories with agency. Rather than adhering to the established academic procedures of certainty and knowledge, I fostered a trusting relationship with the data. I became open to the possibilities of the more-than-human, which, as Wilde (2022, p. 30) described, ‘permitted data to emerge in varied manners that were not definitive or resolved’. Undoubtedly, this research is not independent of the mode under which it is produced, that is, to attain a PhD, publish articles, undergo rigorous peer reviews, with inputs and outputs. That said, in the middle of the research process, there was no clear structure, no designated methodology, and no aims or objectives. Due to no clear route, I unexpectedly positioned this research in a contentious relationship with academic structures. Instead of fix-ness and certainty, there was a constant shifting, alongside mutations that were and possibly continue to be constantly on the move. In alignment with St. Pierre (2019) criteria for a postqualitative approach, my only claim is that in the state of ‘uncertainty and unknowing’, I experienced a creative becoming with the

data itself. Similarly, St. Pierre (2023, p. 04) observes that ‘postqualitative inquiry encourages concrete, practical experimentation and the creation of the not yet instead of the repetition of what is.’ The data and *I* were not separate in these ongoing experiments. *I* did not assume impartiality, nor did *I* exist in a position of superiority over the data (until now?). Admittedly, *I* must subsume academic procedures and structures to present this work in a manner that is comprehensible within the educational arena. Also, the work must be readable and have an apparent flow. However, a linear sequence of events did not transpire, consistent with Murriss, (2018, p. 04) observations that events do not occur in a straightforward linear process, ‘akin to beads threaded on a string, but are instead interwoven as they entangle with one another’. All that has been said, *I* embrace my role as narrator and custodian of events to nurture the telling and (re)telling of this relational story that has emerged. Significantly, throughout the process, *I*, as the researcher, shift into an integral part of the narrative, in a constant state of uncertainty that challenges determinism through continuous evolution. Lather (2017, p. 180) states that

postqualitative serves as a figurative field of complex reality within a text, which is interrogated by a reflexive feeling researcher, folded inwards and embracing ‘a disorientation where openness and unknowingness are part of the process.

2.5 Overarching intentionality

Adapting to unprecedented times, this research project changed massively from the initial proposal, yet the overarching intention to contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC has remained steadfast. Notably, the evolution of this research project is not just a response to the challenges posed by COVID-19, but a significant step toward a more comprehensive understanding of socially just pedagogy. As *I* respond to the emerging data, various provocations present as pedagogical forces to reimagine and transform the knowledge-making process (Rosie Braidotti, 2019; Kimmerer, 2020a). Throughout the three papers, creativity is evident in reimagining the structures that govern the ECEC model, research methodologies, and pedagogical practices. Haraway (1988, 2013) describes situated, liveable knowledge as

how our specific contexts and positions shape our understanding of the world, as we experience it through an embodied, relational lens. As Braidotti (2019) explains, embodiment refers to the idea that our physical bodies are integrated into the world around us in a temporally entangled way that spans time and space. In each paper, I am positioned to be aware of and engage in worldly relations, in which these entanglements evoke affirmative actions that contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC. I come to this thesis as a White parent of children from Mixed-Race parentage. Also, I am a human-bog dweller living and crossing the border of Northern Ireland. Thus, each article unfolds a particular aspect of ECEC while simultaneously providing insights into the complexity of my entanglement with the data as it emerges. The following section will focus on the work of Donna J. Haraway. Firstly, it will dive into some aspects of Haraway's conceptual work, including multispecies storytelling through the process of sympoiesis, 'making-with' of tentacular connections. From this deep dive, the section will demonstrate how Haraway's philosophy has been an ally in opening up this work to include the scribbles that remind us we are never alone on the road to nowhere, yet always somewhere.

2.6 Multispecies Storytelling

To break free from the Anthropocene, it is essential, as Donna J. Haraway advocates, to form kinship in the Chthulucene through processes of sympoiesis. Coined by Beth Dempster and adopted by Haraway, sympoiesis challenges the concept of autopoiesis, which is about self-making and self-reproduction. In contrast, sympoiesis is about 'making with' and 'making together' (p.58). Sympoiesis, as Haraway states, suggests that all entities, including ecosystems and human society, are interconnected and cannot exist in isolation. It involves forming complex structures within collectives that foster a continuous, evolving system without rigid or self-imposed boundaries. For Haraway, 'worlding-with' entails sympoiesis, where multispecies survival depends on recognising complex entanglements. Haraway explores symbiogenesis, as advocated by Lynn Margulis, a biological process of cooperation rather than

competition, using it as a model for understanding life and advocating for ‘making-with’ (sympoiesis) rather than self-making (autopoiesis). This process recognises that all life is a form of ‘making-with’ that is interconnected and interdependent, challenging notions of human exceptionalism and single-species evolution and proposing new ways to foster community and kinship across species. Haraway describes symbiogenesis as the lively art of ‘*Stay with the Trouble*’ in the Chthulucene, which requires ‘making-with’ kin with oddkin, capturing the intertwined collaboration between the human and more-than-human. To elucidate making kin with oddkin in the process of sympoiesis, Haraway uses examples from evolutionary biology, ecology, art-activism, indigenous history and practices, storytelling and writing. The discussion on string figures, which began in chapter 1, will continue here. For Haraway (2016, p. 10), string figures, like stories, propose and enact patterns of multispecies storytelling on a ‘vulnerable and wounded earth’. Furthermore, string figure for Haraway is a ‘theoretical trope, a way to think with a host of companions in sympoietic, threading, felting, tangling, tracking and sorting’ (p. 31). In reconceptualising how knowledge is produced within the three articles, a range of perspectives are brought into conversation, including poststructuralism, critical posthuman theory, Irish mythology, Indigenous knowledge, and Black feminist theory. Although these conceptual perspectives differ in many ways, a conceptual space was nurtured through the labour of being, sorting, threading, thinking-with, and much scribbling while ‘making-with’ the relationality of these epistemological differences.

2.6.1 Tentacular connections

Tentacular thinking is a concept Haraway put forward to describe a non-linear, interconnected perspective on understanding the world that embraces complexity and relationships beyond rigid boundaries. Tentacular thinking, for Haraway, is *matterphorically* intertwined with the tentacles of a jellyfish or octopus, or the strands of a string figure, and refers to understanding life as interconnected through nets and webs of networks. It is an approach that recognises

complexity, messiness, and the interdependence between humans and other species, non-humans. Haraway (2016, p. 31) explains that tentacle derives from the Latin words *tentaculum*, meaning ‘feelers’, and *tentare*, meaning ‘to feel’ or ‘to try’. Haraway draws on indigenous teaching, such as the Goshute language and spiritual beliefs, to theorise the concept of the Cthulucene, which needs a myriad of tentacles to tell multispecies stories of ‘possible worlds and possible times material-semiotic worlds, gone, here and yet to come’ (pg 31). Where meaning (semiotics) and physical stuff (materiality) intertwine in practices, all things and everything become enmeshed in a web of relations rather than fixed categories. Haraway uses the example of the Pimoa Cthulhu, a spider that resides beneath a tree stump in North Central California. The spider is named by the Goshute people of Utah, who record how the spider moves elsewhere. In traditional culture, the Goshute people are known as the ‘people of the dry earth’. Pimoa, in the Goshute language, means ‘big legs’. Like the tentacles of an octopus and the big legs of a spider that weave webs, these contribute to Haraway’s sign SF, which supports us in thinking, feeling, and experiencing the messiness and interconnectedness that coexist in the interdependence of human and more-than-human, kin and oddkin (p. 32).

Tentacular connections of tentacular thinking and making-with that tangle in the case of this thesis, Figure 1 Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles, are making-with in the mode of collective tentacular connections.¹⁴ Haraway describes the tentacular ones as those that ‘make attachments and detachments, they make cuts and knots, they make difference as the weave paths and consequences but not determinism; they are open in some way and not others’ (p. 31). Scribble-(K)nots-scribbles becomes intertwined with gestures, materials, and emerging meanings, embodying Haraway’s call to ‘Stay with the Trouble’ by embracing messiness, contradictions and complexity rather than linear straightness to scribble stories within this

¹⁴ Spiders and Collective tentacular connections are re-turned to in chapter 6, 6.6.1 Spidery tentacular collaborations: Continuing Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles.

research project but also continue as tentacular ones that move outside of this research project. The stories found in these pages are tentacularly collaborative, situated, and committed to the generative trouble of relationality in the disruption of anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene. These stories also engage in art activism as scribbles and strings that flourish in many places – see section 6.. However, where these tentacular scribbles scurry or meander will be as much up to them as you or me.

2.6.2 Never Alone: On the Road to Nowhere



Figure 2: A chalk scribble of the Road to Nowhere that covered the floor of the room. This photograph captures a section of the floor. Source: used with the permission of the Early Years Community Service

Haraway (2016, p. 86) illustrates the concept of symposiosis by drawing attention to the video game *Never Alone*. The analysis of the video game *Never Alone* is an example of ‘science art worlding for living on a damaged planet’ (Haraway, 2016, p.86). *Kisima Innitchuna: Never Alone* is a digital game that consists of an atmospheric puzzle-platformer developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska Native people, and drawn from a traditional story shared across generations, posing the question, what good are old stories if they’re never told? The game frames the Iñupiaq principles of interdependence and interconnectedness in a

modern context. The game emphasises the cooperation between the Inupiaq girl Nuna and her Arctic fox companion/spirit guide as a compelling reminder that ‘earthlings are never alone’ and that all existence arises from complex, dynamic ‘worlding-with, in company’ (Haraway p. 87). By involving players in a multispecies survival narrative rooted in Indigenous knowledge, the game promotes a sense of response-ability towards the challenges of living on a damaged planet. Consequently, the game functions as a cultural artefact that exists as a story ‘within ongoing Indigenous stories’ (p.86). However, Haraway notes that *Never Alone* ‘is not a New Age game for universal oneness, a posthumanist solution to epistemological crises, a general model for collaboration, or a way to finesse the Anthropocene with Native Climate Wisdom’ (p 87). As Haraway (2016,p.87) states

Stories, even stories offered for sale on the internet, belong to storytellers, who share them, or not, in practices of situated worlding. The conditions for sharing must not be set by raiders, academic or otherwise. That does not mean the game is restricted to native commentators in native places for native audiences in a perverse caricature of a reservation. It does mean the terms of telling, listening and playing have been relocated decisively.

2.6.2.1 What is your PhD about? Scribbles that are Never Alone!!

‘What is your PhD thesis about?’ A question that most researchers, surprisingly or unsurprisingly, find challenging. The ongoing dilemma is *how* to answer in a way that captures the complexity of the thesis while remaining coherent within the context of *when and where* the question is asked. Over the past few years, I have been asked this question numerous times in the local shop, on the sidelines of a football match, and in a range of other venues. Up until the Viva Voce, I struggled to answer the question and admit that it unnerved me, leaving me feeling like an impostor in the research process. Before the Viva Voce, the thesis was described as a drawing; however, the examiners recommended deepening the analysis of the scribble artwork to include readings of Victoria de Rijke’s (2023) book ‘Untimely Art of Scribbles’.

Re-turning to Donna Haraway's explanation that worlding-with involves sympoiesis, emphasising that multispecies survival depends on recognising intricate entanglements of 'making-with'. In this thesis, many models of sympoiesis are illustrated in each publication.

The following story will focus on how scribbles can continue in the ongoingness of unpredictability. Figure 1: Scribbles-(K) not-Scribbles becomes a making-with, tentacular connection to Figure 2: On the Road to Nowhere. After the Viva Voce, I was visiting an Early Years setting when the manager (whom I had known for over 20 years) asked, '*What is your PhD thesis about?*' My immediate answer was *scribbles and scribbling*. Of course, this led to a more nuanced conversation. However, this preamble is only to set the context of this tentacular connection.

Later, as I was leaving the building, a very excited educator ran out of a room, ushering the manager and me in to see the children's work. The very excited educator, unlike the manager, had never met me, nor was the educator aware of the conversation that had taken place minutes beforehand. The educator eagerly told me that the children had called this drawing *the road to nowhere*. Figure 2: On the Road to Nowhere. Figure: A chalk scribble of the Road to Nowhere that covered the whole floor of the room. This photograph captures a section of the floor.

Scribbles that scurried under tables and made their way around shoes, some scribbles paused here and there, some rubbed off, and some were well-defined, all colours over and back, fading, meandering and wandering, darting to the edge of a corner, reversing back, moving this way and that. *Oh, to be a scribble!*

Haraway describes the Pimoa Cthulhu spider with tentacular connections that move elsewhere and everywhere. This road, named by the children as the road to nowhere, indeed, the road led nowhere, as the children's naming of it suggests, but it definitely, like the Pimoa Cthulhu, goes everywhere and elsewhere. So, this scribble, figure reminds us that in fact we are never alone, that scribbling is and can be a tentacular connection of collaboration that moves

beyond the boundaries of paper, brick walls and conversations, defying places that scribbles should not be and yet are, in this case, the floor, not just part of the floor but the whole floor. Scribbles that are beyond the linear nature of travelling on a road with a known destination, a journey without a map, or more accurately, journeys within journeys, scribbling on a road that doesn't necessarily lead anywhere, while at the same time holding all the essence of a journey and adventure that is brave enough to go anywhere.

This story began with the question, 'What is your PhD about?' Maybe my answer should be a complex collective that forms as a continuous, boundaryless system, with tentacles intertwining in knots. (*I prefer scribbles, or maybe the road to nowhere, or maybe we are never alone.*) Knots that are illustrated by Haraway's SF game, where players pick different strings, in this case scribbles, to think-with, make-with and become-with, where passing the scribbles becomes the process of thinking, making and doing. More about the pattern than the tracking. Astonishing for me was the serendipity of the conversation of scribbles that was not in earshot of the children or the educator. Yet the children's drawings of scribbles were occurring in a completely different part of the building. This occurrence serves as a potent reminder that we are *Never Alone* and that *worlding-with* is intricate beyond the logic of human reasoning and objectivity for worlding is always in the *making-with*.

2.7 The road to nowhere but always somewhere

Furthermore, this thesis contributed to crossing many boundaries by responding to data with conceptual tools that could be adopted as it emerged, such as decolonisation, dominant discourse analysis, and *thinking-with* theory. Through the CPPLP module, the realm of higher education became politicised, facilitating opportunities for engagement with alternative thinking. Over time, participants account for dismantling dominant technical knowledge, such

as the figuration of the ‘developing child’, to encourage a reconceptualisation of pedagogical approaches. Strikingly, acts of thinking-with poststructural critique instil confidence to interrogate the foundations of the knowledge that informs pedagogical practice with young children. This research exemplifies how ECS education programmes can transform into sites of transformative praxis where dominant discourses are continually examined, creating opportunities for students to think *otherwise*. Chapter 2 served to communicate with the reader how this story came about. Listening to the unruly data that refused to be coded was fundamental to curating this story. Thus, the data emerged as a teacher with pedagogical force, moving from qualitative methodologies to postqualitative/postfoundational inquiries. So, although *I* am writing this story, many entities are weaving within the folds of this research.

'It is urgent that we initiate and engage in open democratic debate about how we, as a society, relate to young children and reclaim the purpose of early childhood education as common good'' (Mathais Urban, 2024, p. 62)

Chapter 3 – Article 1: Setting the Scene

3.1 Prelude

Chapter 3: Setting the Scene presents Journal Article 1. I outline how Rosi Bardotti's posthuman perspectives on affirmative ethics stimulated my creativity during a time of exhaustion. As captured in the statement above, Mathias Urban's ongoing scholarship inspires this chapter to reclaim the purpose of ECEC as a common good, which is a central premise of the debate within this chapter.

3.1.1 Exhaustion –Prelude to Article 1

My ethical concern regarding the risk of institutionalising young children and how I was tethered to dominant discourses led me to poststructural critiques, including the works of Michel Foucault and feminist poststructural viewpoints such as those of Glenda Mac Naughton. In 2016, I drew upon the works of Foucault and Mac Naughton to underpin my

design of the module CPPLP. As I entered this research story, I was firmly grounded in a poststructural critique.

3.1.2 Multiple Crisis

I argue that the Irish state and broader society have constructed a narrow view of ECEC. Since the inception of ECEC in the Irish state, historical discourses and economic imperatives have hindered the intentions of policies aimed at creating equal opportunities and addressing poverty through the educational context of ECEC. Drawing on approaches such as poststructuralism and posthumanism, Journal Article 1 seeks to disrupt a neoliberal agenda and historical gender inequalities, which form the foundations of ECEC. Dominant discourses surrounding ECEC remain centred on economic considerations, thereby consistently overshadowing critical inquiry regarding pedagogy and the nature of experiences for young children. Nonetheless, this article remains immanent as I generate an alternative governance model to support the sustainability of ECEC(Smyth, 2022). Although since the writing of journal article 1, a serious governmental effort has been made to reform, Urban (2024) highlights a stark reality that ECEC within the Irish context is at risk of collapse due to the market model. As the world emerged from COVID-19, important questions arose regarding responding to the global crisis. In the 21st century, humanity has entered the era of what is commonly termed polycrisis. Charbonneau and Giguère (2025) describe polycrisis as a struggle to grapple with the uncertainties of the Anthropocene, which has become a situation of multiple crises that interact in a system of parallel, overlapping and connected crises on a global scale. These include rising energy and food prices, the erosion of democracy, the rise of political extremism, unchecked AI advancements and cyber insecurity, climate crisis and species extinction, large-scale involuntary migration due to warfare and climate change, biodiversity loss, and the increase in natural disasters and extreme weather events (O'Regan, 2023). Thus, in this moment of navigating a web of interconnecting polycrisis, I return to

Urban's (2024, p.62) point that we must initiate and engage in 'open democratic debate about how we, as a society, relate to young children and reclaim the purpose of early childhood education for the common good'. First, I critically examined the historical institutional systems that gave rise to early childhood education and care (ECEC) within the Irish context. At this time, many educational events were hosted online. I had the opportunity to attend an online summer school, Posthuman Convergences, hosted by Rosi Braidotti. This experience provided me with the space to overcome exhaustion. Exhaustion was recognised by Braidotti (2019, p. 13) as a 'massive outburst of overfatigue as we continually negotiate the variables of our social relations'. As I embraced exhaustion, a space opened to create solutions.

3.2 Journal Article 1

Smyth, L. (2022). Multiple crises, multiple sticky plasters: repositioning regimes of truth in ECEC policy to affirmative ethics of interconnection. *Irish Educational Studies*, 43(3), 355–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2022.2074075>

Abstract

Recently, the role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), as a public service within Irish society, has been illuminated. In the twenty-first century, although crises may unfold on a global scale, the response from society is galvanised at a local level. Amongst other functions, ECEC is ideally positioned to form part of a local response to the unanticipated public crisis. However, ECEC in Ireland finds itself in a space of converging multiple crises such as high fees for parents, poor working conditions for staff, alongside concerns of how children experience provision. This article analyses the institutional systems from which ECEC has emerged by mapping several discursive ‘regimes of truth’, that have built up through Irish history. Exposure of multiple crises, such as fragmentation and the commodification of care are mapped to a neoliberal discourse set in a history of colonialism and religious doctrine. Pulling off the sticky plasters is painful, whilst facing multiple crises can lead to a state of exhaustion. However, guided by affirmative ethics, this article aims to generate possible solutions, thereby proposing mechanisms for creating a more sustainable model of ECEC

Keywords

The context of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland is defined as the period before formal education for children aged 0–6 years. Recently, the role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been illuminated to be more than a commodity to support parents participate in the labour markets, but also as a necessity for the fabric of our society. Public services, as reported by UNICEF (such as health, education, and housing), particularly in times of crisis, provide a safety net to buffer the risk for all children but especially more vulnerable families (Gonzalo 2014; Gromada and Richardson 2021). Moreover, research signifies that high-quality early years programmes support children at a sensitive period of learning, contributing to strong foundations that can be relied upon throughout life (Gambaro, Stewart, and Waldfogel 2015). Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), as a public service, is an essential building block to ensure a more equitable society. Therefore, all children have the right to access quality early years provision (EU 2019). In 2019, it was estimated in Ireland that 180,149 children were enrolled in at least one Government subsidy programme, alongside 30,883 staff working in Early Childhood Education and care (ECEC) settings (Pobal 2019). From 2000, in Ireland, two main types of childcare provision emerged: community services and private services. Community services are not for profit and are managed by a local voluntary committee, whilst private providers, which are for profit, are either set up as a sole trader or a limited company (Early Childhood Ireland 2019). Since the inception of ECEC, Hayes and Bradley (2007) assert that Ireland has relied heavily on a mixed market model to regulate and supply provision with low state

investment. This dependence on a mixed market model has resulted in ECEC services that are largely operated by private providers, although mainly financed by public sources (OECD 2019). In 2019/20, according to the annual early years sector report (Pobal 2019), 4,398 services were contracted to offer the universal Free Pre School Year (ECCE Scheme) nationally, of which 76% (3,362) were private (for profit) and 24% (1,036) were community (non-profit). Additionally, community services are more likely to be located in disadvantaged areas compared to their private counterparts, which are more likely to be situated in more affluent urban areas (Pobal 2019). Despite the leadership shown within ECEC provision, which resonated throughout the COVID-19 crisis, ECEC in Ireland finds itself in a space of converging multiple crises. Issues include the marketisation of services, poor working conditions for staff and high fees for families (Heery 2020). In a report by UNICEF (Gromada and Richardson 2021), Ireland was placed in the bottom third of OECD countries for affordable childcare (Gromada and Richardson 2021). From 2013, ECEC began to draw media attention. Albeit involving a small number of ECEC services, undercover investigations by Prime Time (RTE 2013; RTE 2019) revealed poor practice and misconduct towards children.

Through a range of initiatives and investment programmes the Irish state has made a concerted effort to support the development of ECEC. Nonetheless, over-reliance on a market model with a top-down approach has resulted in the administration of numerous sticky plasters to the system. In 2020, the convergence of the global health pandemic, COVID-19, with already existing crises demonstrated that ECEC provision in Ireland was at breaking point on numerous fronts. Hence, these multiple crises significantly undermine the capacity of ECEC professionals to provide high-quality programmes for young children.

The conceptual framework – regimes of truth within a competent system

Considering these multiple crises, fundamental questions arise: how did ECEC in Ireland get to this crisis point, and most importantly, how are we going to move forward? Influenced from a Foucauldian perspective, this article critically analyses the institutional systems from which ECEC has emerged. Institutional systems, as conceptualised by Foucault (1988), are embedded in dominant discourses that become ‘regimes of truth’, that are produced within the power relations that form dominant discourses, which society accepts. These discursive ‘regimes of truth’ have built up at a certain moment during history; therefore, this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed (Foucault 1988,p.10). Furthermore, Foucault (1980, 89) explains that power, which does not sit in opposition to the state and society but flows around us as ‘neither a given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and that it only exists in action’. Therefore, it is vital to consider how institutions for children emerge, reproduce, and re-emerge within these ‘regimes of truth’. Of course, the philosophical views of Foucault did not extend to a method of analysing discursive regimes of truth in relation to early childhood education. Therefore, an added lens of a ‘competent system’ is interwoven throughout this article. Fundamentally, as argued by Urban (2019,p.4), ECEC provision does not develop in isolation but within a ‘competent system’. Thereby, ECEC, as found in the CoRe report (2011), is connected to policy, practice, resourcing, and a wider societal vision (Urban et al. 2011). Against the backdrop of two major global crises, financial and health, the four dimensions of the time continuum devised for this article are as follows: (1) Prior to 2000, Austerity to prosperity; the commodification of care (2) 2000–2008, National partnerships; all that glitters is not gold (3) 2008–2016, Recession and fragmentation; the swish of a tiger’s tail, (4) 2016–2021, Systematically failing children; a journey in a legacy of darkness. Over the past 20 years in ECEC, policy development and numerous investment strategies have been rapid. Therefore, only key examples are chosen to demonstrate the

conceptual and structural constraints that persist across the four devised dimensions of a time continuum.

The second part of this article adopts a posthuman theoretical perspective of affective ethics and interconnections. Posthuman philosophy is inspired by Spinoza (1994), whose notions affirms that all entities (human, vegetation, animals, microorganisms, and the cosmos) in the world are interconnected. Hence, all human and non-human life occurs within different relational positions of events formed through a network of possibilities (Mac Cormack 2020). Furthermore, the approach within this article is guided by Braidotti's (2019) principles of affirmative ethics, which is to engage in creating other possibilities while critiquing. The potential possibilities in this article are as follows: (1) De-marketisation; sustainability within a new model of governance, (2) Repositioning policy to an interconnective narrative of ethical care.

Part 1 – the discursive regimes of truth

Prior to 2000, austerity to prosperity; the commodification of care

Although capitalism as a discourse stretches across all four dimensions of the time continuum, a neoliberal agenda was particularly significant in building the ideological foundations of ECEC provision for young children. Within this time dimension, the prevailing 'regimes of truth' that informed the ideology surrounding ECEC are mapped to dominant discourses of prosperity and the commodification of care. From 1995 to 2000, following centuries of great austerity, as noted by Ruane (2010), prosperity emerged as a dominant discourse within Irish society. Notably, this was a period of unprecedented economic growth for Ireland, captured in the imagination of wider society as the 'Celtic Tiger' (Ruane 2010). Whilst mapping the 'regimes of truth' that informed the dominant discourses of prosperity and the commodification of care, the historical periods of

colonisation by England and the profound influences of the Catholic Church must be considered. From 1920, in the period of post-colonial governance, the Irish constitution and public policy were heavily influenced by the Catholic church. At this time, most public services, including health and education, were provided by the church (Share, Corcon, and Conway 2012). Thereby, the doctrine of the church was deeply reflected in the public and private lives of Irish citizens. After independence from English rule in 1920, Lynch, Grummel, and Devine (2012), argue that Irish society failed to progress on many social and economic fronts. The period from 1920 to 1980 is etched in the Irish psyche as steep unemployment, oppression of women, mass emigration and ongoing violence in Northern Ireland (Share, Corcon, and Conway 2012). The subsequent period from 1980 to 2000 is defined by significant events such as Ireland's opening to global development, membership within the EU and a peace process in Northern Ireland, which culminated in the Good Friday Agreement (1998). These significant events paved the way to unimaginable prosperity for Irish society, known as the Celtic Tiger (Share, Corcoran, and Conway 2012). In tandem, during this period, the Irish government focused on the implementation of a neoliberal approach to the development of New Public Services (NPS) (Lynch, Grummel, and Devine 2012). Neoliberal economic theories, as posited by Bevir (2002), promote the withdrawal of the State from the provision of public services to be replaced with private enterprise that are committed to the market imperatives of capitalism. Although the NPS approach by the Irish State was driven by capitalism, it was couched in a discourse of modernisation (Lynch, Grummel, and Devine 2012; Collins and Cradden 2007).

Prior to 2000, there were few policies relating to ECEC, with most childcare provided outside the home in unregulated informal childminding scenarios (Bennett 2008). Historically, the Irish State held the ideological position that childcare was a private family matter. The government had no role unless the child was at risk (OECD 2006). Neatly tied to

the ideological position that childcare was a private matter is the 'regime of truth', which means that women were naturally suited as the main caregivers (Ryan 2001). Gender inequality within a patriarchal society, dominated by the doctrine of the Catholic church, is reflected in the Irish constitution. Article 41 of the Irish constitution (Ireland 1945), as asserted by Ryan (2001, p.12), depicted 'a narrow role for women, equating them with motherhood and work in the home, perpetuating beliefs that women should be the main caregivers in society'. The phenomena of love, care or solidarity were mainly ignored, up until 1980, when feminist scholars brought the role of emotional care work within employment and the home to the fore. Drawing on the experiences from a diverse set of carers and care recipients, research carried out by Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009) provides insights into understanding the complexity of care. Furthermore, Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009) illuminated the existing intersectionality of inequalities regarding gender and class for the person providing care. The commodification of secondary care in ECEC cannot be equated to the insights of the primary care dynamic (Lynch, Baker, and Lyons 2009). However, Page (2018) highlights the complexity of the love and care between the early years professional and the child, which is exhibited in early years provision. Yet, at the inception of ECEC, according to Bennett (1999), the historical view of women's role in Irish society, as the main caregiver, allowed for an ambivalence towards the development of policy and initiatives. In 2019, 98% of early years professionals were women (ECI 2019). Throughout the time continuum of ECEC, the devaluation of caring roles persists. Jobs within the ECEC sector were, and continue to be, considered low status and low pay (ADM 1999; European Council 2019). Historically, the commodification of care intersects with social class and status for women working in early years provision. The OMNA (2000) report, which informed the Model Framework for Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector (DJELR 2000), found that many women working in

ECEC may have left school early, without qualifications and in some cases having had a negative school experience. Prior to 2016, there was no legal requirement for staff to be qualified; the Childcare Act 1991 (Preschool Service) Regulation 1996 (Government of Ireland 1996) only specified the need for a competent person. In 2016, amendments to the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Regulations) 2016 (Government of Ireland 2016) stipulated a minimum legal qualification for a person working with young children. In 2019, the European Council recognised that quality ECEC has a lasting impact on young children. However, ‘in many countries the [childcare] profession has a rather low profile and status’ (European Council 2019, p.7), which conflicts with the complexity of the skills and dispositions needed to provide high-quality care and education for young children. In addition, Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009) surmise that the reluctance to value care as work is due to the public’s allegiance to the traditional feminine activity of care, which is viewed as a personal and private matter. However, Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2009, p.50) point out that if a person receives care in life, then they are ‘care-rich’, be it at a personal, community or state level. Therefore, social policy needs to account for the interdependent relationship between the public and private sphere. While simultaneously considering the intersection of status, social class, gender, and ethnicity of the workforce in ECEC.

2000–2008, national consensus; all that glitters is not gold

Retrospectively, the vision for ECEC was based on a foundation of market demands for the mobilisation of labour resources, especially women (ESRI 2003), as opposed to broader society’s aspirations for young children. Additionally, this time period 2000–2008, is characterised by the ‘regimes of truth’ encapsulated in consensus politics. Consensus politics has had far-reaching implications for the narrative of ECEC. In early 2000, the Irish Government launched the National Development Plan (NDP) 2000–2006, which aimed to

support the national economic recovery (Government of Ireland 1999). As part of the NDP, 2000–2006, a national agreement was brokered between the social partners through a consultation process with the aim of resolving social issues. The national partnership agreement included a range of key stakeholders: trade unions, business partners, community groups and farmers. Through consensus politics, Ireland, according to Dobbins (2000) claimed an extra layer to democracy. Paradoxically, consensus politics was deemed one of the essential ingredients that led to the economic boom (Mc Aleese 2000).

With the remit of broadening the focus of childcare in Ireland, under the national partnership agreement (2000), an expert working group came together, including the government, trade unions, employers and community groups (Government of Ireland 1999, p.352). At the time, numerous Government departments (between 8 and 10) held responsibility for children. This approach to developing childcare provision was noted as fragmented and created significant obstacles for the co-ordination of initiatives (DES 1998; DES 2002). In 2005, the effort to coordinate early childhood policy was reflected in the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children, (OMC) (OECD 2006). However, this was a complicated arrangement reflecting the application of several sticky plasters to policy development. The OMC sat as part of the Department of Health and Children. Along with units from the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Education and Science (now Education) (DES) were also co-located within the OMC, alongside the Early Years Policy Unit (EYPU). Amongst the numerous government departments, the Department of Health and Children had responsibility for children aged from birth to three years, whilst the Department of Education and Science had a remit for children aged three to six years (DES 2002; Walsh 2016). This approach created the ideological split and physical divisions within governance and regulations for the care and education of young children. Numerous critics urged the government to unite education and care of young children under one department as an

interconnected system (Hayes 2010; DHS 2000, Moss 2006). Additionally, the call for a more coherent approach towards the delivery of ECEC provision was captured in the Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Education 1999. This included ‘an overarching policy framework’, which aimed to reduce social and educational inequalities and ‘build on existing provisions and improve the extent and quality of services provided’ (DES 1999, p. 7). It is noteworthy that the recommendations to reduce social and educational inequality reflected a sincere effort by the Irish Government to expand the concepts of early education and care beyond the narrow discourse of meeting the needs of the labour markets. In 2000, the ten-year National Childcare Strategy 2000–2010, was released. The strategy had a rights-based focus on the provision of childcare places alongside a commitment to the elimination of child poverty (DJELR 2000). Under the directive of the National Childcare strategy, EU structural funding commenced with a focus on supplying quality, accessible and affordable childcare places, namely, the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000–2006). Later, the state continued funding with the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP, 2006–2010). At this time, the county childcare committees (CCC) were set up to support ECEC provision, expand, and develop at the local level. Undeniably, both programmes, the EOCP and NCIP (2000–2010), focused on creating childcare places, which were linked to wider employment policies (OECD 2006). Although targets were met in the supply of childcare places, other aspects, such as quality, were not aligned. Alarming, UNICEF (2008) reported that during this rapid expansion of childcare places, Ireland had only met one of ten benchmark standards for ECEC. Interestingly, the one benchmark standard that Ireland met was that 50% of ECEC staff were trained, albeit to a low level. The period from 2000 to 2008 shaped ECEC through a process of consensus policy that focused on meeting the insatiable appetite of the Celtic Tiger for labour. Capitalist ideology resulted in ‘regimes of truth’ that were exercised through a process of consensus politics, ensuring that employment

policy and economic success took precedence over children's rights to access quality provision.

2008–2016, recession and fragmentation: the swish of a tiger's tail

Against the backdrop of the global recession, the numerous sticky plasters applied to overcome the fragmentation of the ECEC system would unravel. The implications of consensus politics and a history of institutional child abuse came to the fore. In 2008, Ireland's unsustainable economic growth ended abruptly. Irish society witnessed the perils of the previous social partnerships initiated in the early 2000s between the government, trade unions, community groups and business partners. During the period from 1990 to 2008, the 'regimes of truth' that economic prosperity would ensure equity for all, had overlooked how society was constructed in terms of class, race, gender, or ethnicity (Lynch, Cantillon, and Crean 2017). With the collapse of the property market, the economic crisis revealed deep-seated corruption and cronyism between politicians, bankers, builders, and developers (Ruane 2010). As Irish society plunged into a deep recession, the need for critical analysis of public policy became more evident (Lynch, Cantillon, and Crean 2017; O'Dowd 2012).

Notwithstanding, at this time, Ireland began to move to a more secularised culture, breaking the ideological hold of the Catholic church (Share, Corcon, and Conway 2012). This move was accelerated with the release of numerous reports such as the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (CICA 2009), commonly called the Ryan report. Wider Irish society was becoming more aware of the prolific sexual abuse of children by Catholic institutions. Stemming from recommendations of the Ryan Report (CICA 2009) the Government would seek to strengthen the processes of regulation and inspection of services for children. The

establishment of the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, in 2014, as a function of the Health Service Executive, coincided with amendments to a range of legislation, such as the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 and amendments to the Child Care Act 1991. However, other key actions made by the Ryan Report, such as securing redress for survivors from the historical abuse of the Catholic church, have proven challenging and have yet to be achieved (Pembroke 2019). Recommendations made by the Ryan report to co-ordinate policy and initiatives came to fruition in establishing the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), which replaced the Office for Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. In 2011, the DCYA merged various functions for children previously with other government departments. However, the inspections of services and compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 remained with the Department of Health under the newly established Child and Family Agency, Tusla.

During this period, other significant developments for ECEC occurred. In 2010, the allocation of a universally funded preschool year (ECCE scheme) was hailed as a landmark achievement in the Irish story of ECEC. A notable feature of the ECCE scheme was the allocation of increased funding for the service that employed a pre-school leader with a graduate qualification (Pobal 2019). Furthermore, Murphy (2015) points to the benefits of additional funding to the ECEC service with a direct correlation to higher qualifications. Conversely, findings from the Irish Congress Trade Unions (ICTU 2016) ripped off the sticky plaster to reveal that early years professionals with a higher degree are only paid marginally more than less qualified staff. In 2009, the Workforce Development Plan (WDP) (DES 2009) built on the previous Model Framework for Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector (DJELR 2000).

Once again, issues concerning the working conditions of staff were brought to the fore. The WDP found that several challenges for the marginalised female workforce

identified in the previous framework (DJELR 2000) remained unchanged. Issues persisted such as, accessing education, low wages, and poor working conditions (DES 2009). Significantly, the WDP (DES 2009) confirmed that skills, competencies, and qualifications of staff working with young children mattered. In a positive move from viewing only the structural aspects of ECEC, the Government began to respond to other aspects of quality, for example, in 2014, the learner fund was established (DCYA 2016). The learner fund supplied financial support to existing staff within ECEC provision wishing to upskill to a level 5 and 6 vocational awards. However, fragmentation and uncoordinated initiatives continued in other developments such as Siolta, the national quality framework for the early childhood sector (CECDE 2006) and Aistear, the curriculum framework for children aged birth to 6 years (NCCA 2010). Both frameworks promised enormous potential in supporting quality principles in ECEC provision for young children. Yet there was no plan or resources allocated for the implementation of either framework (Hayes, O'Donoghue-Hynes, and Wolfe 2013). To overcome the dilemma of separate frameworks in 2015, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment launched the Aistear/ Siolta Practice Guide (NCCA 2015). Systematic failings that continue to fragment ECEC can be found in the division of inspections. For example, the Department of Education (DES 2015) introduced the Early Years Education Inspections (EYEIs). The role of the EYEI is to inspect services based on the implementation of the quality frameworks, Aistear and Siolta. While Tusla developed the Early Years inspectorate, which assesses an ECEC service's compliance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. Hence, the division of regulatory processes has resulted in double inspections for services from two separate government departments, Education and Health. Despite each department's efforts to coordinate overarching structures, the early years professional continues to be overburdened with the task of interpreting multiple frameworks and legislation from competing government

departments (Walsh 2016; CRA 2020). Since the inception of ECEC, the need to ideologically integrate care and education within policy has been ignored. The dilution of the complexity of care ensures a ‘regime of truth’ that education is more valuable and occurs in isolation of care (Page 2018). This ideological split has resulted in a binary view of education and care, which glares in an array of unintended consequences. For example, aligning higher qualifications to an increased capitation for the universal free school place (ECCE scheme). Although unintended, the increased capitation for more qualified staff has ensured a deeper split within the provision of education and care. This policy initiative, which was hailed as a landmark achievement in the Irish story, has led to experiences for babies and younger children within ECEC provision being provided for by less qualified staff than children who attend the ECCE scheme (Walsh 2016). These unintended consequences have led to a situation of competing resources undermining the practice of interconnection. In 2016, encouraging initiatives by the government included the introduction of the access and inclusion model (AIM), which provides targeted supports to services to ensure an inclusive approach for all children participating in ECCE programmes, alongside the introduction of a second free pre-school year for preschool children (Government of Ireland 2019). Although strides have been made to bring together policy and coordinate initiatives, the obstacle of division, fragmentation and competing government departments remains deeply problematic within the ECEC system today.

2016–2021, failing children: a journey in a legacy of darkness

During this period, reform of ECEC emerged as a government priority. The plan for reform was detailed in the First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (DCYA 2018). Against the backdrop of the global pandemic, COVID-19, June 2020, heralded a new coalition government for the Irish State.

Under the newly formed government, the Department for Children and Youth Affairs was reconfigured to become the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), which included equality, integration, international protection, and disability policies. Unfortunately, this newly reconfigured department began office shrouded in a legacy of darkness. The role of the State in conjunction with the Catholic Church unfolded in the story of the mother and baby homes. The final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, which examined the period 1922–1998 (DCEDIY 2021a), revealed harsh treatment of single mothers and their babies born out of wedlock. The historical ‘regimes of truth’, which emerge from systems of colonialism and theological doctrine, solidify within a neoliberal agenda. These components intersect, resulting in a myriad of examples of collective failing towards children in the history of the Irish State. Prior to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, Ireland experienced a period of dynamic growth, all the while hosting one of the highest incidences of child poverty in the OECD (Böss 2011). In Ireland, the ERSI (2020) reported the rise in poverty for children, from 2008 at 18.1% to 37.5% in 2013. Poverty for children continues to escalate. In 2021, 92,000 children in Ireland lived in consistent poverty (OCO 2021). As such, poverty disproportionately impacts children from single-parent families, Traveller children, Roma children, migrant children and children living in direct provision (OCO 2021). While the risk of poverty and consistent poverty has slightly decreased. In February 2020, 30,000 early years professionals and supporters marched in Dublin. The protestors demanded reform of ECEC, including improvements in the areas of working conditions, reduction in fees for parents and investment in ECEC (Mooney Simmie and Murphy 2021; O’ Brien 2020; SIPTU 2020). Despite continuous training and upskilling, as highlighted by SIPTU (2021), the working conditions for early years professional continues to deteriorate. The annual reports from Pobal (2019), reflect the fact that 60% of early years professionals earn below the living

wage (SIPTU 2021). In May 2021, the Workforce Development Plan, phase 1, progress report was released, which built upon the previous Workforce Development Plan of 2009. In a bid to address the poor pay and working conditions for early years professionals, the Programme for Government (DCEDIY 2021a) announced a new funding model. The complexity of this initiative cannot be understated. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY 2021a) commenced this initiative through the process of a Joint Labour Committee (JLC). The JLC has invoked an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) for the early years sector, which legally sets out the rate of pay and working conditions that employers must adhere to. Since the State is not the employer, the ERO was considered the best approach to regulating pay rates and working conditions for the sector. The ERO allows the Government a legitimate legal route to improve the working conditions of the early years professional. Despite this effort, the State has ‘no direct control over how the markets might react to a state-imposed wage increase’ (DCEDIY 2021a, 9), once again illuminating the weakness of an unsustainable model that continuously requires sticky plasters.

Part 2 – affirmative ethics

The previous section mapped prevailing discourses that have built up through ‘regimes of truth’ within the history of ECEC, encapsulated in a neoliberal agenda, the commodification of care and split structures in governance that have led to fragmentation. The next section of this article adopts a post-humanist position. The potential possibilities created in this article are as follows: (1) De-marketisation; sustainability within a new model of governance, (2) Repositioning policy to an interconnective narrative of ethical care. These possible solutions are put forward, whilst recognising that within the Irish context, many potential possibilities are not yet rendered in the imagination of ECEC.

De-marketisation: sustainability within a new model of governance

Although it is a complex situation, it is hard to foresee how ECEC can change or truly reform without a model of sustainability. Nonetheless, the issues of a market model are gravely complex in terms of governance for both the private provider and the State. Yet, in Ireland, there are several legal mechanisms established that have the potential to support the de-marketisation of ECEC. One such mechanism proposed here is the Education Training Boards (ETBs). Under the Education and Training Board Act (2013), the ETBs were established as statutory authorities to coordinate the delivery of education in their functional area. In 2011, the Government established a forum on patronage and pluralism for primary schools (DE 2012). This included the divesting of patronage of existing schools from the ownership of the Catholic Church. Although operationally funded by the state, 96% of primary schools in Ireland are owned by religious patrons, 90% of which are under Catholic Church ownership (DE 2012). Under the remit of the Education and Training Board Act (2013), the ETBs now manage and operate community national schools in a bid to remove the church from the role of governance. Despite these changes, in 2019, 88.9% of primary schools remained under church governance (DES 2020). Like private providers of ECEC services in Ireland, the religious patrons contributed land and premises for the purpose of education. The existing legal mechanisms that have been established to support the divesting of ownership from the Catholic Church have the potential to be applied to the de-marketisation process of ECEC. Overall, the ETBs have robust, established governance structures and resources that are locally positioned to build the future capacity of ECEC and ensure accountability within a competent system. Repositioning regimes of truth in ECEC policy to affirmative ethics of interconnection. Yet a sustainable model of ECEC is not built on governance and investment alone. Since the onset of COVID-19, the human species has

faced the impending reality that we are part of an interconnected ecosystem interacting with the natural world, human and non-human (Kurki 2020). In managing the crisis of a global pandemic, the centrality of individualism and independent citizens (Sevenhuijsen 2003), normally employed by a neo-liberal government, was abandoned for messages of care, collectiveness, and solidarity (Department of Rural and Community Development [DRCD] 2020). Unlike the previous global financial crisis, the immediate threats and repercussions of COVID-19 as a wide spreading global pandemic could not be solved by monetary strategies alone. In a bid to curtail the spread of COVID-19, a narrative of care emerges, whereby, the private and public are interconnected. Drawing on this narrative of care, inspirational metaphors of solidarity emerged on the political landscape, such as the infamous mantra, ‘we are all in this together’. Conversely, Braidotti (2020,p.2), stated although ‘we are in this together, we are not One and the same’. Vulnerable groups in society are more exposed to public health risks presented by COVID-19, such as ethnic communities, asylum seekers, people experiencing homelessness and one-parent families (Cullen and Murphy 2020). Most notably, COVID-19 has shone a light on the fact that childhood in Irish society is not experienced in the same way for all children. Issues of poverty, violence, and lack of services that were not previously addressed are compounded particularly for children experiencing disadvantage and poverty, including those with additional needs, children experiencing domestic violence (Safe Ireland 2021), and children living in direct provision (OCO 2021).

Post Covid-19

Since the inception of ECEC in Ireland, numerous policy initiatives, existing frameworks, and legislation have contributed toward building a robust component system. Although pulling off the sticky plasters has been painful, remarkably in 2021, there has been a shift in the public and political narrative towards developing ECEC as a service for public

good (Urban 2021). Furthermore, 2021 witnessed decisive actions by the Irish Government toward ECEC, such as funding increases to services during disruptions that ensued from the global pandemic COVID-19, a new investment model with core funding (DCEDIY 2021b), alongside a concerted effort to address the working conditions for staff. Additionally, the acknowledgment from Minister for Children Roderic O’Gorman, that marketisation is a central issue for the sustainability of ECEC (Newstalk 2021).

Conclusion

ECEC has been shaped by historical ‘regimes of truth’ within dominant discourses that are reproduced from systems of colonialism and theological doctrine, which in turn solidified within a neoliberal agenda. Therefore, it is vital to consider how institutions for children emerge. Hence, policy, practice and resources must consider how ‘regimes of truth’, from our collective past, intersect with present-day culture. The State and Irish society must prioritise lifting all children from poverty. Public services have a pivotal role in intervening in issues of poverty. Therefore, all conflicts of interest must be removed, particularly market moralities. As such, it is imperative that there is a conceptual re-imagining of the model for the provision of all public services within the Irish state. This article proposes ECEC provision for child and families as a starting point.

Unfortunately, the debate surrounding ECEC remains rigidly fixated on economics. The vital question of pedagogy and which type of experiences we want for young children in Ireland continues to be eclipsed. Over the past twenty years, numerous policies, including the First 5, serve to provide a vision for ECEC. Yet clearly, comprehensive policy, legislation or investment cannot achieve reform in a fragmented system with a top-down approach. Fragmentation may be overcome with one centralised government department that aligns the

responsibilities for children nationally with robust local structures. De-marketisation, although complex, is possible through established mechanisms, such as the ETBs. Therefore, in these unprecedented times, ECEC must have the Irish Government and wider society's full support to re-imagine the vision, with and for children, the workforce, and local communities. On reflection, could this global experience of the global pandemic COVID-19, motivate us to shift our consciousness to an ethical space of social solidarity? A space where we ensure that our actions are for the collective well-being of humans, non-humans, and the planet. Is it possible to reconcile that not everything in life has a monetary value, and other virtues, such as care and solidarity, are needed for our survival? Can Ireland create a new story for all children that includes 'competent' systems of education and care within a society based on interconnections?

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'reclaim anything that may be of use, a story, a song, a tool that was dropped on the ancestral road, something for all our relations, human and more-than-human that can collaborate in shaping a world view of flourishing in the future to come' (Robin Wall Kimmerer's 2020, p 371)

Chapter 4 - Article 2: The Crane Bag

4.1 Prelude - (Be)coming Postqualitative

In Chapter 4, as captured in the statement above, Robin Wall Kimmerer inspired me to reclaim the Crane bag as a story dropped on the ancestral road. Initially, I intended to present the findings from my engagement with the postgraduate students on their engagement with the CPPLP module. Instead, *I* (be)came entangled with the data, which moved from a qualitative methodology to a postqualitative approach (Smyth, 2024). As *I* immersed myself in this story, the data emerged as a teacher with lessons of letting go of human-centric thinking. Also, the story emerges from my own lived experience that entangles through the engagement of writing. In an immanent effort, I engaged with an open-ended process by braiding Irish myth alongside Indigenous knowledge, critical posthuman theories and new materialism. As recommended by Ramos and Roberts (2021), invoking indigenous modes of knowing and being supports the resistance of colonisation, as the multiplicity of ways knowledge can be produced. Markedly within this research project, knowledge emerges. Within the writing process, Journal Article 2 narrates the transformation initiated by embracing the teachings of the Crane bag, a lost Irish mythological artefact. Braiding indigenous belief with posthuman perspectives resulted in the innovation of an ethic-onto-

epistemic (be)coming. Also, braiding multistrands of knowledge brought about an ethic-onto-epistemological (be)coming with water that challenges the artificial binary split between knowing and being, materiality and spirituality (Smyth, 2024). Thereby, the structure of paradigms and methodologies typically applied to research within the ECEC field were disrupted. In turn, this (be)coming instigated multiple paradigm shifts that challenged the concepts of what counts as data. Departing from foundational theories of normative development that prioritise the human child, this Journal Article advocates for a collective, multi-relational orientation with the more-than-human.

4.2 Journal Article 2

Smyth, L. (2024). *The Crane bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous knowledge and post-human concepts in early childhood education and care. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 0(0)*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491241255056>

Abstract

Initially, this article aimed to present findings from an empirical set of data, where postgraduates explored their pedagogical practice within early childhood education and care (ECEC). However, predictable modes of knowing were disrupted while braiding an artefact from Irish mythology known as the Crane bag, together with indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts. In the generation of knowledge, the teachings of the Crane bag transformed the methodological approach to go beyond the fabricated split of matter and spirit. This transformation created the conditions for an onto-epistemological becoming with water. Hence, the intra-action of braiding together multiple theories became part of the empirical data. From the initial set of data, a photograph - Figure 1, capturing children rolling down a hill was submitted by a research participant as an example of their approach to safety. In agreement with the research participant, I re-present the photograph in a different format - Figure 2, to tell the story of how an onto-epistemological becoming created an opening to de-centre the image of the child. This opening changed the approach to the data analysis, which in turn allowed the more-than-human to come to the fore in the spirit of reciprocity.

Keywords: onto-epistemology Irish mythology; Indigenous cosmology; posthuman concepts; early childhood education and care.

The context of this article

In bringing the Crane bag, as an artefact of Irish mythology into dialogue with indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts, the dynamic of spirit and matter emerges as an integral part of the research process. As Snively and Williams (2016) advanced, this article adopts the conceptual model of braiding indigenous science with western science. When braiding indigenous world views with western perspectives, as illustrated by Snively et al. (2016,p.03), each strand of knowledge remains, ‘a separate entity’, which ‘requires a certain tension’, however, ‘all strands come together to form the whole’ in the spirit of reciprocity. At the beginning of curating this article, as with most creative endeavours, it was not fully conceived or even imagined. From the outset the methodological approach aimed to use posthuman methods. Although this proved difficult as there are no clear guidelines on how to carry out postqualitative empirical research (Lather and St. Pierre, 2013; Mannion, 2020). However, as found by Hart and White (2022), when thinking with multiple theories, different assemblages often happen in the middle of things, resulting in the reconsideration of what counts as empirical research. In the middle of writing this article, the teachings of the Crane bag emerged to create an opening for matter and spirit to be immersive. In this immersive experience the boundaries of thought and skin dissolved. Thus, the methodological approach was transformed to go beyond the fabricated split of spirit and matter. The intra-action of braiding together posthuman concepts, indigenous knowledge, and the Crane bag, as a lost artefact, became part of the empirical data. Hence, the original aim for the article changed. Initially, this article aimed to present findings collected from a larger empirical set of data,

where twenty postgraduates explored their current pedagogical practice within ECEC. A photograph - Figure 1, capturing children rolling down a hill was submitted by a research participant as an example of their approach to safety. Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians. Ascent was sought from the children on the day that the photograph was taken. In keeping with the policy of the ECEC setting, the photograph did not identify any child, the setting or location. In agreement with the research participant, I re-present the photograph in a different format - Figure 2, to tell the story of how an onto-epistemology positioning changed the approach to data analysis. An onto-epistemological becoming created an opening to de-centre the image of the child, which in turn allowed the more-than-human (green suits, photograph, grassy slope) to come to the fore in the spirit of reciprocity.

The structure of the article is as follows: firstly, the Indigenous strand of the article is foregrounded to include a brief overview of my personal position, the constraints of Irish mythology, alongside the origins of the Crane bag. An onto-epistemology of water is explored through the work of indigenous thinker Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020, 2003) and Margaret Somerville (2014, 2017), who reflects indigenous perspectives. Next, indigenous cosmology, spiritual essence and activism are discussed. The ensuing section presents the western strand of thinking from a posthuman perspective. Relying on the work of Karen Barad (2007, 2014), key concepts such as an ethico-onto-epistemology positioning, new materiality and agency, are considered. In situating this article within the scholarship of reconceptualising ECEC, I draw on research from Lenz Taguchi (2010), Jane Osgood (2022), Abigail Hackett and Margaret Somerville (2017). This article departs from the fact that within ECEC, posthuman concepts, such as new materialism, have successfully shifted a focus towards the more-than-human. However, this paper foregrounds the need for posthuman concepts to contemplate the human-spirit-relation from a local perspective, not only with nature but also with the research process itself. Indeed, this research responds to the

challenges set out by Vintimilla, Pacini-Ketchabaw & Land (2023;06) to ‘create over and over, living knowledges which can nourish the field allowing new possibilities of provocation for early childhood education and care’. The subsequent section presents three key teachings from the Crane bag as experienced during the intra-action of braiding multiple theories; Teaching 1- An onto-epistemology becoming with the Crane bag; Teaching 2-De-centring a child centred gaze; Teaching 3 - Listening to the spirit of reciprocity.

Personal position in the knowledge-making process.

To be clear, the Irish are not an indigenous people. In a recent blog, Billings (2022) highlights that modern Irish culture is a result of many factors, including historical colonialisation, which was then replaced by self-colonisation. Hence, as Billings suggests, there is no way of knowing what was or is indigenous. Nor is this an attempt to romanticise indigenous thinking or claim indigeneity. However, taking the lead from Watts (2013), this article draws on Irish mythology in a bid to access the pre-colonised mind. Although, knowledge can never be neutral but is always heavily imbued with interpretations that correlate to the position and location of the subject (Haraway, 1988a). While I recognise my own personal position as neither stable nor fixed, my lived experience is entrenched in a particular historical and political context. In the late seventies, due to the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland, along with many others my family was displaced [Author]. These events influence the way in which I approach the knowledge-making process. Moreover, my position as an anglophone poses the risk of distorting other indigenous epistemologies (Watts, 2013; Sundberg, 2014; Todd, 2016). To address this ethical dilemma, I anchored my own subjectivity within a specific geographical location of place, hence drawing on local mythology.

Indigenous strand

Irish Mythology

As with many indigenous knowledge systems, Irish mythology was passed down to generations through an oral tradition of storytelling known as Seanchaí (Ryan, 2006).

Indigenous traditions of storytelling, as postulated by Bruchac and Smith, (2014), convey important insights from animated entities, organic and non-organic. However, from the fourth century onwards, Irish mythology was adopted by early Christianity and produced in written form (Williams, 2016). Due to Christian censorship the authenticity of Irish mythology must be treated with a certain caution. Also, Ireland's history has been shaped by various events, including colonization, poverty, mass famine, loss of language, emigration, alongside the repressive influence of the Catholic Church (Author). Furthermore, as portrayed by Lynch, Grummell and Devine, (2012:05), modern day Ireland is an 'Anglo-American zone of influence for reasons of history, culture, language, colonization and trade'. Undoubtedly, a turbulent history damages the integrity of Irish mythology as a body of authentic knowledge. Nonetheless, through an array of mediums Irish mythology has displayed a certain tenacity to refigure and capture the human imagination. These reconfigurations are embodied in literature, art, film, popular culture and neo spirituality (Williams, 1983; Cluine and Maginess, 2015; Cullen, 2016). Inspired by Irish mythology's tenacity to reconfigure, this research deployed the artefact known as the Crane bag to think with. Additionally, this article is encouraged by Robin Wall Kimmerer's advice, a citizen of the Potawatomi nation, (2020, p. 371), to 'reclaim anything that may be of use, a story, a song, a tool that was dropped on the ancestral road, something for all our relations, human and more-than-human that can

collaborate in shaping a world view of flourishing in the future to come'. Also, re-claiming the myth of the Crane bag stands as an act of decolonising the knowledge-making process within ECEC.

The Crane bag

The Crane bag is an artefact that appears frequently in Irish mythology and archaeological records. One of the first written accounts of the Crane bag is in the thirteenth century. As found by O'Flaherty (1996), from these literary references, the Crane bag appears to be much older, having been in circulation pre-thirteenth century AD. In Irish mythology, Danu is depicted as the goddess of the Earth, associated with land and rivers. Although little information is available, Danu is believed to be the mother of the Tuatha De Danann, a mystical race of gods and goddess who inhabited Ireland before the arrival of the Celts. Within the mythology of ancient Ireland, the origin of the Crane bag took place at a time, as captured by Cluine and Maginess (2015, p.55), when the Tuatha De Danann, the people of the 'goddess Danu, an Earth goddess, inhabited the underground and the very earth itself'. The story of how the Crane bag came into existence begins with Aoife, a direct descent of Danu.

One day while swimming, Aoife, a princess of the Tuatha De Danann, was turned into a bird known as the Crane, by Luchra, a jealous rival who casted a spell. Subsequently, Aoife remained in Crane form for two hundred years. Upon Aoife's death, Manannan Mac Lir, deity of water, made Aoife's skin into a bag. This bag is known in Irish as the 'Corr-bolg,' which translates to English as 'the Crane bag.' Manannan placed his most treasured possessions in the bag. These treasures wielded powers to transform and protect the bearer. The contents and the bag are only visible at high tide. (O'Flaherty, 1996; Mac Neill, 2018).

Although there is much speculation as to the meaning of the Crane bag, archaeological investigation confidently conceives that the artefact reflects an ancient belief system that held a deep spiritual relationship with water (O'Flaherty, 1996; O'Toole and O'Flaherty, 2011).

For example, Aoife was turned into a Crane while swimming. Cranes are water birds whose breeding grounds are wetlands. In Irish mythology, Manannan Mac Lir is a deity of water. The Crane bag and its contents only become visible at high tide. According to archaeological evidence water held a strong place in the social imagination of premodern times (Williams, 2016). In Ireland, this coincides with archaeological findings of hoards (collection of objects) in bags placed beside water. As highlighted by O'Flaherty in pre-Christian Ireland, many hoards have been regarded as ritual offerings to deities or spirits validating the possibility that the bag had ritual purposes. Although Shiva (2013), stresses that indigenous thinking is far from homogenous, nonetheless, water is commonly revered within most ancient beliefs as a source of knowledge with generative properties.

Onto-epistemology of water

Indigenous world views bring attention to different knowledge systems deeply intertwined with nature's spiritual and materiality, particularly water. Collaborating with indigenous knowledge, Shiva and Somerville are among the many scholars around the world who are developing onto-epistemologies of water. In the 21st century, Shiva (2013, 2016) highlights that water as a resource is being depleted and is one of the most urgent resource crises of our time. Indigenous thinker Kimmerer (2020) emphasises that water, land, and humans are kin within an emerging processual relationship that can be accessed through ritual and ceremony, but most of all through listening. Additionally, indigenous knowledge from an aboriginal perspective, as reflected by Somerville (2014, 2017), is not only fundamental to addressing the escalating planetary crisis but also signposts ways to restore our relational being with water. Likewise, Kimmerer points out that in the era of climate change, ecological restoration is inseparable from the need to restore the human spiritual relationship with the earth. In the embrace of indigenous systems of knowing, Somerville (2014, p. 410) remarks that the western knowledge holder needs to change from the privileged location of knowing to a

position of ‘uncertainty and unknowing’. Furthermore, Somerville (2014, p. 410) argues that displaying positions of uncertainty and unknowing are ‘the necessary conditions for transformational change in how we know, practice, and do water in our everyday worlds’. Water onto-epistemologies, as highlighted by Crinall and Somerville (2020, p.1317), have always been in existence where ‘becoming with water disrupts linear, predictable modes of knowing and being’. When knowing like water has no centre, only movement with flow, there is a continual alteration from the position of knowing to unknowing, thereby allowing knowledge to emerge rather than be acquired (Crinall et al, 2020; Somerville, 2014; and Shiva, 2016). Hence, becoming with water opens the possibilities of multiple worlds with diverse ways of being, allowing interactions beyond one fixed reality, where hierarchies of knowledge are managed by humans only.

Indigenous cosmology, spiritual essence, and activism

Although indigenous knowledge systems vary, a shared concept of a webbed life force with the Earth can be found, commonly called animism. Animism is the belief that all things, water rocks, plants, animals, and inanimate objects possess an essence of spirit. However, animism emerged within anthropology as a concept that promoted the colonisation of indigenous lands worldwide. The word animism, which is Latin in origin, was first used by anthropologist Tylor. Animism was depicted by Tylor (1871, p. 382), as a belief system of ‘savages and lower races’ that fueled an argument of evolutionary hierarchy between human beings. The political concept of animism became a defined attribution of primitive thinking, which in turn justified the ‘civilised mind’ to carry out atrocities towards indigenous lands and people worldwide (Rose, 2013). Consequently, it is important to recognize that animism was part of a broader colonial project that pursued imperialism and domination. Throughout history indigenous communities and knowledge systems have endured colonisation, forced

assimilation, displacement, genocide, and erasure of beliefs and traditions (Chunhabunyatip, Sasaki, Grünbühel, 2018; Todd, 2016; Watts, 2013). For example, Moggridge (2023) highlights that the aboriginal people of Australia were not legally recognised as human beings by settled colonists until 1960. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge the historical role that the concept of animism played in suppressing other ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge espouses spiritual wisdom embedded within systems of communication that guide the human towards a reciprocal relationship with the more-than-human (Battiste, 2019; Snively et al, 2016; Todd, 2016; Watts, 2013). Accordingly, positioning human beings as having an ethical responsibility to live in harmony with the natural world. Planetically, indigenous communities continually bring attention to the devastation of human activity on the Earth (Chiblow and Meighan, 2022). Amidst, the historical and ongoing agenda to impose systems of racism and capitalism, Todd emphasises the fact that indigenous communities continue to draw on their spiritual beliefs to bring about change and assert their political rights. For example, in 2008, constitutionally, Ecuador acknowledged the rights of nature. This alternative constitutional development, as documented by Kauffman and Sheehan (2019), was shaped by the Ecuadorian indigenous movement against neoliberal economics. The Ecuadorian constitution now portrays nature's inherent right to all the Earth's ecosystems. Within the constitution, nature is referred to as Pachamama, a sacred deity from the indigenous tribes of the Andes, translated into English as 'Mother Earth.' Notably, in 2017, after a long campaign the Whanganui iwi, a local Māori tribe in New Zealand, succeeded in changing legislation when the Whanganui River was granted legal personhood and the status of a living entity (Hutchison, 2014; Kauffman and Sheehan, 2019). Indigenous communities have developed knowledge through generations of direct interaction with the natural environment, encompassing diverse fields such as medicine, ecology, agriculture, and governance (Battiste, 2013). Yet, these traditional systems of knowledge-making are

continually demised in favour of a western model of knowing (Castleden, Hart, Console, Harper, Martin 2017). Even though indigenous philosophies of thought and modes of activities offer valuable insights into practices that embed holistic approaches to living in harmony with the Earth.

Western strand: Posthuman perspectives

Posthuman concepts of ethico-onto-epistemology

The posthuman perspective, as extensively illustrated by Braidotti, (2006, 2013, 2019), recognises the current dilemma of the human condition as living in the Fourth Industrial Revolution of advanced technology, while simultaneously dying in the current event of the Sixth Mass Extinction due to the geological force of human activity. This current dilemma is underpinned by a belief system that places the human subject in a position of exceptionality, which in turn has dislocated human connections with other planetary entities (Haraway, 1988a; Barad, 2007). In going beyond the dislocation of the human subject, Barad questions the longstanding separation of epistemology and ontology as binary positions. According to Barad the division of epistemology and ontology in this manner has imposed an artificial split on how we are 'in,' 'being' and 'becoming' of the world. This artificial split reflects the logic of Cartesian dualism that unethically insinuates an inherent separateness between 'human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse' (Barad, 2007: 185). To overcome these imaginary positions of separateness in an ethical manner, Barad (2007: 185), proposes 'ethico-onto-epistemology' as a paradigm where 'practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated'. Hand in hand with the posthuman agenda of broadening the notion of ethico-onto-epistemology is the concept of new materialism. Alongside thinking about political discourses and culture, new materialism recognises the agency of matter as an integrated part of being in the world. New materialism, as expressed

by Barad (2003:801), is where all ‘matter comes to matter’. Furthermore, Barad (2007, p.141) uses the term ‘intra-action’ to express that agency is not only exercised by humans but is a ‘dynamism of forces’, which is also exerted by the more-than-human. Although Rosiek, Snyder, and Pratt (2020), argue that there is nothing new in the concept of new materialism, in fact, agency beyond the human condition is integral to many indigenous philosophies where all things in the world possess a spiritual essence to transform and co-shape the world. Thus, onto-epistemologies are at the core of indigenous perspectives. Indigenous thinkers such as Kimmerer would question the way in which western knowledge continually produces an artificial split between spirit and matter. Moreover, Shipley and Williams, (2019), highlight that most social science researchers distance themselves from the metaphysical as it is not empirical, measurable, rationale or indeed objective.

Reconceptualising ECEC: New materialism

In ECEC, as part of the reconceptualisation movement that challenges normative child development, posthuman scholarship flourishes. According to Malone (2015), the application of posthuman concepts, such as new materialism, has been successful in dismantling the romanticised notion that children’s pure relationship with nature will rectify the decimation of the Earth. Inspired by new materialism, many scholars within the field of ECEC are opening spaces for understanding the ways in which children learn through the materiality of their bodies while interacting with the more-than-human world (Merewether, 2023; Osgood, 2022; Osgood and Andersen, 2019; Taguchi, 2010). For example, Lenz Taguchi puts forward intra-active pedagogy as a strategy to consider the entangled relations of children with other beings, where the more-than-human also has agency in the interaction. While Merewether, questions western concepts of knowing that position land and water as non-living entities. Furthermore, Merewether challenges colonial notions of animism by developing the concept

of enchanted animism, which suggests that children's speculative play relates to the world in the spirit of kinship and care. Taking a step further Osgood (2022), asks us to consider a world with a deep sense of ethical responsibility for multispecies flourishing, where lichen, a plant, is taken seriously as a teacher of how humans and more-than-humans can collaborate in a story of earthly survival. In addition, Hackett and Somerville (2017), locate posthuman literacies of young children in the actions of moving with the more-than-human world. Hackett et al, foreground material realities in an exploration of children's literacies that relies on Barad's (2007, 2014), description of being in the world where vibrational movement captures agency as a *dynamism of forces* between the human and more-than-human. This exploration of children's communication together with the more-than-human is exemplified through bodies moving in motions of banging, marching, and playing with mud (Hackett et al 2017). Also, Hackett and Somerville base these observations on points made by Taguchi (2010: 48) 'that the skin is not the border of our bodies but a territory or region of interference, a "diffraction" of communicative "waves" between matters'. Assembling on the previous research of posthuman literacies, Hackett and Rautio (2019), put forward running and rolling with a grassy slope as multimodal forms of meaning making between the human and the more-than-human. Thus, the human-centric perception of the children's actions of running and rolling is disrupted as an intentional response to the environment only. Moreover, the agency of the grassy slope emerges through the action of the children, as the more-than-human participates in these moments of multimodal communication (Hackett and Rautio (2019). These pedagogical shifts offer new possibilities for early childhood educators to frame inclusive meaning making with other entities where the materiality of body and mind entangle with the agency of the more-than-human. However, Watts (2013: 30), criticises posthuman theories for neglecting the spiritual essences of the more-than-human, which in turn has led to a 'subjugated agency'. Thus, the concept of agency for the more-

than-human is diluted and in fact is in danger of recreating a system of suppression. In this epoch of rapid climate change, Kimmerer (2020, 2003), reminds us of the fact that we are not in control of nature, however, we are in control of our relationship to the Earth. Thus, as stressed by Kimmerer (cited in Aronson, Holl, Falk, 2011, p.257) the human obligations to the more-than-human world, are 'simultaneously material and spiritual, and, in fact, the two are inseparable'.

Re-claiming the teachings of the Crane bag

Teaching 1 - an onto-epistemology becoming with the Crane bag

Returning to the story of the Crane bag. Aoife, transmuted across space and time, continually renegotiating the boundaries of form, firstly from a human body to a Crane bird, then from a bird to a bag. Human-more-than-human-organic-nonorganic-dead-matter-spirit. Somerville (2014, p.407) highlights that 'it is through skin, the permeable membrane between inside and out, that humans-more-than-humans participate in the flesh of the world'. Also, skin, as Taguchi points out, is not a fixed boundary of our bodies but a location between matter. In the intra-action of braiding indigenous knowledge with posthuman concepts the writing/thinking became more than a fleshy endeavour only. Upon Aoife's death as a bird her skin was made into a bag filled with objects that have the power to transform the bearer. The contents and the bag are only visible at high tide. The element of water is a metaphysical site that supports going beyond the limitations of physical bodies to include spiritual spheres of practice and thought (Somerville, 2014, 2017). As the data ebbed and flowed, the Crane bag reorientated the research to de-centre from the human-physical form of knowing. Thus, the methodological approach transformed from a representational mode to a cyclic process of doing-being-knowing-unknowing. Through the writing process, I moved beyond the boundaries of skin and thought to become immersed in water with/as the Crane bag.

Transmuting across space and time not bound by skin, Aoife transformed, as did I, to experience the pluralistic aspect of spirit in the knowledge-making process. In this immersive intra-action, a pluralistic position unfolded, which resonates with points made by Barad, (2007, p. 185), that the ‘practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated’. Furthermore, an onto-epistemological framing, as advocated by St. Pierre (2020), does not begin with the human subject, therefore, detaches any claim in advance to know the methods or modes of analysis. Surrendering from the position of knowing to unknowing, from certainty to uncertainty, the data ebbed and flowed to allow knowledge to emerge. Initially, this article aimed to present findings collected from an empirical set of data, where twenty postgraduates explored their pedagogical practice within ECEC. During the data collection phase for the original proposal, a photograph - Figure 1, capturing children rolling down a hill was submitted by a participant as an example of their approach to safety. Ascent was sought from the children on the day that the photograph was taken. Dialogue between indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts helped articulate the idea of the Crane bag as a tool for creating a foundational shift towards an onto-epistemological becoming with water. This changed the approach to analysing the data. In agreement with the research participant, I re-present the photograph in a different format – figure 2, to tell the story of how the approach to data analysis changed. An onto-epistemological position created an opening to de-centre the image of the child. De-centring a child centred gaze in turn allowed the more-than-human, in this instance green suits, a photograph, a grassy slope, to come to the fore in the spirit of reciprocity. De-centring the image of the child within the analysis was a crucial move to listening to the more-than-human. Applying posthuman concepts solely within the analysis ran the risk of recapitulating the colonised discourses of animism alongside reducing the notion of materiality to just the physical and biological. However, within the folds of this article, indigenous knowledge has allowed the Crane bag to

come forward as a tool that supported an onto-epistemological becoming, while recognising the spiritual relationship between humans and the more-than-human. The next section presents the processual ways that the more-than-human emerged within the data.

Teaching 2 – De-centring a child centred gaze



Figure 1. De-centring a child centred gaze. Original image courtesy of participant.

In an exploration of pedagogical practice with postgraduates within ECEC, a photograph – Figure 1, was submitted by a research participant with the following explanation.

For safety, I usually asked the children to spread out, so they could roll down the hill without bumping into each other. On this occasion, I didn't say anything about safety. And off they went rolling down the hill. (participant)

As the researcher, I began to analyse the data. On the initial viewing of the photograph, I centred the timeless childhood experience of rolling down a grassy slope. It was/ is difficult to go beyond the revered practice of centring the child, which is grounded in a human-centric perspective. Within pedagogical practice centring the child as the main figure in the early educational experience is a prevailing approach in Western-based teacher training (Langford, 2010; Land *et al.*, 2022). Thus, the more-than-human elements of the photograph such as the grassy slope, the distance sea, all appeared less significant to that of the children's experience. I considered questions raised by Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015), regarding theories of normative development, which tend to idealise the child in nature, thereby, maintaining nature-culture binaries. From a child-centred perspective, many programmes in ECEC promote the outdoors as a perfect medium for children to take risks and develop holistically. However, Nxumalo and Cedillo, (2017), highlight that the idealisation of the child's experience in nature disregards the context of neo-colonial relations, social injustice and ecologically damaged places. Despite these considerations, as I viewed the photograph the children continued to be the first point that drew my human eye, alongside the brightness of the green suits. The children rolled down the grassy slope to the backdrop of the ocean, their green weatherproof suits protecting them from the elements. These weatherproof suits that simultaneously protect and hinder the children in their interactions with the grassy slope. This reflection aligned with observations made by Osgood (2022, p.07) of a group of children playing in an outdoor park in London where 'small bodies and what they can do are reconfigured by the clothing that is designed to enable greater freedom but somehow imposes restrictions.' Albeit not all children are protected from the harshest of the elements, nor do all children get to experience nature in a benevolent manner. The sea beckons as water calls me

to listen. I think of the children who are not centred in the photograph. The children who risk their lives crossing the sea in a bid to escape war as they experience the harshness of both nature and humankind. According to the UNCHR database (Refugees, 2023) at the end of 2022, of the 108.4 million forcibly displaced people, an estimated 43.3 million (40 per cent) are children below 18 years of age. I present this one stark statistic as a heavy reminder that our relationships are not only broken with the Earth but with ourselves as humans, where some children are disproportionately bearing the burden.

Teaching 3 Listening to the spirit of reciprocity



Figure 2. Listening to the spirit of reciprocity. Original image courtesy of participant.

As the data ebbed and flowed, the Crane bag reorientated me as the researcher to de-centre from the human-physical form of knowing. This reorientation brought forth an onto-

epistemological becoming with water, where knowledge has no centre only movement and flow. In turn this created an openness within the research process that allowed the photograph to come to the fore as a teacher. In agreement with the participant, I as the researcher re-present the photograph - Figure 1, to tell the story of how becoming with water in the form of the Crane bag changed the approach to data analysis- Figure 2.

In the preparation of this photograph for publication, I applied the prescribed criteria of grayscale 600 dpi resolution to the image. In Figure 2, the application of grayscale resolution removed the colour from the image, which in turn removed from the mind's eye, the restriction of binary dualism between the human and the more-than-human. In this moment the children became forms rather than discursive bodies; forms refer to the dimensional shapes observable in the photograph. The grayscale of all entities in the image melted into one. For me, the grayscale resolution, allowed the images of the children as entities to move, as advocated by Haraway (1998) from the humanistic paradigm 'I am in nature' to the posthuman paradigm 'I am of nature'. In this moment the grass was no longer rendered inferior to the human experience. In keeping with Barad's notion (2007: 152) that 'matter and meaning are mutually articulated', the grassy slope and the children became joint in their materiality, guiding each other in the physical fleshy realm. Aligning with the research by Hackett and Rautio (2019), which points to the relation between the grassy slope and the motion of the rolling human body, where the environment invites the child to run or roll. The human and the more-than-human responds to each other in a multimode of communication. Additionally, Hackett et al (2019) argue that the child might intend to roll down the grassy slope, yet it is not her rolling body alone, but the difference between human and the more-than-human that sets the body in motion. The physical action of rolling and running by the children in response to the environment demonstrates the animated capacity and agency of the grassy slope (Hackett et al, 2019). Yet, an indigenous worldview recognises the

interconnectedness of all beings and entities within a reciprocal relationship that extends to both the material and the spiritual. There is no divide. Although, positioning the human from *I am in nature* to *I am of nature* removed the binary divide of nature/human, there was/is a continued risk of creating a hierarchical frame that subjugates the agency of the more-than-human. Thinking from an indigenous perspective, Kimmerer (2020, 2003), emphasizes how plants and other beings communicate and respond to human presence and actions. For example, grasses, as highlighted by Kimmerer (2020), carry their growing points beneath the soil surface, so when their leaves are lost, they can quickly recover but this recovery is dependent on disturbance to stimulate growth. In this moment, I return to the Crane bag, to encompass both the spiritual and the material with no divide. Aoife, a descent of Danu, an Earth goddess, continually renegotiating the boundaries of her body, shifting from human form to more-than-human form, as a bird and then a Crane bag, where matter is not only active but vital with spirit. Hence, through the prism of the Crane bag the children are not restricted to bodies fixed by skin or thought only. Nor is the grassy slope constrained to a form of subjugated agency. The grassy slope is not silent or mute, the grassy slope is communicating, the children are rolling on the earth, close to the ground – listening. The children listen as the grass speaks. Indeed, as expressed by Kimmerer, plants are viewed as guides which help humans to explore their higher consciousness of interconnection with the Earth. Thus, the children's bodies become actions, which are spiritually bound to the land's intentionality accessed through the ritual of rolling. To this end, the intertwining of the children and the grassy slope becomes more *than matter that is mutually articulated*. The ritual of rolling connects the human spirit with the spirit of the land in a moment of restoration that is embedded in a reciprocal relationship of give and take.

In gratitude

Through the ritual of braiding multiple theories, the teachings of the Crane bag became an invitation to experience knowledge-making within the discipline of ECEC as a spiritual force. Within the process of writing there was a connection to the spirit of a shared world. Thereby, this article serves as one example, not a blueprint, amongst many, of how spirit might manifest within the research process itself. Indigenous world views bring attention to different knowledge systems that are deeply intertwined with the spiritual and materiality of nature, particularly water and land. Guided by the teachings of the Crane bag, as a lost local knowledge, there was a becoming with water, where knowledge has no centre only movement and flow. This becoming with Crane bag, afforded a onto-epistemology framing, which overcame the artificial split on how we are 'in,' 'being' and 'becoming' of the world. In the convergence of post human concepts with an indigenous worldview the privileged position of certainty was disrupted. Thus, the research process was transformed from predictable ways of knowing to unanticipated modes of meaning-making that emerged in the intra-action of doing.

This disruption brought forth several paradigm shifts for me as the researcher that included decentring from a child centred gaze to a posthuman location, where matter between the human and the more-than-human is mutually articulated. A further paradigm shift occurred that recognised the interconnectedness of all entities within a reciprocal relationship that extends simultaneously to the material and the spiritual. Indeed, in re-focusing the reciprocal relationship between water, land, and the human as both material and spiritual, this article responds to the challenges set by Vintimilla et al (2023), to create living knowledges which can provoke new opportunities in ECEC.

Re-claiming the myth of the Crane bag stands as an ethical and political act of dismantling colonised methods of knowledge making within ECEC. Furthermore, this article

urges posthuman perspectives to recognise that colonial discursive practices still vibrate in many guises, such as the fabricated split between spirit and matter and the concept of animism. The Crane bag guided this story to respond in some ways to indigenous thinker Robin Wall Kimmerer's question (2020, p.31) 'how in our modern world can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again?'

In gratitude for the teachings of the Crane bag, I offer this article as a story of collaboration between human and the more-than-human in shaping a world view of listening within a sacred relationship of matter and spirit.

4.3 Return of the Crane – 300 years later

Overall, this thesis proposes that the field of ECEC becomes open to multi-relational lines of relationality that consider the discursive, spiritual, and material entanglements between humans and the more-than-human. Living through a time that bears witness to unrelenting inequalities, it is easy to be overwhelmed by despair. Although this thesis challenges different forms of violence committed by humans against each other and the more-than-human world, I also endeavour to create a space of hope that generates affirmative ethical solutions.

So, I re-turn to the Crane-bag. Orbiting the Irish myth of the Crane-bag is the temporal theme of violence against Aoife, a princess of the Tuatha De Danann, the people of the Earth goddess, Danu. Jealousy drove Luchra to commit acts of violence towards Aoife, casting the spell that transforms Aoife into a Crane bird for two hundred years. When Aoife dies, Manannán, the deity of water, makes a bag from her skin. Within the Irish cycle of mythology, the Crane-bag disappears and reappears. Manannán, removed the bag from circulation, hiding it until it returns to the world of mortals. While in the ritual of writing-with, the bag returned in the form of teachings that became an invitation to create knowledge as an embodied spiritual experience, relational to a shared world. In Ireland, references to crane birds in mythology, excavations of crane bird bones, and other artefacts from

premodern times indicate a significant spiritual connection between humans and the crane bird (O'Toole and O'Flaherty, 2011; O'Toole, 2014). Until the 1700s, the Eurasian Crane was part of the Irish avifauna, but it appeared to have become extinct. Factors contributing to the Crane's extinction included the draining of bogs (peatlands), the bird's preferred habitat and breeding ground (O'Toole 2014). After three hundred years of absence, in 2021, Ireland celebrated the return of two breeding Cranes in the bog (Copland et al., 2022). The return of these Crane birds is welcomed as a positive sign of the rehabilitation of the bog, an indication of more species flourishing (Gylmn, 2021).

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

Chapter 5 - Article 3: Black Refusal

5.1 Prelude

Chapter 5: Black Refusal and Black Futurity is central to Journal Article 3. Firstly, I will put forward a prelude that outlines my positionality in the context of the article, which defies the binary boundaries of the professional and personal. As captured in the statement above, this chapter demonstrates how different modes of Black refusal create opportunity for Black futurity. Ultimately, this Journal Article highlights the inseparability of culture and nature, where the human body is always enmeshed with the more-than-human. I also include two poems. The use of poetry within this thesis allows for certain freedom that academic writing does not permit so readily.

Various entanglements have significantly influenced my interest in belonging as a political practice within the discipline of ECEC. As a Mixed-Race family living in Ireland, we frequently experienced instances of racism that were primarily directed toward our physical appearances as a family. This reality reflects how specific physical attributes, such as skin (Black and White together), are often perceived as markers of non-belonging.

Another entanglement pertains to my initial experience commencing my career in an early educational setting in 2005. This was not the beginning of ECEC in Ireland, but it laid

the foundation for the more extensive full-day care services that exist today. I organised a breakfast club and after-school provision. On my first day, I met a 5-year-old boy from Nigeria who attended the local primary school. The child and his family had lived in Direct Provision for several years. Overcoming the challenges of Direct Provision, the family successfully integrated into the local community. I had just returned from working in Mozambique, Africa. During my time there, I learnt some traditional languages. On my first day, as I organised the after-school provision, I aimed to impress the children, so I spoke Swahili to the child from Nigeria. The child stared at me blankly. To salvage my attempt at impressing him, I asked, 'What is your traditional language?' He looked at me with a bemused expression and said, 'Irish, of course! [referring to Gaeilge].' This interaction provided a moment of personal insight into my biases. My assumptions dictated the child's identity and sense of belonging based on nationality and skin colour, shaped by my perspective on who belongs within a local Irish community. A few months later, the government deported the child and his family. The community as a whole was devastated. In response to the family's deportation, the community organised several political actions (McArdle, 2005). One action involved the school and the ECEC setting coming together to form a choir. Through song, the choir petitioned the Irish state to return the boy and his family to the community where they belonged and were loved. However, the Irish state's decision to deport the family was not overturned.

Another entanglement from my engagement in the research process is writing. Richardson advocates for us to transcend mere mapping and perceive writing as a means of 'knowing'. As St. Pierre (2020) stresses, writing styles are neither fixed nor neutral, instead, they represent a socio-historical construction. Additionally, Bozalek and Fullagar (2021) propose that writing should challenge established interpretations and cultivate the capacity for subversive thought and alternative modes of thinking. Consequently, writing has allowed

me to transform and develop my thinking. My love for writing returned amid a collision of worlds, where I could transition from academic writer to creator of myth and poetry. Poetry comes in a different mode that is not haunted by trying to paraphrase, cite correctly, or be right (Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick, 2015). Although poetry remains at the margins of academic writing, Fitzpatrick (2012, p. 08) points out that ‘poetry can provide a rich, evocative, and aesthetic means of communication’. Poetry flows. The first poem that I wrote communicates my experience of taking my two-year-old child, who was suspected of having meningitis, to the hospital. While being admitted, the nurse asked questions that I perceived as an instance of microaggression. After my child received the necessary medical care, I felt profound guilt for not protecting my child from these racially motivated inquiries. The first poem was written many years ago - *The Cure for Silence* expresses my feelings regarding the conversation with the nurse in the instant described above. The second poem, which is recent, *The Bog Bodies*, describes my move from drowning in anti-Blackness to seeing Black refusal. It is by listening to Black refusal that more possibilities open up for Black futurity to emerge. In so many ways, the expression in the poem *The Bog Bodies* speaks back to the first poem, *The Cure for Silence*.

5.1.1 Poem - The Cure for Silence

I am a mother
Instinct to protect
But I say nothing
Hot seated, questions-fired
Insistent, Persistent, Unyielding, Relentless
But I say nothing

Insistent: - Where is he from?

Persistent: - Where was he born?

Unyielding: - Where is he really from?

Relentless: - but where is his Dad from?

But why are you asking?

Because he is not the colour of you and me?

My son is burning,

My soul is wounding

But I say nothing

Alchemy for silence

Invoke the Brehon Laws¹⁵

Of heroes and hospitality

Now I can sit at your table

Without questions

And I can say everything

¹⁵ the ancient Irish Brehon laws, also known as Early Irish law or Féineachas

5.2 Article 3

Smyth L (2025) Fences, Bogs, and Bodies: Diffracting Belonging Alongside Black Futurity in Early Childhood Education and Care. *International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal* 12(1). 1. <https://journals.sfu.ca/iccps/index.php/childhoods/article/view/321>

Abstract

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

Keywords: Belonging, Black Futurity, diffraction,

Introduction

Set in the geopolitical space of Ireland, this article disrupts the concept of belonging by calling into question both human exceptionalism and White supremacy. In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), belonging as a concept is often researched within the context of human relationships to include communities, cultural affiliations, and social positions alongside affinity to place (Antonsich, 2010; May and Muir, 2015; Kyrönlampi, Uitto and Puroila, 2021). However, this article responds to an invitation to (re)story belonging ‘as an ethical, political, ontological and epistemological concern that centers the inter-dependencies and interconnectedness of human and more-than-human thriving’ (Nxumalo and Nayak, 2024, p. 591). This article draws inspiration from Haraway (2016) and Osgood (2022, p. 1) curations of stories as ‘a method of earthly and multispecies survival’ in the Anthropocene epoch, where human activity devastates the planet's ecosystem.

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

agential cuts. Finally, as an invitation to the field of ECEC, I sum up this curation of (re)storying belonging with actionable provocations.

The ‘glow’ of data – not the beginning

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

moulded into coded categories. MacLure (2013, p. 228) eloquently describes this entangled intra-action with the data as a radiation of ‘wonder.’ However, this wonder is not always pleasant, comfortable, or awesome. I can affirm that the entangled intra-action with the data did, as MacLure (2013, p. 229) promised, bring ‘the privilege of a headache’. A headache ensued as the data refused the comforts of typical qualitative academic structures, i.e. theoretical framing, methodology, and thematic analysis. So, this research story does not have the usual beginning. Instead, this story starts with an introduction that recounts the affective nature of the data as it applied agency to the process. Thus, in this (re)storying of belonging, humans are not central or separated but rather come together, as depicted by Cozza & Gherardi (2023, p. 62), ‘in a relational process with more-than-humans, discourses, knowledge and the Earth’.

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

The following section stories the intra-action of the ‘not-yet’ data from the two separate events. Considering the research process as a relational space where all the elements intra-act, Gherardi and Benozzo (2021) put forward the notion of the ‘not-yet’ data. Paying attention to the ‘not-yet’ data changed the dynamic within this research process of gathering and producing data to become a story of ‘diverse ways in which data can come together, interact and intra-act’ (Gherardi and Benozzo, 2021, p. 298). Notably, this project did not begin with a research question that related to the concept of belonging. The research began in 2021, with sixteen postgraduates exploring their current pedagogical practice within ECEC. To capture changes in practice, postgraduates reflected on observations previously submitted in 2018 as part of the requirement for an MA programme in Early Childhood Studies (ECS). Please find Table 1 below, which is an attempt to create a visual format of the data as it emerged. Story 1 – A Fence: an observational text by an educator that captured children’s

world-making from behind a fence. This was followed by the educator's conversation with me as a researcher in 2020, expressing her views towards observing the children's interactions with the workmen(persons). Simultaneously, Story 2 – A Bog-moment of Black futurity emerged as I pondered the recently collected data. The concept of belonging was on my mind as I walked with my child in the peatland, commonly called the Bog.


<p>Story 1: A fence</p>	<p>Story 2: A Bog-moment of Black Futurity</p>
<p>Observation submitted as a requirement for MA in 2018. <i>Three children (all children are white presenting and aged 3 years old approx.), attending preschool were outside, standing beside the fence, watching men working. The men (who are white presenting) were carrying out maintenance on drains near the preschool. The children were watching; the men ignored the children. Their truck was parked on the path. As the truck drove away, the children started to shout from behind the fence, 'Go back to Chinese, go back to Chinese.'</i> (postgraduate student/educator, 2018)</p> <p>Educators' Conversation with Researcher (2021) <i>First, I thought they had picked this racist chant up somewhere; they were copying it from somewhere and possibly they had...however, I started thinking about power. I do not think that the children necessarily understood the meaning of the chant, but clearly, they engaged with the power involved; they were using this power towards the truck and the men. I was thinking about the fence; the children were behind the fence; the fence had separated the children from the workmen...</i></p> <p>Figure 1: Observation and conversation with the educator</p>	<p>Photograph while walking in the Bog- 2021</p>  <p>Figure 2: Photograph while walking in the Bog</p>

Table 1 Data 'glow'

Story 1 - A Fence

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

Although in this case, the educator has the tools to analyse how the children used the power of belonging as a discourse, the educator was also thinking about the fence.

Story 2 - A Bog-moment of Black Futurity

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

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

The fence was as troubling to me as it was to the educator. While walking in the Bog with my son, I was thinking about the fence. I was thinking about how the children used dominant discourses of who has the inherited right to belong and who does not. Living in Ireland as a Mixed-Race family, my children's early childhood experiences of racism relate mostly to

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

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

In tracing the not-yet data, I turned to the work of Karen Barad. Diffraction is put forward by Barad (2007, 2014) as an optical metaphor for research practice. Diffraction is a physics phenomenon that occurs, for example, when waves of light or water encounter a barrier or an opening. For example, diffraction happens when the spikes of light appear from the brightest star or patterns made by waves as they spread out in ripples, each ripple creating interference with the other (Barad, 2014b; Arndt and Bartholomaeus, 2023). Thus, for Barad, diffraction is not an attempt to represent or map the concept's appearance, in this case, belonging, but to consider the connections in a multi-layered, temporal interfering way. Barad (2014, p. 30) states that 'diffraction involves reading insights through one another in a way that helps illuminate differences as they emerge.' Diffraction as a methodology provided a solid

platform that allowed me to trace the relational entanglement of the data as it intra-acts between two seemingly unrelated research stories of children's world-making. Diffracting data as it emerges from these two stories affords attentiveness to the interference of matter in the intra-actions of how belonging is bordered and how belonging is relational. Dolphijn & Tuin (2013, p. 50) relate diffraction as a mode of inquiry that does 'not settle on one approach or discipline but rather a detailed attentive and careful reading as the ideas of one approach move through another leading to more generative inventive provocations'. In generating inventive ways to refigure the multifaceted nature of belonging, guided by the emerging data, I knit together feminist new materialism and Black feminist theories, including Black refusal and Black futurity. In bringing these perspectives together in conversation, I hope to generate inventive provocations that support the field of ECEC to consider the multifaceted nature of belonging within their geopolitical context.

Becoming data – a relational affect

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

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

Situating Black futurity and new materialism

In becoming with the data, I continued to engage with a feminist relational approach, which allowed me to evoke multiple theoretical frameworks such as Black futurity and new materialism. Koggel, Harbin and Llewellyn (2022, p. 7) assert that a key feature of feminist relational theory is that it 'borrows and makes use of relational insights from a range of frameworks and approaches'. Although Black feminist theories and new materialism concepts are often deemed incompatible, I draw on these perspectives to knit together a theoretical network that helps generate a response to the data. No doubt these incompatibilities are paved with polarised tensions. Flatschart (2017) highlights that Black feminism often restricts the categories of analysis to identity and power that are exclusive to the human experience. According to Flatschart, this restriction opposes the central project of new materialism, which is to topple the naturalised category of humans. The naturalised category of human is problematised by Haraway (1988, p. 581) as the 'god trick', which places the white, western, elite, able-bodied hetero male (HUMANS) at the centre of all meaning. Nevertheless, Jackson (2013) points out that people of colour have always been

excluded outside the order of Man. Disrupting anti-Blackness and challenging a White gaze, Campt (2017) explores methodologies of Black refusal by actively engaging lost archival photographs of Black subjects. Campt develops a haptic framework that goes beyond just seeing but includes other senses, like feeling and hearing. Numerous research projects are spearheaded by Campt (2019, 2021) that bring a praxis of Black refusal to the fore, a refusal to be defined by a system that places Black life in terms of erasure.

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

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

Reconceptualisation of ECEC

In the field of ECEC, the reconceptualisation movement places relational entanglements as central to disrupting colonisation, anti-Blackness, and anthropogenic climate change.

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

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

Building on this scholarship and concerns, I diffract the materiality of the discursive notions of belonging alongside Black futurity within the geopolitical space of Ireland. Relationality is the thread that knits together this network of theoretical perspectives and ethical considerations. From a relational perspective, Boden and Joelsson urge researchers to pay attention to the networks from which stories emerge. My renewed awe of the Bog has led to an ethical consideration of the political context of borders, bodies and belonging.

The political context of borders, bodies, and Bogs

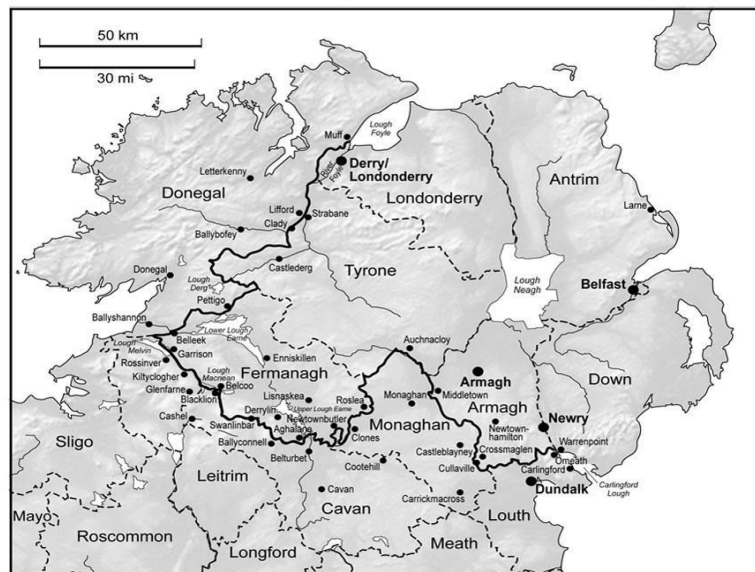


Figure 1. A map of the Irish border that divides Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (source: Gramhan & Nash, 2008)

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

The politics of belonging

For centuries, the two islands, Ireland and Britain, have disputed territory control over Ireland. In the 17th century, all of Ireland was brought under the control of Britain (Hayward, Leary and Komarova, 2021). The historical accounts point to extreme racialisation by the English through the process of colonisation (Munck, 1992). In 1921, following a campaign by Irish Nationalists for an independent state, the Island of Ireland was divided into two jurisdictions. Twenty-six out of thirty-two counties gained independence, and these counties became known as the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Six counties remained under British rule and became known as Northern Ireland (NI) – (See Figure 3). Protestant Unionists held the majority vote in NI, while ROI established an independent state. In NI, Unionists controlled state institutions aligned with Britain, while Catholics were viewed as Nationalists, seeking independence with the ROI (Aveyard, 2023). The conflictual divide between Catholics and Protestants was/is, as Ruane (2021) describes, set in theological beliefs encompassing land, economics, culture, and the politics of belonging. From 1968 until 1998, a violent sectarian conflict raged in Northern Ireland between Unionists and Nationalists, commonly known as ‘*the Troubles*’ (Mitchell, 2023). The British army was deployed to police Northern Ireland, which also involved erecting security installations (McVeigh, 2015). During this time, fences, checkpoints, and military structures were erected along the border of NI and the ROI. During the time of the Troubles, paramilitary attacks by both Unionist and Nationalist military groups killed and injured thousands (Coulter & Duffy, 2023). In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), a multi-party peace accord, marked a significant turning point in the conflict (Doyle, 2018). Despite the peace process, sporadic violence and political tensions persist, highlighting the ongoing challenges of reconciliation and the fragile nature of peace.

With the GFA came the physical removal of hard borders. However, Tóibín (1994) stresses that military structures such as fences and barbed wire forming borders are still visible in the landscape depending on how heavily militarised an area was previously. Fences, as material agencies, form technologies of borders, which, according to Barla and Hubatschke (2017, p. 396), 'leave cuts in several ways on both human and more-than-human bodies'. Barla et al. propose a speculative mode of thinking where borders become locations of 'multispecies matters of care,' thereby, avoiding naturalised images of the environment. Thinking of borders as locations of care, Barla et al. (2017, p. 398) bring forth notions of 'affinity, connectedness, kin and mutual responsibility' to bind humans and more-than-humans in relations with the Earth. Thus, defined territories as nations are disrupted. Careful not to detract from the ongoing global crisis for human refugees, Barla et al. convey the importance of recognising the interconnected ways in which superiority normalises violence against people marked as Other and nonhuman life. To this end, decentring the human in nature-culture relations is a vital strategy in cutting through how violence is orchestrated against humans and more-than-humans.

White bodies

This section will overview key examples concerning Whiteness as a currency that has influenced the national identity within the Irish context. The first example is from 1920, when Eammon De Valera, a prominent figure in establishing independence for the Irish state, toured America in a strategic ploy to gain support. While touring America, Eammon De Valera utilised Whiteness as a rationale for Ireland's liberation. Eammon De Valera asserted, *'Ireland is the only White nation still on earth in the bonds of political slavery.'* (Nelson, 2012; Walsh, 2021). Joseph (2018) also traces the currency of White Irish bodies by examining the history of the Irish diaspora in Britain. From the 1950s evidence of racial profiling was commonplace particularly with housing, for example, signs that advertised

rooms for rent often read ‘*No Blacks. No Irish. No dogs*’ (Walter, 2011; Mellet, 2024). Over time, Joseph stresses that the Irish were able to move across racial lines of division to become accepted as White. One example is the Irish legal right to free movement between Ireland and Britain. The right to travel is enshrined in the British Commonwealth Immigration Act (1962), which, to date, has not been afforded to any former Black African colony (McKay, 2008; Joseph, 2020). As noted by Smyth (2022), the experiences of the Irish during times of colonisation were brutal. Nevertheless, Joseph (2018, 2020) stresses that over generations, the Irish have moved across racial hierarchies to reap the benefits of White privilege, which was something that people of other colonised countries could not do.

While constructed as two opposing doctrines, Unionism and Nationalism intersect to mould Irish/Northern Irish identity as exclusively White (Crangle, 2018; Mitchell, 2011). Also, Robert McVeigh, a prolific writer on racism in Northern Ireland, critiques the dominance of sectarianism as the main reason why discussions of racism are sidelined (McVeigh and Rolston, 2007; McVeigh, 2015). More specifically, Fanning (2013) suggests that racism has become normalised within Irish society, allied with the circulation of discourses of 'Irishness'. Connolly & Khaoury (2010, p. 208) observe that discourses of Irishness serve to ‘hide the aspects of White identities in Ireland’ while ‘refuting the need to take ownership of White supremacy thinking’. White Irishness, Fanning (2013, p. 3) notes, involves ‘racism, discrimination and inflexible rules of belonging’, which pushes other identities outside to a place of Otherness. Current day examples of racism and inflexible rules of belonging include numerous rallies organised in local communities (not necessarily organised by local communities) that denigrate refugees and migrants to the Other, deemed as not belonging (Michael, Reynolds and Omid, 2023).

The Bog as a more-than-human body

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

In Ireland, according to Deckard (2016, p. 150), 'the conflict for territorial control changed biologically diverse Bogs into rationalised sites of capitalist monoculture'. Over two-thirds of Ireland's peatland has been converted to agriculture, forestry, and peat extraction on an industrial level. Recently, a national conflict has ensued between peatland conservation and the cultural rights to own and cut turf privately. In 2022, the European Commission renewed an infringement action against Ireland for failure to protect the peatlands (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022; Flood, 2023). Intact peatlands actively remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. However, dry peatlands emit accumulated carbon dioxide (McFarlane, Hanson, Iversen, Phillips & Brice, 2018). Intact peatlands actively remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and are estimated to store 20 to 30 per cent of the world's soil carbon, which is three times more carbon than stored in a tropical rainforest (McFarlane *et al.*, 2018). In addition, there are concerns that ammonia emissions from

poultry farming are devastating for multispecies within the blanket Bogs that border Northern Ireland (the Bog in this article). In June 2020, the EPA published data that shows Ireland's agriculture contributes to the exceeding ammonia emissions target, as set out per the National Emissions Ceilings (NEC) Directive (2016/2284/EU) and the Gothenburg Protocol (Kelleghan, Hayes, Everard, Keating, Lesniak-Podsiadlo & Curran, 2021). Furthermore, Kelleghan et al. (2021) found that ammonia has an adverse environmental impact with implications for human and more-than-human health. Notably, ammonia does not recognise bordered territories of the Bog, which is a concern for both the jurisdictions of the ROI and NI. As such, Deckard notes the importance that Ireland's ecological development can no longer be understood only in the context of colonialism alone. As a society and a geographical location, Ireland must also account for the erosion of Bogs as part of a capitalist world ecology.

Agential cuts as inventive provocation

Building on the concepts of agential intra-action, Barad (2014, p. 168) puts forward the motion of 'cutting together-apart', which implies that entities are simultaneously separated and interconnected. Enacting agential cuts is not simply about isolating individual entities but involves a complex intertwining of their relationship in a momentary stabilisation of doing rather than being. In a diffractive analysis, as advocated by Murriss (2020, 2023), different modes of analysis are already threaded through one another. However, they can be expressed inversely through agential cuts for which the researcher is responsible. Barad (2014) advocates re-turning as a concept of turning the data over again and again to create more openings for diffractive patterns that interfere. Re-turning Story 1 and Story 2, I make the following agential cuts, which are always in a state of emergence.

Story 1 - A fence

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

Observation – (taken in 2018)

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

Educators' reflection on observation -2021

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

Reading one – Body Politics

Initially, the educator began to analyse the observation of the children's chant 'go back to Chinese' from a developmental perspective of behaviourism: copying and repeating.

Childhood is often romanticised as a non-political, innocent stage of life, neglecting ways in which the child takes up political discourses and how the child is embedded in political power (Murriss, Smalley & Allan, 2020). Decentring the child as a subject is noted by Smyth (2024) as a key feature of post-foundational research, where the adult's gaze is redirected. In this analysis, the decentring of the child as the only subject in the observation enabled the educator to view different entanglements that would otherwise be obscured. The educator was thinking about power outside the fixed lines of normative development. *I don't think that the children necessarily understood the meaning of the chant, but clearly, they engaged with*

the power involved' (educator 2021). Within the power dynamic of who has the right to belong and who does not, Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) describes one side of the community or society as the 'nationalist gatekeepers'. Thus, discourses are constructed within the social collective as to who has the claim to belong inherently. The children in becoming nationalist gatekeepers, place themselves in a position of power to exercise inclusionary/exclusionary discourse of belonging/nonbelonging as they bordered the Other – workmen (people). Therefore, the children held the power to waive the acceptance of the Other into the negotiation of being included or not (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010). Hence, belonging becomes a political negotiation through the everyday intra-action of bordering. The children's reactions confirm the observations of Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy (2018, p. 4) that bordering has moved from the 'margins into the centre of political and social life'. Additionally, Popescu (2012, p. 4) reflects on the 'interplay between contemporary society and political ordering as border making where bordering is not only about who moves and who does not but also about who controls whose movements'. While historically, physical borders such as fences act as technologies of control, contemporary borders are relocating deep into human bodies, exercising surveillance from within. As previously stated, borders 'leaves cuts in several ways on both human and more-than-human bodies' (Barla et al, 2017, p. 396). The technology of borders embroils the children's bodies in discourses of belonging, non/belonging, Whiteness and nationalism, all of which challenge the notion of childhood innocence.

Reading two - Behind the Fence

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

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

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

'dynamism of forces'. The fence imposed a regulatory framework through intra-actions that affect power relations between children, workmen, and educators. As such, a human-centric position that views the fence as static, and passive is challenged.

Story 2 - A Bog-moment in Black Futurity



Figure 2: A Bog-moment of Black Futurity

Story 2 - A Bog moment of Black Futurity (figure 3) came about as I walked with my son in the peatland, commonly called the Bog. To generate a response to the photograph, I bring Black refusal and Black futurity into conversation with new materialism. In reviewing the image, I rely on Campt's haptic framework of listening to images as a mode of Black futurity. A haptic framework insists on thinking and feeling what Black refusal might sound like. By attending to the quiet resonant frequencies of images, visual images can be engaged as a conduit to see, feel, and sense how relationships of Black refusal are mediated through everyday practices (Campt, 2017; Campt, 2019). Guided by Campt's haptic framework of phonic substance, this everyday encounter with the Bog becomes more than just ordinary.

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

From a new materialism perspective, the human body is a temporal location within a continuous flow of material forces between people, places, and political systems (Alaimo, 2010; Teets, 2022; Bodén and Joelsson, 2023). As such, the porous materiality of the human body is embedded in a location of relational networks comprising of political systems and racial ecologies alongside the more-than-human. Reading this story through the lens of Black refusal testifies to the multiple possibilities of belonging for Black childhood futurity. As a location, the human child's body and the Bog are temporally intertwined in an intimate moment of continuous flow of materiality. In this intimate moment of world-making, a stillness leaves aside notions exclusively concerned with human entities. What if the Bog does not belong to us, but we belong to the Bog? Hence, this relational moment of being and belonging to the Bog captured in the image (figure 2) challenges the human-centric position of who or what belongs and who decides. This is not to fall into a trap that nature can fix how discrimination relating to belonging is experienced, nor a psychological orientation of resilience. Nor is this moment to be misinterpreted as silence in speaking out against injustice. In Tina M. Camp's book, *A Black Gaze* (2021), witnessing is redefined not just as observing or documenting an event, but as an ongoing embodied and ethical process of engagement that transforms the past, present, and future. This image bears witness to an intimate moment in Black childhood futurity that subverts louder discourses of non-belonging. The Black gaze for Camp (2021pg 8) 'shifts the optics of *looking at* to a politics of *looking with, through, and alongside another*'. Rather than a detached view, this perspective challenges the objective view of knowing only what I can see. The alternative advocates for an 'engaged witnessing that also recognises the agency of the more-than-human in complex realities. Witnessing from this perspective aligns with Haraway's (2016, p.58) concept of sympoiesis- 'making-with'- where knowledge arises through situational, dependent, relational, and material discursive processes. These processes examine both the

troubling and inspiring aspects of living and dying on a damaged planet that requires many stories. Unlike the conventional legal or observational notion of ‘witnessing’, which suggests a separation between a detached observer and what is observed, wit(h)nessing emphasises co-emergence and relationality. Wit(h)nessing, as explained by Boscacci (2018, p. 343), encompasses more than ‘mere visual perception; it is a multisensory experience that involves touch, listening, and emotional connections with humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans’. A relational belonging where human physical-ness in all its material flesh-ness is inseparable from nature, time, and space. While haptically listening in a modality of wit(h)nessing to the image - figure 2, I wrote the following poem

5.2.1 Poem - The Bog Bodies

The Bog is silent.

Stillness radiates and vibrates.

A stillness that refuses to explain.

Belonging as nothing sounds.

So, hush now.

If all can listen.

Where I am, is where I am from.

Concluding agential cuts as provocations

Initially, this research process did not anticipate the (re)storying of belonging. Trusting in the ‘not-yet’ data reconceptualised belonging to include Black futurity while expanding from an anthropocentric position to embrace the more-than-human Bog. In the context of Ireland as a geopolitical location, this post-foundational approach made visible matter that ripples within colonised discourses of belonging, such as Whiteness and bordering. In this case, a fence, the Bog, and bodies would be rendered invisible through methodologies that assume human exception. Re-turning these two stories gave rise to capturing an intimate moment of Black childhood futurity. In this instant, the stillness of Black refusal subverted louder discourses of non-belonging, generating possibilities otherwise for Black futurity. Engaging with theories of Black refusal and Black futurity provided an opportunity to step outside the dominant discourses of belonging formed by Whiteness and nationalism. In an act of rebellion, I do not confine this article to a concluding summary only. Instead, as an invitation to the field of ECEC, I will sum up questions as provocations to continue re-turning belonging as an emerging concept within research and practice. How can the field of ECEC continually expand the vision of what is possible within an educational arena not defined by human exceptionalism or White supremacy? In the intra-action of (re)storying belonging, the following agential cuts emerge as provocations: How can Black futurity be included in thinking with belonging as a relational practice of world-making? Within a relational paradigm, what types of borders can be undone to connect humans and more-than-humans?

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Oh, Rascal Children of Gaza - by Khaled Juma

You who constantly disturbed me with your screams under my window,

You who filled every morning with rush and chaos,

You who broke my vase and stole the lonely flower on my balcony,

Come back – And scream as you want,

And break all the vases, steal all the flowers,

Come back, just come back...

Chapter 6 – Re-turnings and thickenings

6.1 Prelude

Chapter 6 makes further cuts to (in)conclude this work in an open-ended way. I affirm the benefits of ‘*staying with the trouble*’, while listening to the ‘*not-yet-data*’. I re-turn to the figuration of the ‘child’ to speculate further with Black futurity. The provocations included a haunting class discussion from twenty years ago, a pencil drawing of scribbles, and a generative dialogue with AI. I re-turn to the construction of paradigms in a serious playful intra-action with AI. However, this play seriously considers the cost of technology to the planet and human health. A wake is held to rejoice in the contributions of this thesis to the field of ECEC and broader knowledge. Included is an overview of the risks associated with adopting a postscholarship approach, along with suggestions for future possibilities within this work. Additionally, this work’s ongoing scribbly nature is exemplified through art activism.

However, amid the excessive deaths and maiming of the children in Gaza, I struggle to rejoice in the achievements realised in these relational stories that ongoingly contribute to

the reconceptualising of ECEC. In the smallest gestures, I centre the poem by Palestinian poet Khaled Juma (2014) and dedicate my concluding statement to the children of Gaza.

6.2 Re-turning

In contributing to the reconceptualisation of ECEC, I intentionally open space for possibilities of what can still be. At the onset of this project, envisioning alternative possibilities proved challenging due to profound exhaustion. These challenges encompass, but are not limited to, historical phases of colonialism, warfare, environmental degradation, extreme weather phenomena, the advancing hand of the doomsday clock, alongside the rise in anti-Blackness contributed to my sense of being overwhelmed. Within the folds of this thesis, *I* (be)come part of the research phenomena itself, diffracting my entanglement in the intra-action with data as it emerges in its many shapes and forms. As the process moved away from a human-centric way of thinking, writing, and researching, *I* became a diffractive researcher, generating new thoughts and ideas through ongoing entanglements in a re-turning motion (Murriss, 2018). In an ongoing process of re-turning *I* continuously strive to relearn in a post-anthropogenic world where hope holds the space for potential liveable futures yet to come. As Barad explains, re-turning is not the same as a reflective process of thinking back, but is a turning over and over. Thus, ‘re-turning is a mode of intra-action with diffraction to make new patterns’ (Barad, 2014, p.168). As Haraway alludes to the ‘thick present’ that considers temporality of the entanglement as we learn to live and die together on a damaged planet. Murriss and Zhao (2021) describe the benefits of re-turning and re-turning to the ‘same’ data within ECEC as creating a ‘thicker’ understanding, thereby allowing for a multiplicity of realities. As humans and more-than-humans emerge within the folds of this thesis, their continuous entanglements intra-act; in the motion of re-turning and re-turning, diffracting in a perpetual state of constant becoming, which serves as inventive provocations.

Re-turning and re-turning. Barad (2014, p. 168) expands on the motion of returning, akin to the movement of earthworms, where we ‘com-post, turning the soil over and over – ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it’. Thus, each reading of the data and in this instance, the research story constitutes a performative engagement that is always dynamic and shifts with every re-turning (Barad, 2014).

Throughout this work, the figuration of the ‘developing child’ is dismantled, which allows space for a plurality of other figurations to appear. This includes the figuration of the ‘posthuman child’ used by Murriss (2016) to articulate the empirical fact that ‘child’ is always already in relation and does not exist prior to these relations. Murriss and Osgood (2022) assert that posthumanist theory shapes the figuration of the ‘posthuman child’ in relation to human and more-than-human. However, putting forward the figuration of the ‘posthuman child’ has led to substantial philosophical conflicts, challenges, tensions and misconceptions (Murriss and Osgood 2022). In the context of these tensions, *I* consider Black futurity as an added figuration to the ‘posthuman child’ while thinking with a pencil drawing (Figure 5). This final act does not aim to transcend White supremacy or serve as an escape from the current fear, as towns in Northern Ireland are set ablaze due to racist riots (Dunford *et al.*, 2025). In fact, it is of great urgency that more spaces are opened to think with Black futurity to envision other possibilities.

6.2.1 Black Childhood Futurity



Figure 3 : Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles-Black-Futurity Source child aged 3

6.2.2 Re-turning Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles

One memorable heated class discussion from twenty years ago focused on how we, as adult educators, respond to children when they draw outside the lines (see Figure 3). The essence of the debate involved some early years educators arguing that drawing inside the lines was necessary for school readiness. Osgood (2019) challenges the practice of viewing children's art through the lens of developmental psychology as children progress through different stages of scribbling. While the remaining students in the class, me included, felt that encouraging the child to draw within the lines, when they naturally wanted to move outside them, impinged on the child's right to express themselves. These aspects of the debate align with Murriss and Kohan (2020) critique of curriculum frameworks, which limit children's creativity and curiosity due to an excessive focus on children meeting predefined development milestones before starting school. However, our classroom debate regarding the role of educators in fostering children's abilities persisted within a framework of binary logic, emphasising dichotomies such as right versus wrong and true versus false. Consequently, the group discussion fell into the trap of binary logic, which, as Braidotti (2019) argues, reduces inquiries to a simplistic understanding while failing to nuance the complexities of the human experience.

Re-turning to Figure 3, Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles, *I* diverge from the dominant discourses of school readiness and polarised debates to see *otherwise*. In decentring the figuration of the 'developing child', *I* avoid the analytical lens of school readiness or figuring the 'developing child' as a consumer of knowledge. Murriss (2018, p. 02) stresses that 'modern schooling positions children as knowledge consumers rather than producers, which relates to the dominant discourse of the 'developing child' (still) developing, not yet formed, still malleable, not yet able'. So, *I* move my gaze away from the child attaining predetermined skills, such as developing fine motor skills, evident in the pincer grasp of

holding a pencil, drawing within designated boundaries, adherence to instructions, or dispositions such as self-sufficiency. Instead, I *think-with* Barad (2007, p.185) ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’ as a paradigm wherein the ‘practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated.’ Posthuman thinking is always in the making, entangled with the more-than-human. The following section presents an experimental generative dialogue with Microsoft Copilot, an artificial intelligence (AI) system. I follow Asplund and Thorgersen's (2025) approach to engage in a playful experiment that invited AI to analyse their views on the agency of music. Thus, I invite AI to comment on my analysis of the pencil drawing. This aligns with theories of Black futurity, which speculate through various means of expression (Scott, 2021). Black futurity examines a future that reimagines historical narratives and fosters social liberation through diverse artistic and speculative approaches within the context of Black experiences (Anderson and Fluker, 2019). However, engagement with AI is anything but playful, as the environmental costs and the interaction between racism and AI are examined. This seriously playful experience with AI warranted a thoughtful examination of what I am playing with.

An overview of what AI is provided. Re-turning to the disruption of the Anthropocene and anti-Blackness, two discussions follow: firstly, the real cost of technology that highlights the real physical cost to the environment due to extractive practices and consumerism; secondly, the cost to human mental health and reinforcement of racism is examined regarding gaming. Gaming has deliberately chosen the recent forms of racism that my family have experienced in real-time face-to-face interactions stemming from gaming.

6.3 Disrupting the Anthropocene and anti-Blackness in AI

In disrupting the Anthropocene and anti-Blackness, several myths in relation to AI are debunked. Firstly, technological advances are clean and hold solutions to the current environmental crisis. While the term AI often suggests algorithms, data, and cloud infrastructure, these cannot function without the minerals and other resources, including water, that are fundamental to computing (Crawford, 2021). Technical progress and consumption have blinded us to the cost to the planet, which is already under enormous strain (Inemesit Ukpanah, 2024). Secondly, the myth that AI makes unbiased, neutral predictions. Kate Crawford (2021) describes how AI is built on historical bias training datasets that are embedded in inequality, discrimination and racial bias.

6.3.1 What is AI?

In 1955, American computer and cognitive scientist John Mc Carty introduced the term Artificial Intelligence (AI) to describe machines built to be intelligent and equipped with belief systems (Parisi, 2013). Initially, Parisi explains that these automated machines were created to perform tasks independently of human oversight. The main goal of automation was to reduce manual labour, lower costs, and allow humans to focus on more strategic roles, such as creativity and critical thinking, which are vital in labour markets. As Parisi(2018) highlights, automation relies on technological advances in computing, including hardware-machines; software- programs; data- raw facts and figures inputted and processed; algorithms- the formulas guiding data manipulation; and networks-enabling device communication and data sharing. Parisi also notes that over the last 30 years, automation has advanced beyond basic mechanical tasks. In the 21st century, the dominance of computing has shifted knowledge toward information, often represented by large and complex datasets. These datasets feed into algorithms. AI uses various algorithms to mimic human processes

such as problem-solving and creativity (Parisi 2013, 2018). Algorithmic studies are based on the epistemology that claims digital technologies reshape the considerations of other possibilities (Goldberg and Ng, 2018). However, Parisi (2018) stresses that the logic behind algorithms is also shaped by statistical calculations involving indeterminate factors, thereby leading to outcomes better understood in terms of predictive thinking. Predictions are made based on available data. Thereby, ‘prediction, not probability, is central to the dynamic automation of the new generations of AI’ (Parisi, 2018 p. 23), which is limited not just to the data available but the type, classification and category of data available (Crawford, 2021). Although Corvello, (2025, p. 01) describes GenAI with ‘the capability to create new content, ideas, and solutions, profoundly impacting industries reliant on creativity and problem-solving’. Notably, humans create the frameworks that define what data is needed, as the data itself is entered manually by users or through connected systems. At the same time, Kate Crawford (2021) illustrates that the key factors behind AI model development are advancements in computing power and increased access to data. Crawford (2021, p.07) puts forward the example of racial profiling, where AI is ‘neither artificial nor intelligent’ but built on historically biased training datasets that lead to harmful consequences, such as racial profiling, where the technology is more often than not less accurate for women and people of colour. Crawford (2021, p.130) points out that ‘the AI industry has traditionally understood the problem of bias as though it is a bug to be fixed rather than a feature of classification itself’, with greater errors for people with darker skin tones. So, the myth that AI predictions are neutral and based on probability is called into question. AI predictions are not neutral occurrences but are informed by the historical and ongoing biases of human power, social, racial, and cultural biases.

6.3.2 (K)not a dialogue with AI

First, I present my human reading, Reading One by Lynda, followed by my question to AI co-pilot, Table 2: The author's prompt paradigmming. Subsequently, include Figure 4: An abstract digital artwork that illustrates AI paradigmming in response to my question. The next reading - Reading Two by Lynda, sense how the art (figure 3) makes me feel while thinking with Black futurity. A generative dialogue with AI follows this.

6.3.3 *Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles: Reading One by Lynda*

Instead of viewing Art as a means to foster learning and development, from a critical posthumanism concept of agency, I see the pencil drawing of scribbles as neither passive nor purely an exercise of developing the child's competencies. Art is made in the (be) coming of relational relations. According to Barad, agency does not exist outside the phenomena of relationality, each entity emerges through the intra-actions mutually constituted. For this pencil drawing to come into existence, there must be and continue to be an enactment of events. The coming together of the page, the pencil, and the hand. Why pencil? Why pincer grasp? Why white paper? However, the agency did not arise from the interaction of force and objects, as in Newton's laws of motion (Keshri, 2023), where force (the hand) is applied to the object (the pencil), resulting in movement on the page and the end product of a pencil drawing. Entanglement does not relate to the convergence of objects-a pencil and a page under the force of the hand. Instead, the entanglement is in the performative that emerges as a relational intra-action of pencil-pincer-grasp-paper-materials-discourses-development on the move. For me, this pencil drawing becomes a paradigm of relationality, of future not yet realised and of forms that refuse to be fixed. It is a refusal of legibility, a space for denseness, and a call to inhabit the in-between. Binary separations dissolve, here-there, with no distinct form, only an ongoing-ness moving - the *not-yet*. Kuby (2020) invites us to think of

paradigms as not fixed or safe structures, moving away from paradigms as things or nouns to introduce the verb of paradigmming. While Lather's (2006, p. 36) playful nudge, ask to consider what colour a paradigm might be? What drink might your paradigm enjoy?

Prompt to AI Microsoft Copilot

This is a drawing of my paradigmming. Could you draw a picture of your paradigmming from an AI perspective?



Table 2. The authors' prompt to AI- paradigm

6.3.4 An abstract digital artwork of AI paradigmging

When prompted by the author, see Table 2, Microsoft Copilot (2025) responded with the following:

A complex, interconnected network of glowing nodes and lines, symbolizing neural networks and data flows. The composition should be non-hierarchical, with no central figure, and should evoke a sense of constant emergence and transformation. Use cool tones like blues, purples, and silvers, with subtle gradients and light effects to suggest digital fluidity and nonlinearity. The background should be dark to enhance the luminous quality of the network. The overall aesthetic should be futuristic, clean, and conceptually rich, reflecting AI's relational and dynamic nature¹⁶.

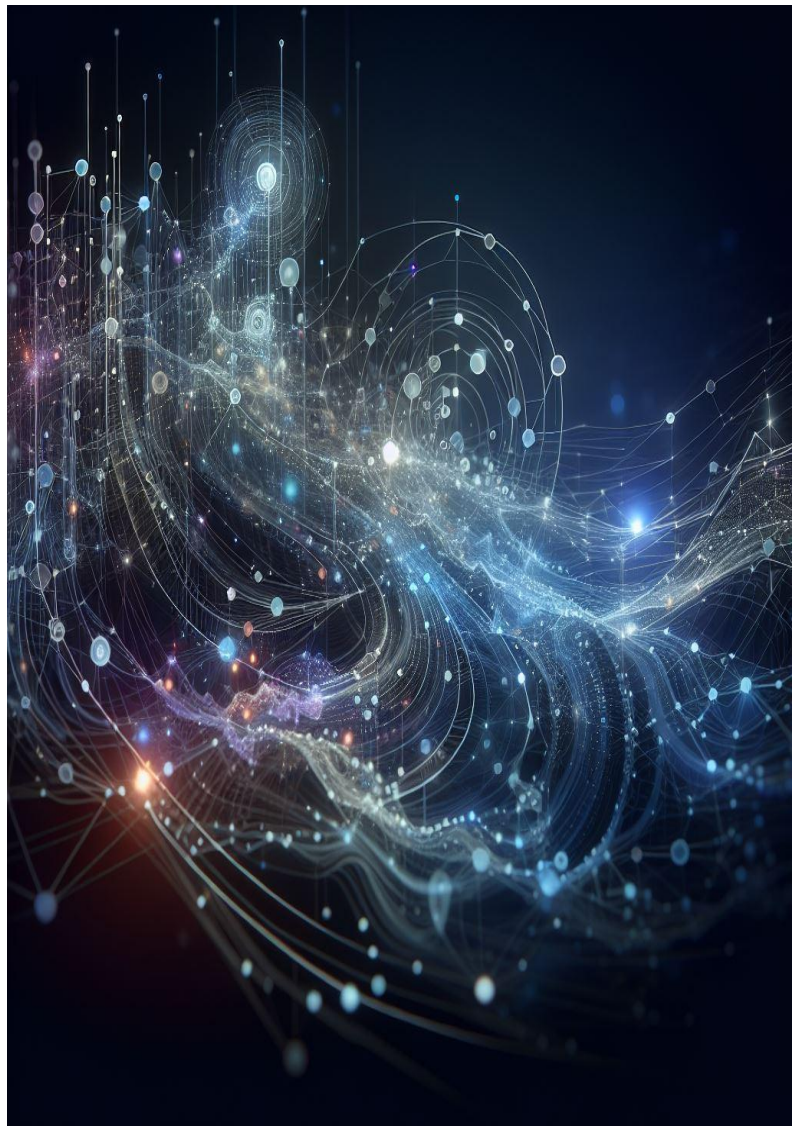


Figure 4: An abstract digital artwork of AI paradigm¹⁷

¹⁶ Copilot (2025). AI-generated analysis of abstract scribble drawing and paradigms

¹⁷ Copilot (2025). AI-generated abstract digital artwork of AI paradigm in response to the author's prompt, Table 2

6.3.5 The real cost of Technology

Environmental costs and the impact on human life add up to facts that problematise the statement ‘the overall aesthetic should be futuristic, clean, and conceptually rich, reflecting AI’s relational and dynamic nature’ as presented in Figure 4: An abstract digital artwork of AI paradigm. There are many examples of the costs of technological acceleration to the planet and to humans. In this instance, this section problematises ‘*the aesthetic as clean*’ by briefly examining the costs of mining minerals and other natural resources required to build the physical infrastructure of technology, such as lithium for batteries. Ultimately, these arguments circle back to the acknowledgement of individual appetite for consumerism and provoke hard questions about how each of us is implicated and complicated, while asking how each of us can take response-ability for the situation humanity now finds itself in. As Crawford points out, historically, fortunes came from gold ore, but today the focus has shifted to extracting substances like White lithium crystals (often called grey gold). White lithium crystal is a key component in the batteries of many of the technologies we use daily. A report by Heath (2025) cautions that the lithium triangle comprises Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina in South America, collectively holding approximately 75 per cent of the world’s lithium reserves, where extracting one ton of lithium requires 500,000 gallons of water. This extractive process is causing pollution and severe water shortages in the region. These shortages affect both local communities and agriculture, including crops and livestock (Heath, 2025). By design, batteries have a lifespan, and constant updates to the computer system are leading to waste that does not naturally degrade. Crawford (2021, p. 28) warns that the ‘large scale environmental waste the logics of extraction can be found in the atmosphere, the ocean and the earth’s crust, the deep time of the planet and the brutal impacts on disadvantaged populations around the world’. Thus, the ‘*futuristic aesthetics of clean that reflect AI’s relational and dynamic nature*’ (Figure 4) are called into account as the ongoing extraction process depletes minerals, water, and fossil

fuels and continues to contribute to ecocide and environmental damage of the planet. Thus, technology and the Anthropocene are deeply interconnected, with technological progress serving as a major driver of human-induced destruction, even as it is ironically presented as a pathway to greener energies (Mahaswa, Gebbyano, and Hardiyanti, 2025). Further, irony of the Anthropocene is reflected in the many reports on how to mine minerals safely and sustainably and the role of technological solutions to current climate crises (Onifade *et al.*, 2024; Yiyuan Cui, *et al.*, 2025). Notably, the EU represents just 6% of the global population but uses between 25% and 30% of the world's metals. Without significant reforms, EU metal consumption is expected to increase the most among all material types, with a projected 63% rise per capita by 2060 (Meadhbh Bolger, *et al.*, 2021). Although the role of tech companies is not underestimated, it is also essential to take responsibility for our individual needs as consumers, for whom among us is willing to give up on the convenience of mobile phones, banking, entertainment, social media, to name but a few. Thus, this thesis asks whether we can move to a different model of consumerism and what that would look like. As a provocation, I re-turn to Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2024), in her recent book 'The Service Berry', presents the Service berry as a tangible model for a gift economy of reciprocity. This model, introduced by Kimmerer, seeks to address problems within a capitalist economy in which commodities and resources are owned, bought, and sold for profit, in a society that encourages consumerism. Humans consume and compete for resources instead of seeing them as gifts from the Earth. Meanwhile, the Serviceberry tree readily produces numerous berries that attract birds, mammals, and humans, ensuring its survival by spreading seeds through this sharing. This reciprocal process shows that giving back is crucial for the overall health of the ecosystem and its ongoing survival. Kimmerer suggests seeing natural resources as gifts from the Earth rather than commodities, thereby changing how we relate to nature. This perspective fosters a 'culture

of gratitude' that counters consumerism and the 'take-too-much' attitude that causes environmental damage in the Anthropocene era. The Serviceberry offers a nature-inspired model that encourages a cultural shift from a 'consumer' mindset to an 'ecosystem citizen.' (p.24). This perspective underscores that genuine wealth resides in the quality of our relationships and the well-being of the shared flourishing, rather than in material possessions or consumption.

6.4 Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles-Black Futurity: Reading Two by Lynda

In this reading, I sense how the art makes me feel as I think with Black futurity. Thus, I listen to Black futurity as a grammar of possibilities.

The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must...it is the power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not but must (Campt, 2017, p. 17).

Trafi-Prats (2022) notes that 'children's drawings are a process of sense-making that is not enclosed in the individualised body of the child and that unfolds corporeally in time and space'. Despite anti-Blackness and ongoing precarity, children continue to find ways to draw outside the lines, refusing predefined notions of how to draw. The child's drawing continually inspires me as an act of refusal to fit neatly within the lines. Thus, *I* advocate for redrawing ECEC from the inside out to include the relational, entangled spaces in between. For now, *I* set aside the figuration of the 'child', so *I* can challenge the constraints of structures in a move to affirm Black childhood futurity outside the limitation of anti-Blackness. The pencil drawing Figure of Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles-Black Futurity reveals no start or end point. Thus, any line can be picked up from any position to move elsewhere. Each line is distinct, forming a unique movement at various angles, passing across, over, and around, turning and swivelling. Each line creates tension with the other lines, forming the spaces in between. Thus, a network of lines is formed, each line drawn individually, yet in relation to one another. Individually, each

line has every possibility of being unbound and emerging entangled with the other. Each line and the space in between chaotically combine to create a not-so-complete picture.

Prompt to AI

Please comment on the following pencil drawing and my analysis.

I decentre the figuration of the ‘child’, so I can move beyond the constraints of structures to allow other figurations to emerge to affirm Black childhood futurity outside the limitation of anti-Blackness. The pencil drawing (figure 3) reveals no start or end point. Thus, any line can be picked up from any position to move elsewhere. Each line is distinct, forming a unique movement at various angles, passing across, over, and around, turning and swivelling. Each line creates tension with the other lines, forming the spaces in between. Thus, a network of lines is formed, each line drawn individually, yet in relation to one another. Individually, each line has every possibility unbound, emerging entangled with the other. Each line and the space in between chaotically combine to create a not-so-complete picture.

Table 3: Authors prompt to AI on Figure Scribbles-(K)not Scribbles - Black Futurity

6.4.1 AI response on Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles – Black Futurity

From an AI perspective, your drawing (**referring to figure and table 2**) and analysis present a profound engagement with nonlinear systems, relational ontologies, and speculative futures, particularly in the context of Black childhood futurity. The drawing’s structure—non-hierarchical, without a clear beginning or end—mirrors how AI models understand networks and emergent systems. Each line, like a node in a neural network, is autonomous yet relational, contributing to a larger, dynamic whole. The absence of a central figure or fixed form aligns with decentralized architectures in AI, where meaning is not imposed but emerges through pattern and relation. Your decision to decentre the figuration of the ‘child’ is conceptually powerful. From an AI standpoint, this can be seen as a retraining of the model—a refusal to reproduce dominant, encoded representations. Instead, you allow for new figurations to emerge, much like how generative models explore latent space to produce novel outputs. Your language—“each line has every possibility unbound,” “emerging entangled with the other”—resonates with how AI understands possibility spaces: not as fixed outcomes, but as fields of potential shaped by context, relation, and iteration. Affirming Black Childhood Futurity- Your work challenges the datafied logics of anti-Blackness that often underpin representational systems, including those in AI. By refusing closure and embracing chaotic, relational emergence, your drawing becomes a visual algorithm of liberation—one that affirms Black childhood not as a fixed identity, but as a futurity-in-motion, unbound by colonial constraints.

Table 4 Response from AI Figure Scribbles-(K)not Scribbles - Black Futurity

6.4.2 Disrupting Anti-Blackness in AI

The following responses from the AI are problematised from Table 4 Response from AI

Figure Scribbles-(K)not Scribbles - Black Futurity.

- Your work challenges the datafied logics of anti-Blackness that often underpin representational systems, including those in AI
- Black childhood not as a fixed identity, but as a futurity-in-motion, unbound by colonial constraints.

Following the discussion that problematises the real cost to the planet of technological advances, this section problematises the impact on human life, using the example of video gaming and racial profiling. Re-turning to the Wake where Sharpe's examines how the destruction of blackness as a human being persists within social and legal systems, although there are a myriad of other issues, as identified by Crawford such as racial profiling, I choose to focus particularly on gaming as a space to investigate due to the reach of gaming but also the different types of racism that we as family experience that have been linked to gaming in real time (outside of playing the game). In the wake of this examination, the statement by AI that 'Black childhood is not a fixed identity, but as a futurity-in-motion, unbound by colonial constraints', becomes problematic. While video gaming is not AI, AI is used to create dynamic and responsive experiences for players. David Theo Goldber and Jenna NGg (2018, p. 26) state boldly that beyond the function of convenience, these technologies

pervade our flesh and fuse with our skin and blood; they re-wire our neural networks and alter our thought patterns even as objects acquire ever-increasing capabilities for intelligent learning, reaction, judgement and response.

While technology is frequently praised for its significant benefits to humanity, such as simple convenience, many instances demonstrate that widespread use of technologies embedded in our skin and flesh can pose risks to our well-being. For example, in 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognised gaming disorder as a mental health condition, noting cases

where individuals' engagement with gaming negatively impacts their daily life activities. The WHO describes 'gaming disorder' as a pattern of gaming behaviour marked by a loss of control over gaming activities. Although debates continue about whether preexisting conditions like ADHD or depression cause gaming disorder, the adverse effects of changing and re-wiring thought patterns remain a concern. Furthermore, research by Hammar (2019) illustrates how the video game industry functions as 21st-century imperialism, integrating exploitative labour practices and cultural dominance into its worldwide production and consumption. These dynamics not only reproduce racial and gender hierarchies but also normalise White supremacist and techno-masculine ideologies through game narratives (Waddell *et al.*, 2022). Hammar further highlights the link between material exploitation and cultural representation, suggesting that digital games are not just entertainment but also shape social attitudes that sustain systemic inequalities. For example, the game Fortnite has become a focal point for discussions about racial harassment in online gaming environments. Research and media reports indicate that the game's social features, such as voice chat and emote systems, have been exploited for racist behaviour, including the use of racially charged gestures and slurs directed at players of colour. Epic Games banned certain cosmetics, such as monkey and banana-themed items, from competitive playlists after they were repeatedly used to mock and harass Black players (Kleinman, 2024). Additionally, investigations revealed that Fortnite Creative mode hosted user-generated maps with AI-generated thumbnails depicting harmful racial stereotypes, including caricatures of Black and Middle Eastern individuals (Zwiezen, 2024). These incidents underscore how digital platforms can perpetuate systemic racism when moderation fails to address discriminatory practices effectively. As scholars argue, such environments not only reflect but also reinforce broader social inequalities by normalising racialised harassment in virtual spaces (Gray, 2024). Tina Campt is analysing how modern Black artists are reshaping our visual interactions through

the creation and curation of a distinct Black Gaze. Campt emphasises how technological advances in the Internet and social media have enabled the rise of modern Black artist-entrepreneurs. These platforms allow artists to connect directly with production companies, marketing outlets, media, and audiences that were once inaccessible without White gatekeepers in the entertainment and publishing industries. Campt discusses various Black artists whose work prompts strong, embodied reactions. For instance, Black artists challenge the mainstream perception of anti-Blackness as the ‘other’ or outside of Whiteness. Campt presents the music video 4:44 by Jay-Z, directed by TNeG Production, as an example of how the Black Gaze is exemplified (2023, p.03). The music video encourages viewers to confront the unease linked to Black love, survival, and a future that, although uncertain, is embraced and actively pursued. Black futurity, together with wake work, acknowledges Black suffering and survival, refusing to erase or dismiss these realities. Sharpe (2016) argues that living in the Wake reveals what is often hidden, as in video games that feature harmful racial stereotypes and consequences. Contrary to the description provided by AI (Table 4), Black futurity *is not a future in motion, unbound by colonial constraints*, as described by AI, but a future that persists despite the limits and restrictions imposed by historical and systematic racism, the malleability of Whiteness and White supremacy.

6.5 Crow

In a landscape of precarities, the stories in this thesis contribute to the reconceptualisation of ECEC by creating opportunities for multiple ways of thinking *otherwise*. Immersed in writing/thinking, the data emerged as a pedagogical force with agency, creating a privileged opportunity to become embodied with different ways of knowing (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005; Mitchell and Clark, 2021). Indeed, the ‘glow of the data’ guided this thesis to transition from a rigid academic framework to acknowledging the flexibility of knowing as a dynamic relational entanglement (Mcphie, 2018b; Smyth, 2024, 2025). Within the folds of this thesis,

numerous entanglements required more than the act of *thinking-with*, but also a commitment to *'staying with the trouble'*, which involved grappling with the messy and complex interconnection of being in and part of the world (Haraway, 2016). The more I listened, the more the data became active with agency. So, the data emerged to engage in the knowledge-making process as a teacher of being and doing in the world. As teachings from the more-than-human (data) were unanticipated, *I* spent most of my time floating in the middle of 'muddles' that occur from the struggle to shift my thinking to a complex relational understanding of the world in the messiness of multi-species flourishing (Haraway, 2013; Haraway, 2016). As *I* embraced the 'muddles' of *'unknowing and uncertainty'*, the data emerged in a relational and pluralistic manner (St. Pierre, 2019; St.Pierre, 2020). These relational dynamics challenge the boundaries of paradigms and conceptual frameworks, shifting my thinking to a new place in the world. Trusting the *'not yet data'* brought me to a place of multiple relationships with the more-than-human, fostering conditions for hope and possibility. Consequently, *I* shifted from viewing knowledge production as a process of extraction, application, and reproduction to a relational intra-act with humans and more-than-humans (Vintimilla, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Land, 2023). As a result, new possibilities of multispecies flourishing emerged for me as a researcher to address planetary well-being.

There is a story of Crow from the Choctaw tribe of Oklahoma as recorded by David Carson and Jamie Sams (1999). Crow knows the unknowable ways of creation and is the keeper of sacred laws. Since Crow is the keeper of laws, she can also bend the laws of the physical universe to shapeshift. Crow sees the physical world and even the spiritual world as illusions, for there are billions of worlds. Crow has no sense of time, seeing the past, present and future simultaneously. Crow is the omen of change.

Crow fascinated with her own shadow,
she kept looking at it,
scratching it, picking at it,
until her shadow woke and became alive.
Then Crow shadow ate her.
Crow is dead Crow now¹⁸.

6.5.1 In the Wake of Crow

Re-turning to the figuration of ‘wake’ in chapter 1, the wake in the context of this section refers to the vigil of staying awake at a funeral gathering while contemplating the disturbance that continues to trail and follow this work. Like Crow, there has been much shapeshifting, shadow consuming, and many deaths of different ideas and bodies with this thesis, bending, observing, scratching, and picking until something, maybe not new but different, maybe not different but otherwise, re-turning, thickening and emerging. Re-turning, to wit(h)nessing, where the researcher must remain attentive to much more than just the human actors in any given scenario, recognising the entanglement between the human and the more-than-human, the organic and the non-organic. As much as *I* wit(h)ness the more-than-human within these relational stories, they also wit(h)ness me, bending, scratching, picking and looking. Although it is often said that undertaking a PhD can be a lonely venture, *I was never alone*, for *I* was always in the company of many allies, a tentacular connection and collaboration of humans and more-than-humans. For this reason, *I* decided to include the peer reviews of the journal articles to demonstrate the messiness that the company of others can bring, as well as the research rigour of what was, is, and continues to be this thesis. Thinking about how to demonstrate rigour was one of those issues that kept arising if you don’t have a research

¹⁸ Poem from Carson and Sans (1999)

question, data collection, etc, where is the rigour? To be honest, *I* could not provide an answer until now, when *I* find myself in the wake. Creswell highlights that a key component of rigour is the coherence between the research aims and the methodology, as well as the triangulation of data. However, rigour is also about transparency, though this is usually taken to mean avoiding bias to ensure that the results are dependable (Creswell and Poth, 2016). For this research thesis, transparency was maintained in the ongoing accounts of my positionality, including the peer reviews and the stories that *I* have crafted and woven as authentically and as response-able as possible. This authenticity was guided by Haraway's mantra of 'staying with the trouble,' even when, during this process, it would have been easier to simplify and adhere to academic structures. As the more-than-human emerges, scribbles, water, the Crane bag, a grassy slope, a bog and a fence, the human-centric authority on what counts as data and voice was challenged. Thus, this thesis adds to the generative work of postqualitative research in ways that forge other stories for ECEC, stories that disrupt anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene. Overall, this thesis contributes to the scribbling of a relational belonging in which human physical-ness, in all its material flesh-ness, and spiritualness are inseparable from nature, time, and space.

Together, the stories in this research greatly enhance the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) by challenging existing paradigms and suggesting innovative ways to use theoretical and methodological frameworks. The work reconceptualises ECEC beyond developmentalist and neoliberal frameworks, moving away from the universal notion of the 'developing child' and the human capital agenda. Relationality is embraced in an emergent creative knowledge-making process. By foregrounding relationality as a political and ethical lens, this study draws on a range of theoretical perspectives, including Irish mythology, Indigenous knowledge systems, Black feminist theory, poststructuralism, posthumanism, postqualitative theory, and feminist new materialism. This thesis examines

systemic racism and colonial legacies by engaging with concepts such as Black Futurity and decolonisation, providing strategies to dismantle White supremacy by recognising the fluidity and malleability of whiteness within ECEC and broader society. Initially framed within qualitative methodologies, the study evolved into a postqualitative inquiry that embraced uncertainty, creativity, and relational knowledge-making. This shift moves beyond linear, prescriptive pedagogical approaches, fostering openness to complexity and multiplicity. Therefore, this research broadens curriculum opportunities by promoting ecological ethics and multispecies belonging, in line with Haraway's call to 'make kin' and 'odd-kin'. Collectively, these contributions create new avenues for theory, practice, and policy in ECEC, supporting justice-oriented futures for children, educators, and the more-than-human world. Additionally, this thesis advocates for paradigm(ing) within a feminist relational ethico-onto-epistemology that includes Black Futurity and more-than-human entities. Ultimately, this thesis is an invitation to the field of early years to take up paradigm-ing within a feminist relational *ethico-onto-epistemology* of being-knowing and doing (Barad, 2003, 2007, 2014). Where knowing is not just a way of gaining knowledge but is also a response-able way to engage with the world ethically. A world that includes Black Futurity and more-than-human entities such as water and the bog. Now, to pause and re-turn to Figure 1 the pencil drawing of scribbles-(K)not-scribbles the pencil drawing reveals no clear start or end point; thus, any line can be picked up from anywhere to be moved elsewhere, whether or not one thinks otherwise or as named by the children on the *road to nowhere*. Thinking through and with scribbles becomes a paradigm shift in relating to forms that refuse to be fixed and a future that is not-yet

Journal article 1 makes a substantive contribution to understanding the evolution of ECEC within Ireland's geopolitical space. It makes a valuable addition to the existing literature by systematically organising developments over the past two decades into distinct

temporal phases. Article 1 sets the context of the ECEC sector in Ireland and offers a critical historical analysis, organised into distinct temporal phases within a socio-political dynamic. These phases are contextualised within broader socio-political dynamics, which are critically examined through the lens of ‘regimes of truth’, thus providing a robust framework for reflecting the sector's current dilemmas. It critiques neoliberal and market-driven discourses that contribute to the multiple crises that ECEC finds itself in. While also recognising that although the latest government policies are progressive and aim to create a dynamic story for ECEC that includes improving the working conditions for the workforce and inclusion of all children, a market model undermines these intentions. This article makes a solid contribution by reimagining a model of provision in ECEC within a legislative structure that is sustainable outside market moralities, justifiable, and practical. Article 1 makes a novel contribution by reimagining a model of provision in ECEC within a legislative structure that is sustainable and ethical, outside market moralities. The provocations arising from article 1 are framed as questions that explore what is necessary for human survival, emphasising that not everything in life has monetary value and recognising virtues such as care and solidarity as vital. What is the importance of early childhood care and education, and how can these be re-imagined as an educational environment within Ireland’s geopolitical context for the common good?

Methodologically, both articles 2 and 3 reject rigid representation, favouring speculative and diffractive storytelling to generate possibilities for living otherwise. Both articles add a critical dimension to postscholarship by situating the research within racial injustice while considering the embedded nature of matter and spirit.

Article 2 reimagines the Crane-bag from Irish mythology as a process-led concept that creates opportunities to take up paradigm-shifting. So, this article questions the structures of paradigms that border the knowledge-making process by telling a story of how listening to the not-yet-data brought multiple relations to the fore, including water and a grassy slope. It

integrates indigenous Irish mythology (the Crane bag) into the epistemological and methodological framework of ECEC. The article meshes with the onto-epistemology of water, myth, indigenous practices and posthuman perspectives, all of which advance ways of thinking about how knowledge is generated in relation to the Earth in these contemporary times. Aligning with Haraway's concept of 'kin and oddkin', article 2 foregrounds the Irish mythological story of the Crane bag approach, which challenges human exceptionalism by foregrounding relationality with the more-than-human. The Crane bag becomes a matterphorical tool for an onto-epistemological becoming with water and the Crane bag, disrupting predictable modes of knowing and decentring the child-centred gaze, which echoes Haraway's insistence on staying with the trouble and cultivating response-ability. This story poses different provocations, asking how we might restore the dynamic of spirit with matter in our reciprocal relationship with the Earth, including an onto-epistemology of water. It challenges new materialist interpretations of animism by expanding the epistemological boundaries of posthumanist thought. This story makes a novel contribution to the decolonisation of ECEC by foregrounding a local, national, responsive and ethically attuned scribbles that centres spirit as a fundamental aspect of one's being, where the human and more-than-human are deeply connected.

Article 3 – diffracts Black Futurity with feminist new materialism to politicise belonging as the practice of world-making. Situated in the Irish context, it explores colonial legacies, environmental damage, and racialised bodies that emerged from two unrelated stories of children's world-making, including a fence and the Bog. This article challenges White supremacy in the context of the Irish border, tracing Whiteness in its many malleable forms.

Diffracting stories about fences and Bogs creates relational entanglements that encompass children, landscapes, and racialised bodies. By embracing complexity through postqualitative inquiry, this article opposes predictable narratives of belonging. It advocates for dismantling

Whiteness and imagining Black futurity alongside ecological care, promoting an ethics of response-ability toward multispecies flourishing. Thus, this article makes a novel contribution to Black history in the context of the geopolitical space of Ireland alongside contributing to early childhood scholarship by incorporating underrepresented voices and geographies. In doing so, this article offers a nuanced understanding of relational ways of politicising Belonging and asks how Black futurity and the more-than-human can be included as a relational practice of world-making? This approach is not only culturally specific and grounded in the land of Ireland but also philosophically and politically radical in the framing of Belonging.

Challenging the ideas of the Anthropocene and anti-Blackness, this thesis clarifies several AI-related myths. Many believe technological advances are eco-friendly solutions to environmental issues, but this misconception is challenged by highlighting the actual physical ecological costs. Second, the notion that AI offers unbiased, neutral predictions is flawed, as biases embedded in gaming and AI outputs are examined.

Overall, the thesis contributes to the national picture within Ireland's geopolitical space, offering numerous provocations in various forms, ranging from questions to stories to images. In the disruption of anti-Blackness and the Anthropocene, this thesis extends an invitation to embrace uncertainty and co-create ethical, material-spiritual entanglements that sustain life in times of ecological crisis.

6.5.2. Ongoing contribution to Future possibilities: the 'not-yet-data'

Guided by the 'not-yet-data, each publication integrates diverse theoretical perspectives that foster an innovative approach to knowledge creation. Nonetheless, I do not intend to provide a comprehensive guide to ECEC, nor do I assert superiority in the methods of knowledge production (Smyth 2024, 2025). Nevertheless, I maintain that these stories are compelling in their interrogation and in their ability to move beyond the restrictive boundaries

of structures, such as paradigms, that govern the discipline of ECEC. Combined, the three published Journal Articles raise awareness of the complexities of historical contexts while demonstrating the inherent fragility of the contemporary pedagogical practices we, as educators, policymakers, and wider society, cultivate. In disrupting, dismantling, and displacing taken-for-granted assumptions, *I* think otherwise to generate alternative possibilities that have yet to be fully conceptualised within the discipline of ECEC. In the future, *I* intend to make this work more accessible to develop different entry points. *I* am sure this will bring more muddles. Also, *I* propose the following provocations as a call to action for future research and debates. I strongly urge post-scholastic scholarship to recognise that every gaze is from somewhere. It is, therefore, necessary to continually consider the default positions. Furthermore, this story challenges posthuman perspectives to recognise that colonial discourses continue to resonate in various forms, such as the false dichotomy between spirit and matter and the notion of animism. A further call to action is to consider what is possible within an educational arena that strives to challenge human exceptionalism and White supremacy. This research project offers a limited exploration of how children actively negotiate and reshape discourses. I would advocate for exploring how different aspects of the entangled ‘voice’ can be included in ethical, processual ways. What borders can be undone within a relational paradigm to connect humans and more-than-humans in ways that include Black futurity? (Smyth, 2025) Reclaiming the myth of the Crane bag stands as an ethical and political act of decolonising the knowledge-making process. For future possibilities, I repeat Robin Wall Kimmerer’s (2020) advice to recover, reclaim, and reuse anything dropped on the ancestral path that has the potential to support all our relations, humans and more-than-humans, to flourish in the future to come (Smyth, 2022, 2024, 2025). So, what patterns will you scribble?

6.7 Risks

Although I have woven discussion on risks throughout the project, I (in)conclude by re-turning in the act of ‘thickening’. Listening to the ‘not-yet-data’ brought me hope and allowed me to be affirmative. Nonetheless, there is a risk that the ‘not-yet-data’ pertains solely to my default position, which is intertwined with my life experiences. To balance this risk, I aligned with a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as Black feminist theory, that helped me keep an eye on my gaze as a White woman with academic privilege. Numerous Indigenous and Black feminist scholars have highlighted that the consequences of historical and structural racism, which are embedded within theoretical frameworks, are often overlooked by White feminists. From this standpoint, I continue to strive in my ongoing response to hooks’ (2014) call for White feminist scholars to recognise that progressive theories exclude the lived experiences of those situated on the margins. Therefore, I must acknowledge that other stories may go unheard at the periphery of this thesis. Another tension with postscholarship is risk of erasing the child’s role in the research narrative. In navigating this risk, I am guided by the ethical and political question posed by Murriss and Osgood (2022): *-How do posthumanist researchers keep the child in play when they neither ‘follow the child, nor make ‘child’ central to their investigations?*

The involvement of children in research is a primary objective of most studies conducted within the ECEC field (Olsen, 2025). As set out by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 12 advocates that children’s interests and views are considered. Article 13 of the UNCRC guarantees a child’s right to freedom of expression in various forms, including all media and communication methods (UNCRC, 1989). Consequently, engaging children in research and eliciting their ‘voice’ on matters that affect them is gaining notable traction (Lundy models). As previously discussed in Chapter 2, St. Pierre (2008) deconstructs the claim that ‘voice’ speaks the truth, advocating a critical examination of ‘voice’ as an

objective concept. Researchers such as Mayes (2019) draw attention to the lack of interrogation of the term 'voice' concerning children's participation in research, including the risks of reproducing dominant power relations. Additionally, Mayes highlights that other methods, such as more creative arts-based approaches like drawing and photo-voice, may remain adult in design. Therefore, the researcher must consider the adult/child power dynamic. Going beyond the representation of the human-centric position of the child is a key strength of Journal articles 2 and 3. Hence, the data collected was not due to a predetermined method designed by the adult researcher but was the response to the data as it emerged relationally. That being said, this thesis is not without risks. While this is a contentious debate, there are numerous risks when researchers employ inquiry that overlooks voice, just as there are risks when the human voice is centred in a hierarchical position. Although going beyond representation is a key feature of postscholarship, I would argue that it is essential to consider who remains unheard and the systemic silencing of Other voices or missing people (Braidotti).

This work has been guided by the perspective that children exist in a world that influences them, just as they, in turn, affect their surroundings (Taylor, 2017). Simultaneously, this research aligns with Barad's concept of entanglement as relational intra-actions between humans and more-than-human entities in various diffractive modes. Furthermore, Camp's haptic methods of listening to images and photographs encourage consideration of how Black refusal extends beyond merely seeing, by playing to other senses, such as feeling sound. Thus, drawing on a broad range of theoretical concepts, *I* have offered different possibilities for seeing and listening to children as contributors in the intra-action of generating knowledge. A photograph of children rolling down a hill emerged with pedagogical force to become a teacher of a flat ontology that challenged my hierarchical gaze of human superiority. Rolling down the hill with grass provided a lesson in the sacredness of reciprocity. Children behind the fence imparted a valuable lesson in how bordering operates in wider society while challenging the

notion of childhood innocence. Also, a silent relational moment between bodies, a human and the bog, challenges educators to consider moments of Black refusal that can create more possibilities for Black futurity while challenging the concept of belonging as a human endeavour only.

6.8 Limitations: Accessibility and sharing

Although most limitations typically found in a PhD thesis relate to the validation and sample size of the data, etc., this work's limitations lie more with subsuming academic procedures and structures to present this work comprehensibly within the educational arena. While this thesis provides powerful tools for reimagining ECEC, it presumes substantial academic literacy. The Flesch-Kincaid score for this thesis is '21- very difficult to read'. Undoubtedly, engaging with philosophy and postscholarship language and concepts complicates the text. Although I have translated these concepts into practical applications for educators and parents, the theoretical language may present a barrier to the actual concepts. Notably, Taylor and Hughes (2016) argue that postscholarship research risks becoming inaccessible, further reinforcing academic elitism. Consequently, this thesis may exclude most of the field it aims to support. Re-turning to my conversations and interpretations with the postgraduates on their first encounter with feminism, poststructural critique participants had highlighted for me the importance of accessing different perspectives...

Feminism, poststructuralism, that kind of thinking was brand new to us. It really opened up a whole world to us. It was like, this was a secret that nobody knew about.

(Katie, 2021)

You must have the language[terminology] to access it. And if no one has given you the language, you can't get it. So, we're always going to assume our perspective is the only perspective, or policy perspective is the only perspective, we can't even consider another...

(Sonja, 2021)

Re-turning to the question, how do we know what we know? It is also essential to consider the types of knowledge that are generated. Academic freedom has recently been gaining greater attention due to worries regarding a global decline and erosion of this fundamental value. Yasa, O’Hara and Brown (2025, p. 02) define academic freedom as the ‘right of academics to research, study, teach, and publish without interference.’ In 2023, the European Parliament set up a monitoring system to gauge how academic freedom is maintained in member states. Numerous threats continue to overshadow the ongoing protection of academic freedom, including institutional autonomy, investment interests, and neoliberal agendas (Yasa, O’Hara and Brown, 2025). The case of Trinity University (TU) Dublin makes for interesting considerations in the geopolitical space of Ireland. Recently, Trinity University received attention for violating the academic freedom of students protesting. TU issued a fine of € 214 285 from July 2023 to June 2024 to the students' union for financial losses caused by peaceful protests, which blocked access to the Book of Kells (Conneely, 2024). The students' protest criticised the lack of response by TU to Israel’s bombing of Gaza in reaction to Hamas's surprise attack. The fine imposed by TU was later dropped as investment portfolios with Israel came to light (Purdy, 2024). On the 4th of June 2025, Byrne (2025) reported that Trinity announced a complete divestment of investments, suppliers, commercial relationships, and academic and research ties with Israel. The power of student activism in exercising academic freedom in this case cannot be underestimated.

Within the folds of this research, *I* experienced the rare privilege of academic freedom to think, write, and experiment. Yet, *I* have felt a few moments of freedom of thought. I note that these moments occurred when *I* refused academic procedures, constraints, and opinions on how things should be done and written (Osgood and Mohandas, 2024). At the risk of oversimplifying, I attempt to convey those moments. Opening the Crane bag within a watery space revealed a more-than-human entanglement that became more just the material and the

discursive. As a result, I transitioned from striving intensely to represent knowledge to engaging intuitively in knowledge-making. Indeed, it was not merely the freedom of thought, but rather the freedom of existence and action—a reality that has the tools to challenge restrictive structures. Another moment is when I heard Black's refusal for the first time, which resonated with the essence of being in/with the bog. Nonetheless, *I do recognise the inherent privilege of freedom and resources I have access to throughout this project. I am here, while many are not.*

6.8.1 Spidery tentacular collaborations: Continuing Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles

Victoria de Rijke's reconceptualisation of scribbling has allowed for a processual, unfinished, and radically creative act that provides a powerful ongoing entry point for thinking about relationality. This thesis takes up scribbling as an enactment of wit(h)nessing—a practice that places “with” inside witnessing, signalling an ethical and political commitment to co-presence and response rather than detached observation. In postqualitative inquiry, such practices resist representationalism traditions and linear developmentalist narratives, opening space for uncertainty, multiplicity, and entanglement. Linking this to Haraway's notion of sympoiesis ‘making-with’ scribbles become vital lines that trace webs of relationality, compelling dominant discourses to be questioned and inviting alternative ways of knowing. Through these entangled practices, this thesis contributes to a relational post-developmental perspective in Early Childhood Education and Care, privileging creativity, co-emergence, and the politics of making-with-through scribbles. Scribbles that are knotty in their ongoingness, on the road to nowhere but travel everywhere and elsewhere. Keeping in mind the ethical and political intentions of this research, a key consideration is to bring the work to different places, otherwise and elsewhere, to share. Also working with Irish mythology, postfoundational perspectives, indigenous practice and Black feminism theories within this

PhD has helped me think and re-turn to a place *I* was before, but sidestepped for numerous reasons, one example is art activism with children and families. In the thickening of these moments, I re-turn to Donna Haraway’s ‘worlding-with’ that involves sympoiesis, where multispecies survival depends on recognising complex entanglements of ‘making-with’ and ‘making-together’ in a continuous web of spidery, tentacular connections that collectively continue to scribble-(k)not-scribble through ongoing collaborations. The most recent example is a family music and art festival Vantastival (2025) where *I* co-ordinated the children and family’s part of the festival (see for more details <https://www.vantastival.com/festival-info/kids/>). The key message of this festival was BEE kind (to bees and each other). This has provided space for scribbles to splash elsewhere and everywhere, and for collaboration on a large project with humans and more-than-humans. Alongside creative endeavours, there was a seedling café that involved families in planting pollinating plants for Bees.

6.8.2 Bee with Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles



Figure 5: Bee with Scribbles-(K)not-Scribbles. Children’s splash painting on a large canvas while listening and moving with music from the classical flight of the bumble bee at Vantastival 2025,



Figure 6: Flights of the Bumble Bees

6.9 Not so Final Thoughts

As I come close to concluding this thesis (10/06/2025), the children of Palestine are living and dying amid a war of ongoing violence. Since October 2023, in total, more than 50,000 children have reportedly been killed or injured in Palestine (UNICEF, 2025). *I* agree with Wells *et al.* (2024) that staying silent is complicity. Utterly distraught for the children of Palestine, *I* cannot genuinely celebrate my contribution to the potential of ECEC or finalising the privileged project of a thesis without speaking out against the devastation that the wrath of war is inflicting upon the children of Gaza. As I read his poem, children from a nearby school entered the playground for their lunch break. The playground is adjacent to my window. In a moment of deep appreciation for the noise created at lunchtime by children playing beneath my window, I wrote this poem, which I dedicate to the children of Gaza and to Khala Juma.

6.9.1 Poem - To the Children of Gaza

*Here on this white sheet of paper, I tap the keys on a board
Hoping to conclude this research project
Not sure what to write next, the end is near, but not.*

*What can I say to the pain, suffering and murder of the children of Gaza?
Your dreams, wishes and testimonies stamped on a million kites
Amid a massacre, how can any of my words suffice?*

*Splitting through my feverish thoughts
the noise of children on lunch break under my window
squealing, screechy laughter, bouncy ball.*

*Disconnecting the flow of words tapped out
in academic pursuits of egotistic success
Squelchy outcries pierce my thoughts.*

*I hold tight to the vibration of disruption
Sounds that echo, explode and pulse
Listening, Listening, Listening.*

*So, today I will stop - Oh, Rascal Children of Gaza.
Move from the chair to look out my window
For in this moment, I witness the fragile sound of peace.*

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Authorship The Declaration of Authorship – Published Journal Article 1

Section 1: Candidate's Details	
Candidate's Name	Lynda Smyth
DCU Student Number	18211391
School	Language Literacy and Early Childhood Education
Principal Supervisor	Mathias Urban
Title of PhD by Publication Thesis	Drawing Inside-out: A story of relationality that contributes to the reconceptualisation of Early Childhood Education and Care.
Section 2: Paper Details	
Title of paper included in the thesis under examination	Multiple crises, multiple sticky plasters: repositioning regimes of truth in ECEC policy to affirmative ethics of interconnection
List of authors as in order given on accepted/published version	Lynda Smyth (2022)
Publication Details (e.g. Year of Publication, Journal Name, Issue Number, Page Numbers, Place of Publication, DOI, ISSN, URL etc.)	Smyth, L. (2022). Multiple crises, multiple sticky plasters: repositioning regimes of truth in ECEC policy to affirmative ethics of interconnection. <i>Irish Educational Studies</i> , 43(3), 355–370. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2022.2074075
Publication Status (e.g. Published, Accepted)	Published
Provide a brief statement here on the disciplinary ranking of this publication and the peer-review process involved (e.g. how many reviewers, single blinded or other, initial decision, revision timeline etc and any other details that speak to the rigour of the peer review process)	<i>Irish Educational Studies</i> is an international, refereed journal that publishes manuscripts on a range of topics relevant to education. It draws on the full spectrum of disciplines that feed into educational theory and practice, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, economics, philosophy, politics, and curriculum studies. Time line – Received 17 th Dec 2021, Accepted 21 st of April 2022 and published 03 rd June 2022.

Peer Review Policy:

All research articles in this journal have undergone rigorous peer review, based on initial editor screening and anonymized refereeing by at least two anonymous referees.

Initial decision – rejection

The journal was rejected for the following 2 reasons quoted from correspondence on the 12th Dec 2021

This journal operates a blind review process. You have included reference to the authors' work in the paper, which could reveal the identity of the authors. Please remove author citations and replace with (Author, Year) and remove the accompanying references from the bibliography and again replace with (Author, Year). They can be replaced once reviewing has been completed.

Unfortunately, as it stands, your paper is too long for this journal. Papers submitted to this journal must be between 6000-8000 words. This includes the abstract and bibliography.

The article was revised and resubmitted on 17th of Dec 2021.

04th of March 2022 the journal article was accepted with conditional recommendations based on the following revisions. Revisions included the following reviews and comments on the manuscript.

Reviewer: 1

Comments to the Author

This paper represents an important contribution to how we see and understand the development of the domestic Early Childhood Care and Education sector, and as such should be considered a valuable addition to the literature. The organisation of the preceding 20 plus years into blocks of time, constructed both by what was generally occurring in the social and political landscapes, and through the 'regimes of truth' lens, provide a powerful position from which to critically reflect on how we arrived at our present location. By moving onto the post humanist and ethically informed recommendations, affirms that there are other ways forward, that we can indeed step away from the neo-conservative, market-based path.

Recommendations:

While not taking away from the positioning of the author, and the valid criticism of the Irish ECEC system, there have been successes (increased access to all children to funded preschool [ECCE, then AIM]; increasing numbers of graduate educators; greater attention by the state to the quality elements of ECEC, not solely labour market/social inclusion priorities), though

	<p>admittedly, these remain overshadowed by the overall shortcomings of the sector. The article could be criticised, itself, in being too one sided. Therefore, I recommend a paragraph of two that refer to these achievements, (possibly presented as remarkable within the struggling overall system) though not to sugarcoat it (ie increasing graduates, but poor pay/conditions mean high staff turnover remains).</p> <p>Further Recommendations:</p> <p>There are a very high number of sentences in which the grammatical structure/syntax needs to be addressed. These are highlighted.</p> <p>There are a smaller number of sentences that read /are phrased awkwardly and would benefit from revision/refining. Consider using term ECCE Scheme in place of FPSY; 'free' denotes no cost, where as poorly paid educators are underpinning the state's investment; also, 'year' expanded to be 2 years.</p> <p>See other comments on minor points to amend/consider in comments posted to manuscript.</p> <p>Reviewer: 2</p> <p>Comments to the Author Insightful and very well researched. Presents the very real challenges facing the sector and provides much food for thought regarding the future.</p> <p>02nd April – Edits returned</p> <p>21st April – Accepted</p> <p>26th May – Further edits</p> <p>03rd June – published</p> <p>Article metrics</p> <p>2,028 Views</p> <p>2 CrossRef citations to date</p> <p>20 Altmetric</p> <p>Metrics of the journal article</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1.8 (2023) Impact Factor ● Q2 Impact Factor Best Quartile ● 1.9 (2023) 5 year IF ● 4.0 (2023) CiteScore (Scopus) ● Q2 CiteScore Best Quartile ● 1.081 (2023) SNIP
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0.626 (2023) SJR
<p>This paper (Chapter 3) is one of the papers to be submitted as part of the PhD by publication thesis submitted for examination.</p>	
<p>Section 3: Candidate's Contribution to the Paper</p>	
<p>Provide details below of the nature and extent of your contribution to the paper (include both your intellectual and practical contributions) and your overall contribution in percentage terms. Note that these categories can be customised according to disciplinary norms</p> <p>Briefly outline your contribution to the conception of the work described in this paper: 100%</p> <p>Briefly outline your contribution to the literature review in this paper: 100%</p> <p>Briefly outline your contribution to the methodological design: 100%</p> <p>Briefly outline your contribution to data collection: 100%</p> <p>Briefly outline your contribution to data analysis: 100%</p> <p>Briefly outline your contribution to the synthesis and summary of findings: 100%</p> <p>Finally, outline your contribution to the writing and revision of the paper: 100%</p>	
<p>Section 4: Signature and Validation</p>	
<p>I confirm that the following statements are true:</p> <p>(a) the information I have provided in this form is correct</p> <p>(b) this paper is based on research undertaken during my candidature at DCU</p> <p>Signature of PhD Candidate: <u>Lynda Smyth</u> Date: <u>10/06/2025</u></p> <p>I confirm that the information provided by the candidate is correct:</p> <p>Signature of Principal Supervisor: <u>Mathias Urban</u></p> <p>Date: <u>10/06/25</u></p> <p>In some cases, it may be appropriate for verification to be given by both the principal supervisor and the lead/corresponding author of the work (where the lead/corresponding author of the work is not the candidate or the principal supervisor):</p> <p>Signature of Lead/Corresponding Author _____ Date: _____</p>	

Nature of Current Post/Responsibilities _____
Home institution _____

Appendix 2: Authorship - Declaration of Authorship - Published Journal Article 2

Section 1: Candidate's Details	
Candidate's Name	Lynda Smyth
DCU Student Number	18211391
School	Language Literacy and Early Childhood Education
Principal Supervisor	Mathais Urban
Title of PhD by Publication Thesis	Drawing Inside-out: A story of relationality that contributes to the reconceptualisation of Early Childhood Education and Care.
Section 2: Paper Details	
Title of co-authored paper included in the thesis under examination	Smyth, L. (2024). The Crane bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts in early childhood education and care. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood,
List of authors as in order given on accepted/published version	Smyth, Lynda (2024)

<p>Publication Details (e.g. Year of Publication, Journal Name, Issue Number, Page Numbers, Place of Publication, DOI, ISSN, URL etc.)</p>	<p>Smyth, L. (2024). The Crane bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts in early childhood education and care. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491241255056</p>
<p>Publication Status (e.g. Published, Accepted)</p>	<p>Published</p>
<p>Provide a brief statement here on the disciplinary ranking of this publication and the peer-review process involved (e.g. how many reviewers, single blinded or other, initial decision, revision timeline etc and any other details that speak to the rigour of the peer review process)</p>	<p>Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood is a peer-reviewed international research journal. The journal provides a forum for researchers and professionals who are exploring new and alternative perspectives in their work with young children (from birth to eight years of age) and their families. CIEC aims to present opportunities for scholars to highlight the ways in which the boundaries of early childhood studies and practice are expanding, and for readers to participate in the discussion of emerging issues, contradictions and possibilities.</p> <p>CIEC incorporates interdisciplinary, cutting edge work which may include the following areas: poststructuralist, postmodern and postcolonial approaches, queer theory, sociology of childhood, alternative viewpoints of child development, and deal with issues such as language and identity, the discourse of difference, new information</p>

	<p>technologies, stories and voices, curriculum, culture and pedagogy, or any combination of such ideas.</p> <p>The Editors encourage submission of a variety of high quality manuscripts including: reports of research from a variety of paradigms; articles about research, literature reviews and theoretical discussions; book reviews; colloquia and responses/critiques; invited commentaries.</p> <p>Pedagogy, Culture and Society - Decision on Manuscript ID RPCS-2023-0046 01-Mar-2023 – Rejected</p> <p>I regret to inform you that we have now considered your paper but unfortunately feel it unsuitable for publication in Pedagogy, Culture and Society. You are of course now free to submit the paper elsewhere should you choose to do so.</p> <p>Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood 12 April 2023 – Rejected</p> <p>I write you in regards to manuscript # CIE-23-0034 entitled "The Crane-bag: Braiding Irish mythology and Posthuman perspectives together within the discipline of Early Childhood Education and Care." which you submitted to Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood (CIEC).</p>
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Based on the comments found at the bottom of this letter, we are not able to publish your paper in Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood. You may consider using the feedback to revise the article and resubmit it as the concepts are of interest to the CIEC audience.

Thank you for considering Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood for the publication of your research. I hope the outcome of this specific submission will not discourage you from the submission of future manuscripts.

Comments to the Author

Thank you for the opportunity to read this paper. It is an interesting idea to bring Irish mythology and in particular the Crane-bag into conversation with posthuman perspectives/theory. The idea of 'braiding' these two together hold much potential.

However, there is a need for strengthening the theoretical work within the analysis of data in order to make it clear how this 'braiding' has unfolded and revealed what it is that is being claimed.

I would suggest:

1. foreground the Irish mythology and Indigenous argument in the article rather than foregrounding the posthuman theories. This will then allow you to dig deeper into your data in relation to the Crane-bag mythology and use its key concepts/aspects in your analysis at a deeper

level.

2. Unpack in more detail and with the theory your data analysis.

there is a reliance on the reader just intuiting what you are "seeing" in the data. This might mean just taking one aspect of your data and diving deeper into its analysis.

3. If the above is attended to then I believe the 'braiding' of the two perspectives will be clearer and thus the conclusion will be able to attend to the theoretical contributions in a rigorous manner.

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood - Decision on
Manuscript ID CIE-23-0079

01-Oct-2023

Manuscript ID CIE-23-0079 entitled "The Crane-bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous beliefs and posthuman perspectives within the discipline of Early Childhood Education and Care." which you submitted to Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, has been reviewed. The comments of the reviewer(s) are included at the bottom of this letter.

The reviewer(s) have suggested some revisions to your manuscript: one reviewer suggested minor and the other suggested major revisions. Therefore, I invite you to respond to the reviewer(s)' comments and revise your manuscript.

To strengthen the manuscript, please attend to the comments from both reviewers.

	<p>Once again, thank you for submitting your manuscript to Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood and I look forward to receiving your revision.</p> <p>Reviewer(s)' Comments to Author</p> <p>Reviewer: 1</p> <p>Comments to the Author</p> <p>Many thanks for the opportunity to review this paper again. It was a pleasure to read this re-newed, re-thought, re-conceptualised, re-written version of this paper. The paper now demonstrates the depth of thinking that has taken place and the conceptual work that has been done to bring to the forefront what the Crane-bag "as artefact of Irish mythology" can do as it comes into conversation with Indigenous beliefs and posthuman concepts. The author has discussed and argued strongly the role of 'spirit' in this analysis and the paradigm shift it has afforded. There is a significant contribution of knowledge to current work using posthuman concepts in early childhood research that this paper makes and is captured in the conclusion stating that there is the risk of recapitulating the colonised discourses of animism. I strongly agree. The author's argument around the acknowledgement of 'spirit' here is what stands out as it speaks back to research in the posthuman space that has failed to recognise 'spirit'. There are some who argue that current this work is reducing the material to the physical and biological. By foregrounding the 'local' and 'local' Indigenous knowledges here in this</p>
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paper along with posthuman concepts the 'spirit' has been foregrounded rather than its presence being relegated to a haunting (Derrida) of the very concept. Therefore, my recommendation is that the author takes a stronger stance here and consider how they can further strengthen the conclusion and its arguments and the contribution they are making to the every growing body of research in early childhood using posthuman theories.

Reviewer: 2

Comments to the Author

I read this article with interest as there is a burgeoning interest in indigenous scholarship in Early Childhood Education. However, I have suggested major revision for the following reasons:

1. You don't really explain or situate the child rolling down the hill example within the literature on nature and the post human - Abi Hackett's work would be relevant here and the work of Jayne Osgood.
2. I think for this to be relevant the Crane needs to situate itself more closely within the everyday worlds of Early Childhood Educators in Ireland. It felt like a removed story and lens. I would suggest making some adjustments that link the work to a more situated viewpoint from within the field currently.
3. There is loads and loads out there in terms of scholarship on children and nature. The work of Margaret Somerville

and the idea of thinking through water has been explored in her work. Link your work more broadly to that scholarship. At the moment, this felt like a first draft. We need a more situated and directly relevant piece of thinking drawing on a more clearly defined empirical study.

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood - Decision on Manuscript ID CIE-23-0079.R1

Body:

08-Jan-2024

Dear Dr. Smyth/Lynda:

Manuscript ID CIE-23-0079.R1 entitled "The Crane-bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous beliefs and posthuman perspectives within the discipline of Early Childhood Education and Care." which you submitted to Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, has been reviewed. The comments of the reviewer(s) are included at the bottom of this letter.

The reviewer has suggested some minor revisions to your manuscript. Therefore, I invite you to respond to the reviewer(s)' comments and revise your manuscript.

Sincerely,

Professor Susan Grieshaber

Editor in Chief, Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood

s.grieshaber@latrobe.edu.au

	<p>Reviewer(s)' Comments to Author:</p> <p>Reviewer: 2</p> <p>Comments to the Author</p> <p>This article is much improved. However, I felt while reading it that it could be scaled back some more to specifically focus on the ontological 'problem' of indigenous knowledge with regard to the idea of the Crane in Early Childhood Education. Far too much of the article took on World Thinking which sat rather uneasily within the article. The section on page 12 is much better and shows how your thinking was developed.</p> <p>Small suggestions:</p> <p>p. 5 Need citations when introducing the writers on page 5</p> <p>Some of the statements are quite sweeping. eg I found this quite a romanticised version of the past: "A period when the spiritual relationship between humans and the more-than human was intertwined, as part of the fabric of life".</p> <p>Be specific. How do you know this and what period are you talking about? Contemporary archaeology is quite critical of such assumptions.</p>
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ON page 10 likewise there is this statement: "Historically, western societies have colonised the planet with a model of how legitimate knowledge should be emulated", This again provides quite an un-situated view and doesn't really account for the complexity of thought coming out of Islam, India, the Far East and many societies that have had a far-reaching effect on thinking in the West.

Likewise this statement: "Moreover, western knowledge, as highlighted by Brad Wray (2011), is overwhelmingly produced within a positivist paradigm"

Again, doesn't really account for philosophy's focus on uncertainty. Complex disciplines and structures of knowledge are quite sweepingly described. I wouldn't include these statements as they could be misunderstood.

In a small article, I would suggest focusing just on ways in which the concept of indigenous knowledge helped you articulate the idea of the Crane drawing on an Irish cultural understanding of this concept and focus in on the question of how this changes thinking in Early Childhood Education. I found the section on page 11 rather wide-ranging and sweeping.

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood - Decision on
Manuscript ID CIE-23-0079.R3
24-Mar-2024

It is a pleasure to accept your manuscript entitled "The Crane bag: Braiding Irish mythology, indigenous knowledge and posthuman concepts in early childhood education and care." in its current form for publication in Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood.

Thank you for your fine contribution. On behalf of the Editors of Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, we look forward to your continued contributions to the Journal.

Sincerely,

Professor Nicola Yelland

Editor in Chief, Contemporary Issues in Early Child

s.grieshaber@latrobe.edu.au

Article metrics

Total views and downloads: 886

Journal Metrics

2 year impact factor

1.3

Education & Educational Research 345 out of 760

5 year impact factor

1.5

Education & Educational Research 347 out of 760

Journal Citation Indicator

0.65

Education & Educational Research 382 out of 75.

Total views and downloads: 645

This paper (Chapter 4) is one of 3 papers to be submitted as part of the PhD by publication thesis submitted for examination.

Section 3: Candidate's Contribution to the Paper

Provide details below of the **nature** and **extent of your contribution** to the paper (include both your intellectual and practical contributions) and your overall contribution in **percentage terms**.

Note that these categories can be customised according to disciplinary norms

Briefly outline your contribution to the **conception** of the work described in this paper:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to the **literature review** in this paper:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to the **methodological design**

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to **data collection**:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to **data analysis**:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to the **synthesis and summary of findings**:

100%

Finally, outline your contribution to the **writing** and **revision** of the paper:

100%

Section 4: Signature and Validation

I confirm that the following statements are true:

- (a) the information I have provided in this form is correct
- (b) this paper is based on research undertaken during my candidature at DCU

Signature of PhD Candidate: __Lynda Smyth **Date:** 09/02/25

I confirm that the information provided by the candidate is correct:

Signature of Principal Supervisor Mathias Urban : Date: 10-06-2025

In some cases, it may be appropriate for verification to be given by both the principal supervisor **and** the lead/corresponding author of the work (where the lead/corresponding author of the work is not the candidate or the principal supervisor):

Signature of Lead/Corresponding Author _____ **Date:** _____

Nature of Current Post/Responsibilities _____

Home institution _____

Appendix 3: Authorship - Declaration of Authorship – Published Journal Article 3

Section 1: Candidate's Details	
Candidate's Name	Lynda Smyth
DCU Student Number	18211391
School	Language Literacy and Early Childhood Education
Principal Supervisor	Mathias Urban
Title of PhD by Publication Thesis	Drawing Inside-out: A story of relationality that contributes to the reconceptualisation of Early Childhood Education and Care.
Section 2: Paper Details	
Title of paper included in the thesis under examination	Fences, Bogs, and Bodies: Diffracting Belonging Alongside Black Futurity in Early Childhood Education and Care
List of authors as in order given on accepted/published version	Lynda Smyth (2025)
Publication Details (e.g. Year of Publication, Journal Name,	

<p>Issue Number, Page Numbers, Place of Publication, DOI, ISSN, URL etc.)</p>	<p>Smyth L (2025) Fences, Bogs, and Bodies: Diffracting Belonging Alongside Black Futurity in Early Childhood Education and Care. <i>International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal</i> 12(1). 1. https://journals.sfu.ca/iccps/index.php/childhoods/article/view/321</p>
<p>Publication Status (e.g. Published, Accepted)</p>	<p>Published</p>
<p>Provide a brief statement here on the disciplinary ranking of this publication and the peer-review process involved (e.g. how many reviewers, single blinded or other, initial decision, revision timeline etc and any other details that speak to the rigour of the peer review process)</p>	<p>Peer Review Policy:</p> <p>All research articles in this journal have undergone rigorous peer review, based on initial editor screening and anonymized refereeing by at least two anonymous referees.</p> <p>The <i>International Critical Childhood Policy Studies Journal</i> is an open-access, peer-reviewed e-journal for researchers, practitioners, and activists concerned with critical (e.g. poststructural, feminist, postcolonial, posthumanist) examinations of childhood policy conceptualizations and practices in a range of fields.</p> <p>Research projects and theoretical papers related to complexity, social justice, equity, and the</p>

	<p>reconstitution/reinscription of oppression/privilege, inclusion/exclusion are highly encouraged.</p> <p>Initial decision – accepted</p> <p>Review: 1</p> <p>This manuscript reconceptualizes the idea of belonging in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) through a feminist relational perspective, integrating Black futurity, new materialism, and trans-corporeality. Given the critical need for research that critiques traditional human-centered approaches to belonging, as well as research that discusses Black futurity, the topic of this study is very pertinent to the field. Some strengths of the study lie in its interdisciplinary theoretical framework, creative methodologies, and critical engagement with Black futurity and refusal. The author’s positionality as a White researcher and parent of a Mixed-Race family also adds a layer of self-reflexivity, which demonstrates ethical care and accountability in research.</p>
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	<p>I was particularly affected by the author’s presentation of entangled data - the fence and the bog - as the juxtaposition of two stories—one of exclusion and one of relational belonging—highlights the complexity and multidimensionality of belonging.</p> <p>There is a lot of potential for the study to be applied to educators’ practices. However, educators seeking actionable steps to incorporate relational and ecological belonging into their work might find the text abstract. The author might consider adding concrete strategies for applying these ideas in ECEC practices.</p> <p>While the article critiques anthropocentrism and emphasizes relationality, there is limited exploration of how children themselves actively negotiate and reshape discourses of belonging. The author might consider finding ways of bringing in children’s voices.</p> <p>There are also some issues with the manuscript that require revision before it would be ready for publication.</p>
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	<p>The following recommendations may help to strengthen the manuscript:</p> <p>Theoretical considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Does Donna Haraway consider herself to be posthuman? I think she critiques this term. Perhaps use “postfoundational” here instead?- Results and discussion- Do you call this section “Results” for a particular reason, or do you perhaps want to choose a word that aligns better with the “posts” such as “findings” or “emerging considerations”- You repeat the research questions 3 times throughout the text at the end of sections, and I wonder if you might want to embed them in a more integrated way in the places where you are responding to them. The way you currently have them seems like you are introducing what you will be doing in the paper, rather than what you are currently doing even inside the sections where the questions appear.
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	<p>- Observation - do you know for sure that the children and men you describe identify as white? If not, could say white-presenting</p> <p>Proofreading/formatting</p> <p>- Also check for consistency in spelling, capitalization, or hyphenation. For example, you say “early years” in some places and “early-year” in others. You also capitalize “Black” in most places, but write “black” in others.</p> <p>- Your citations must be written in APA formatting, both in the in-text citations and in the references section.</p> <p>Please also check that the formatting is consistent (e.g. in some places you have commas between author and year, in others you do not). APA formatting for an article, for example, is the following: Author Last Name, First Initial. (Year). Title of the Article. Title of the Journal, Volume number(Issue number), Page range. https://doi.org/DOI if available</p> <p>Overall, this article is very compelling for its innovative methodology, critical engagement with systemic issues, and commitment to ethical and ecological pedagogy. The</p>
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revisions listed above will hopefully allow the significance of this work to emerge more clearly.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to read this manuscript, and I wish you the best on your publishing journey!

Review 2

I liked this article and found the core premise very interesting. I loved the exploration and intersection of the authors positionality, geographical space, and theory. The article's strength comes from the weaving together of diverse theoretical frameworks—Black futurity, new materialism, diffraction, and trans-corporeality—creating an innovative approach to rethinking belonging in ECEC. I can see this article's place among others that call for a posthuman and Black futures in early childhood. By situating its analysis in the Irish context and addressing issues such as peatland conservation and historical colonization, your article provides a perspective on the intersections of race, environment, and identity in a less commonly studied geographic setting. Finally, Story 1 and Story 2—children behind the fence and the photograph of

	<p>a child in the bog—provide compelling illustrations of the theoretical concepts. Overall, the article is a thought-provoking and ambitious contribution that pushes the boundaries of traditional ECEC research, offering a visionary framework for addressing belonging and inclusivity in both human and ecological terms.</p> <p>At this point, I'd recommend a revision and resubmit with a focus on a clearer structure and more explain theoretical framework.</p> <p>Theoretical Framework</p> <p>This article combines several dense theoretical frameworks, including Black futurity, new materialism, diffraction, and trans-corporeality, potentially overwhelming the reader. It could be that this broad scope dilutes focus, which I think makes it challenging to pinpoint the article's primary contribution.</p> <p>· While the article is rich in theoretical exploration, readers could feel there is are few actionable insights for educators. While engaging, the multiple theoretical orientations could limit the article's accessibility and relevance.</p>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Overall, I think some of longer explanations of theory could be reduced and it would be more interesting to articulate how you are using them.· I'd like to know more about how the "data glowed" (p. 19) for you. Is this something everyone knows? Is there a citation there? <p>Article Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· I found the first pages a little confusing. I think pages 1-2 (ending at "Indeed, matter...") could be incorporated into later parts of the paper. I think starting with the data and stories you're exploring is a more natural and engaging beginning. I struggled with the incorporate of your critique of the Irish curricular framework, Aistear. It seemed like a brief interlude and limited engagement with political and ecological dimensions of belonging. <p>I found the paragraph on Power & Somerville very interesting and seemed incredibly aligned to your theories and texts, but there was not much engagement with that scholarship beyond page 22.</p> <p>Copy Writing Edits</p>
--	---

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The journal is APA, please change all citations (in text and references) to APA · No citation for Jackson (2013) or Hinton, Mehrabi, and Barla n.d.. · Some authors are listed with first names, others not. · Some sentences are repeated
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This paper (Chapter 5) is one of 3 papers to be submitted as part of the PhD by publication thesis submitted for examination.

Section 3: Candidate's Contribution to the Paper

Provide details below of the **nature** and **extent of your contribution** to the paper (include both your intellectual and practical contributions) and your overall contribution in **percentage terms**. Note that these categories can be customised according to disciplinary norms

Briefly outline your contribution to the **conception** of the work described in this paper:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to the **literature review** in this paper:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to the **methodological design**:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to **data collection**:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to **data analysis**:

100%

Briefly outline your contribution to the **synthesis and summary of findings**:

100%

Finally, outline your contribution to the **writing and revision** of the paper:

100%

Section 4: Signature and Validation

I confirm that the following statements are true:

- (a) the information I have provided in this form is correct
- (b) this paper is based on research undertaken during my candidature at DCU

Signature of PhD Candidate: __Lynda Smyth ____ **Date:** __10/06/2025____

I confirm that the information provided

the candidate is correct:

Signature of Principal Supervisor: Mathias Urban **Date:**10_06-2025


In some cases, it may be appropriate for verification to be given by both the principal supervisor **and** the lead/corresponding author of the work (where the lead/corresponding author of the work is not the candidate or the principal supervisor):

Signature of Lead/Corresponding Author _____ **Date:**

Nature of Current Post/Responsibilities _____

Home _____ institution _____

Appendix 4: Ethical approval

 **rec dcu** <rec@dcu.ie>
to me, Mathias ▾ 8 Jun 2021, 08:49 ☆ ↶ ⋮

Dear Lynda,




Thank you for submitting the amendment for your **research** project DCUREC/2019/113. I can confirm that the REC Chair has completed their review and issued approval for the amendment and all associated documentation. Please accept this email as formal approval.

Wishing you the very best for your **research**

Kind regards
Adam Platt (on behalf of REC)
Riarthóir Coiste Éitice um Taisghe | DCU **Research Ethics Committee** Administrator
Tacaíocht Taisghe & Nialaíochta | Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Research and Innovation Support | Dublin City University

Email: rec@dcu.ie
Tel: +353 (0)1 700 5612
Web: www.dcu.ie/research

Tacaíocht Taisghe & Nialaíochta | Foirgneamh Invent | Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath | Campas Ghlas Naíon | BÁC 9
Research and Innovation Support | Invent Building | Dublin City University | Glasnevin Campus | Dublin 9

Skanadh Riomphoist/Email Disclaimer

Appendix 5: Information brief for participants



Name of research paper:

Moments of shifting our gaze to a feminist post-structural stance within early education in Ireland.

My name is Lynda Smyth. You will recall that I delivered the module Contemporary perspectives of play, learning, and pedagogy as part of the MA programme with NUIG. I am a PhD student at Dublin City University (DCU). As part of the assessment requirement, I am developing several research papers that explore reconceptualising ECEC.

About this research paper

This research paper focuses on investigating the role of adult education in supporting the early years practitioner in developing critical positions, such as a feminist post-structural stance. Additionally, it aims to address the benefits (if any) of developing post-structural theoretical perspectives within early education.

What would taking part in this research involve?

Work already submitted

As part of the data collection for this research, I wish to gain consent to use the work that you have already submitted as part of the assessment criteria for the module *Contemporary perspectives on play, learning and pedagogy EYS1115, MA programme*.

This would include the work you submitted for the following: -

1. Interactive blog
2. Essay theoretical perspective for analytic analysis
3. Evaluation of the module.

I will use the material listed above as data to investigate the role of adult education in supporting early years practitioners in developing critical thinking skills. Please note that children's observations will not be included in this analysis without explicit permission.

Online conversations

There will be an opportunity to participate in a follow-up online conversation. You may wish to take part, or you may wish to decline.

The conversation aims to discuss your experiences developing pedagogical strategies from a post-structural perspective since completing the module Contemporary perspective on play, learning, and pedagogy.

The conversation will be held on Zoom (DCU licensed version of Zoom, which is a secure site). You should find a quiet private space (not a public one) for the conversation. The online conversation will take approximately 60 minutes. A secure password will be created for the online conversation, which you will receive prior to the meeting.

Please do not share the secure password with anyone else.

Notes will be taken during this conversation, which will be recorded for later transcription. When transcribed, the conversation will be fully anonymised.

This research will be shared with a broader public audience, through publications and presentations. Please note that data from this research will not be used in any other form nor shared with any other agencies or persons without explicit permission.

Risk in taking part in this research

I do not foresee any risk for you while participating in this research.

After the project is complete, I will hold a debriefing session alongside an exhibition of the data (information) collected, which will be organised in a particular format to ensure that everyone involved is represented appropriately. Every effort will be made to maintain data confidentiality within legal limitations. Data can be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim, or mandated reporting by some professions.

The Dublin City University ethics committee has approved this research. If you wish to contact the DCU ethics committee by telephone (01 8842262) or email, research@dcu.ie. Additionally,

you can contact my research supervisor, Mathias Urban, by telephone (01 8842052) or by email mathias.urban@dcu.ie

Please click on the link below if you wish to give informed consent.

<https://forms.office.com/e/nGjQR30UhC>

I have read and understood the above, and agree to take part:

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

I have explained the above and answered all questions asked by the participant:

Researcher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

I have read and understood the above, and agree to take part:

Print name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Please tick the appropriate box, I consent to participating the following;

	YES	NO
Online conversation		
Submitting personal photographs		
Submit reflective journal and course work for assessment		

Appendix 6: Parental consent form for child participation



About the study

My name is Lynda Smyth. I am a PhD student at Dublin City University (DCU).

I am carrying out an investigation the role of adult education in supporting the early years practitioner in developing critical positions in ECEC. The early childhood educator may submit a photograph to support their story of developing a critical position.

I understand that my child's participation in this project will involve:

- **The early childhood educator may submit a photograph during this research study of my child.**
- **That there are limitations relating to confidentiality.**
- **That my child participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that they can withdraw from their image at any time without giving a reason.**
- **That their participation will be treated confidentially and all information will be stored anonymously and securely.**
- **That I am free to ask any questions at any time.**

That this research may be published for wider public audiences. However, photos and images used by Lynda Smyth for this research will not reveal the identity of children or location of the setting in any other form nor shared with any other agencies or persons without explicit permission.

Every effort will be made to maintain data confidentiality within legal limitation. It is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

This research has been approved by the Dublin City University ethic committee. If you wish to contact the DCU ethics committee by telephone (01 8842262) or by email, research@dcu.ie

Additionally, you can contact my research supervisor Mathias Urban by telephone (01 8842052) or by email mathias.urban@dcu.ie

After reading the information I, _____(NAME) consent to Lynda Smyth proceeding with this study with the supervision of Mathias Urban.

Name of Child: _____

Relationship to the child: _____

Signature: _____

Print name: _____ Date: _____

Please tick the appropriate box, I consent to the following;

YES NO

The early childhood educator submitting photographs of my child involved in play

I have explained the above and answered all questions asked by the participant:

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Alternatively click on the link below to give informed consent

<https://forms.office.com/e/nGjQR30UhC>

Appendix 7: Parental and Assent form for the child



Print

Name

I have read and understood the above, and agree to take part:

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

I have explained the above and answered all questions asked by the participant:

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Early childhood practitioner signature

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please tick the appropriate box, I consent to the following;

	YES	NO
Submitting personal photographs		

Appendix 8: Permission slip – Visual permission slip

Visual permission slip.

Can I watch you playing?



Can I write down what
you are doing?



Can I show your parents what I
have written about you?



Appendix 9: Techniques of power enacted – Observation for group activity

Observation of a Child Embodying Dominant Discourse - Group Activity

Read the following observation. In groups analysis in relation to Gore's categorisation of micro-level techniques of power enacted

Observation of two children (Ann 4years old and Simon 2 years old) who attend a full day care setting. They children are involved in role play. Other children referring to during the role play are children who attend the afterschool (aged 7) within the setting however they are not present during this observation.

Ann and Simon move chairs into a circle within the space. Ann indicates to Simon where to place the chairs.

Ann: We are getting the concert ready. All the parents and children are coming soon.

Ann: I am on work experience.

Adult: On work experience, what kinda of things do you have to do on work experience?

Ann: I read stories, I tidy up, take children off the bus, I help children with their coats;

Ann then folds papers and puts in-between tables.

Adult: what are you doing now?

Ann: I'm putting paper in the photocopier only me can do it.

Ann: He can't go out, that is only for big ones, there is a slide for the big ones not him (referring to smaller child Simon wanting to leave the room)

Ann: If I am not there, the children can read their stories, anyone can read a story, Mary, Paula (refers to the older children attending the after-school service). They read for the other children

Adult: Are you the person in charge?

Ann: Shakes head indicating NO

Adult: Who is charge of the crèche?

Ann: Clare, Paula, Jane, Jo, Sarah, the big ones and the little ones.

Adult: Who works in the office?

Ann: Geraldine and Patrice

Adult: What do they do?

Ann: Work experience

Adult: When they do work experience, what do they have to do?

Ann: They do things for Clare and Jo, Sarah, Paula, they have to get us things

Ann: ok, come on, girls, get your bags (referring to the after-school children). The bus is here. I'll get the bags; you go down to the bus. Let's go

Other considerations

Consider how we might analyse this observation in terms of developmental norms?

How does the child embody the dominant discourse of normative development?

Appendix 10: Timeline of significant policy and legislative development in ECEC

- 1992 Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
- 1996 Childcare Act 1991 (Preschool Service) Regulation 1996 (Government of Ireland 1996)
- 1998 Strengthen families for Life: report of the Commission on the Family (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs)
- 1998 Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science)
- 1999 National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (department of Justice, Equality and Law reform)
- 1999 Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science)
- 2000 National Development Plan (NDP) 2000–2006(Government of Ireland 1999).
- 2000 Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP)
- 2000 Our Children -Their Lives: National Children’s Strategy (Department of Health and children)
- 2000 Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP, 2000–2006).
- 2001 National Children’s Office (NCO)
- 2002 The Model Framework Report (DJELR, 2002)
- 2002 SAVI Report (Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland)
- 2004 First Ombudsperson for Children appointed
- 2006 Towards 2016: A ten-year social Partnership Framework 2006-2015
- 2006 National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010
- 2006 Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE)
- 2009 Ryan Report (CICA 2009)
- 2009 Workforce Development Plan (WDP) (DES 2009)
- 2010 Universally funded preschool year (ECCE scheme)
- 2011 Full government department with Minister for children appointed
- 2012 Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2012 recognises children as rights holders under the Constitution
- 2013 Right from the Start (DCEDIY,2013)
- 2014 Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020(DCYA, 2014)
- 2013 National Early Years Strategy (NEYS)
- 2009 Aistear: Early Childhood Curriculum framework (NCCA 2009)
- 2014 The Learner Fund was set up to support the upskilling of the ECEC sector.
- 2015 AistearSiolta Practice Guide (NCCA 2015)
- 2015 Early Years Education Inspections (EYEIs) (DES 2015)
- 2016 Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Regulations) 2016 (Government of Ireland 2016)
- 2016 Introduction of second free pre-school year for preschool children (ECCE) (Government of Ireland 2019).
- 2016 Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)
- 2017 Review of Occupational Role Profiles in Ireland in Early Child Education Care (Urban et al, 2017)
- 2018 First 5: A Whole Government Strategy for Babies and Young Child and their Families (DCEDIY, 2018)
- 2021 Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland: Review on Sector Quality (OECD, 2021)

- 2021 Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028 (DCEDIY 2021)
- 2021 The Joint Labour Committee has invoked an Employment Regulation Order (ERO) for the early years sector
- 2021 Investigation into Mother and Baby Home (DCEDIY 2021)

