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# Kerbs and curbs, desire and damage: an affirmative account of children's play and being well during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

A dominant narrative around the impact of COVID-19 on children focuses on the risk of children being the pandemic's biggest victims. Without denying the severity of such damage, this article explores two examples of playing during the pandemic, alongside more affirmative Deleuzian accounts of desire, which can contribute to mitigating both the damage itself and what damage narratives perform. Using two fragments of data from research into children's play during the first COVID-19 UK lockdown, we show how, despite the tightest of restrictions, moments of playfulness emerged from encounters between children, other bodies and the materiality and affective atmospheres of the street to produce moments of being well. In both fragments children play with the kerbs on the street, deterritorialising the curbs of both striated street spaces and lockdown in ways that temporarily enact a playful politics of space and produce moments of being well. We read these fragments through contemporary Deleuzian accounts of desire as a productive force. In so doing, we contribute to debates in relational ontologies of children's geographies that address the micropolitics of children's spatial practices.

## Bordillos y frenos, deseo y daño: Un relato afirmativo del juego infantil y del estar bien durante la pandemia del COVID-19

## RESUMEN

El informe de las Naciones Unidas (2020) sobre el impacto del COVID-19 en los niños se hace eco de una narrativa dominante cuando afirma que los niños corren el riesgo de ser las mayores víctimas de la pandemia. Sin negar la gravedad de dicho daño, este artículo explora dos ejemplos de jugar durante la pandemia junto con relatos deleuzianos más afirmativos del deseo, que pueden contribuir a mitigar tanto el daño en sí mismo como el daño que realizan las narrativas. Utilizando dos fragmentos de datos de la investigación sobre el juego infantil durante el primer

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confinamiento por el COVID-19 en el Reino Unido, mostramos cómo, a pesar de las restricciones más estrictas, surgieron momentos de diversión de los encuentros entre los niños, otros cuerpos y la materialidad y las atmósferas afectivas de la calle para producir momentos de estar bien. En ambos fragmentos, los niños juegan con los bordillos de la calle, desterritorializando los frenos tanto de los espacios estriados de la calle como del encierro de maneras que promulgan temporalmente una política lúdica del espacio y producen momentos de bienestar. Leemos estos fragmentos a través de relatos deleuzianos contemporáneos del deseo como fuerza productiva. Al hacerlo, contribuimos a los debates sobre ontologías relacionales de las geografías infantiles que abordan la micropolítica de las prácticas espaciales de los niños.

### **Trottoirs et bordures, désir et dommages: un compte-rendu positif de jeux d'enfants et de bien-être pendant la pandémie de COVID-19**

#### **RÉSUMÉ**

La note de synthèse des Nations Unies sur l'impact de la COVID-19 sur les enfants (2020) fait écho au discours dominant quand elle déclare qu'ils risquent de compter parmi ses plus grandes victimes. Sans pour autant nier la gravité de ces dommages, cet article explore deux exemples de jeux pendant la pandémie en parallèle avec des récits deleuziens plus positifs de désir, qui peuvent contribuer à la fois à une mitigation des dommages eux-mêmes et des conséquences des récits de dommages. En nous servant de deux fragments de données provenant de recherche sur les jeux d'enfants pendant le premier confinement de COVID-19 au Royaume-Uni, nous présentons la manière dont, en dépit des restrictions très sévères, des moments ludiques ont émergé de rencontres entre enfants, mais aussi avec d'autres entités, de la matérialité et des atmosphères affectives de rue pour produire des moments de bien-être. Dans les deux fragments, les enfants jouent avec le trottoir dans la rue, déterritorialisant à la fois le confinement et les espaces de rue striés par des manières qui représentent temporairement une politique d'espaces ludique et engendrent des moments de bien-être. Nous interprétons ces fragments par le biais de discours deleuziens contemporains sur le désir en tant que force productive. Ce faisant, nous contribuons aux débats dans l'ontologie relationnelle de la géographie de l'enfance qui aborde la micropolitique des pratiques spatiales des enfants.

## **Introduction**

The underlying mood during this pandemic is affective. It involves complex and internally contradictory alternation of emotions—that mark what I have called the posthuman convergence ... An intense sense of suffering alternating with hope, fear unfolding alongside resilience, boredom merging into vulnerability. (Braidotti, 2020, p. 469)

Given the intensity of affect that Braidotti articulates above, and the gravity of the threats to survival, it may seem both insensitive and trivial to talk about children's play in the

pandemic. However, it is that very sense of triviality and trivialisation that we wish to problematise in this article. The relational ontological and new materialist conceptualisation of children's capacity for playfulness during lockdown that we offer here can contribute both to ongoing debates regarding spatial justice for children in social and cultural geography (Carroll et al., 2019; Horton & Kraftl, 2018; Lester, 2020; Pyry & Tani, 2019; Witten et al., 2019) and elsewhere, for example, in planning and urban design (Bornat & Shaw, 2019; Gill, 2021; Krishnamurthy, 2019; Wood et al., 2019). We argue that the pleasure, vivacity and even frivolity of playing does not diminish the deadly seriousness of the pandemic, nor is it only a way for children to make sense of or cope with the contradictory affects Braidotti describes, as some play advocates have argued (Cartwright-Hatton et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2021; Play Safety Forum, 2020), important though that is. Playing emerges from human-material-affective and desiring encounters in ways that enliven life and enact a playful politics of space that is both ordinary and momentarily revolutionary in its temporary spatial disruptions and reconfigurations.

There is now a growing literature on the impact of Covid-19 and associated government mitigation measures on children, much of which has focused on the damage to children and on how the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities (for example, All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, 2021; British Psychological Society, 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Holt & Murray, 2021; Tsenoli et al., 2021; Weale, 2021February13). Such work is of vital importance, yet, despite its seemingly benevolent concern, a damage framework fixes the damaged as such and reinscribes power in the already powerful. What is offered in this article is a different, nomadic line of enquiry for thinking about children and the pandemic, namely one of play and desire. The article opens with a brief exploration of the damage narrative before moving on to discuss Deleuze's account of desire as a productive force as read through the writings of indigenous scholar Eve Tuck (2009, 2010) and play scholar Stuart Lester and Russell (2010), Lester (2020)). We then read these ideas through two fragments of data from our research into children's neighbourhood play during the first UK lockdown. We suggest that children's play emerges from entanglements of the desire to affect and be affected, including the opportunities and constraints of lockdown, to create moments of being well. In these fragments, children played with, on and off, kerbs and curbs, enacting a playful and prefigurative politics of space.

## The damage framework

"Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims ... the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing" (United Nations, 2020, p. 2).

This report from the United Nations argues that, apart from the effects of the virus itself, government responses to limit the spread of the virus 'may inadvertently do more harm than good' (p. 2) in terms of the numbers of children falling into poverty, the damage to children's education through school closures, the effects of lockdown and related measures on children's physical and mental health and well-being, and also on the safety of those children living with violence and abuse. This warning cry has been echoed in various UK reports (for example, All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Healthy Childhood, 2021; BBC Children in Need, 2020; The Children's Society, 2020). Yet, children

have been all but invisible in the UK government's COVID-19 response, especially in the early days, only surfacing in their role as vectors of disease (Adami & Dineen, 2021; Cortés-Morales et al., 2021) or in terms of the economic impact of their 'learning loss' (Sibieta, 2021). The ways in which the pandemic and associated responses affected children have varied enormously, but it is clear that the last year has exposed and exacerbated already existing inequalities in the UK and globally (Children's Commissioner for England, 2020; Kallio et al., 2020). However, much of this important research and advocacy has had a 'damage' focus.

Whilst highlighting the egregious effects of the pandemic and of inequality, these narratives contribute to the perpetuation of the deficit model of childhood, which rests on molar, reductive and normative understandings of child development where difference is seen as a lack requiring professional remedial intervention (Hammersley, 2017; Lester, 2020). In addition, 'problems' are individualised such that deficit is seen as an individual failing, either of childhood itself or of 'poor' parents or communities (in both senses of the term; Goodall, 2021). The focus on these narratives has meant that more affirmative and productive accounts of children's lives in the pandemic are lost.

Eve Tuck (2009, 2010) makes the case for reconfiguring the damage research framework into one of desire. Her work is with indigenous peoples; here we read it through research into children. We hope that this is accepted as respect and not appropriation. Tuck's notion of 'damage' reframes the debate in a number of ways. Firstly, Tuck (2009) argues that damage is inflicted by external, often structural, forces, through the entangled forces and flows of power and injustice. In the UK, ten years of austerity measures, disinvestment in public services, a populist government and Brexit have all played a part in the pandemic's impact (Holt & Murray, 2021), particularly across intersections of injustices such as poverty, race and gender: for many, lockdown itself is a privilege (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021).

Secondly, Tuck shows how the history of occupation, genocide and colonisation of indigenous peoples becomes invisible and 'natural' in a damage framework. In similar ways, we can see both the naturalisation of childhood as a linear category and as economic investment, enacted through a focus on developmental milestones and educational achievement that are measured in a reductive manner. In addition, the growing interest in measuring children's well-being for policy purposes can obscure contexts and individualise well-being as something that can be acquired or achieved, and therefore a personal responsibility (Atkinson, 2021).

Thirdly, a damage focus produces a fixed and essentialised identity of children – both as a social stratification held in common and also of particular children – as 'less than' adult and in need of interventions from more knowledgeable and more powerful others.

## Thinking beyond damage to desire

Tuck argues that damage has to be read *with* desire. She does not present damage and desire as binary opposites. A desire-based framework does not seek to deny the damage wreaked on, in her case, indigenous peoples, and in ours, children; rather it offers a 'more than' perspective. In suggesting that we 'craft our research to capture desire rather than damage' (Tuck, 2009, p. 416), Tuck argues that desire can offer a third way to interrupt and to navigate tensions between reproduction (an acceptance and perpetuation of the

damage narrative that fixes states of victimhood or vulnerability) and resistance (as explicit resistance which further entrenches the rationale for control and intervention). As well as accounting for damage, a desire-based framework can also account for hope, vision, wisdom and, we would add, enacting the world differently, as children do in their play.

Tuck draws on the work of Deleuze, and of Deleuze and Guattari, in her proposal. In their account, desire does not reside in individual psyches as a lack, it is a productive assemblage, produced from and producing the conditions of people's lives. The process of production is not predictable and is always incomplete: 'it makes room for the unanticipated, the uninvited, the uncharted, and unintended' (Tuck, 2010, p. 641). In this sense, it is revolutionary, not in any great structural overthrowing but in its micro-political capacity to disrupt and to derail. However, Tuck (2010, p. 645) also expresses frustration that Deleuze's conceptualisation is too diffuse and distributed: 'I want him to say that desire is smart – that it is purposeful, intentional, agentic'. Such a move, however, would reposition agency/desire as something possessed by individuals rather than as an assemblage. Even if agency is understood as distributed and relational, as has been suggested by some children's geographers (for example, Änggård, 2016; Gallagher, 2019; Lester, 2020), there are problems with endowing non-human objects and processes with the anthropocentric concept of agency (Kraftl, 2018). Deleuze's always-becoming desire can work with the flows of arrangements and connections of heterogeneous multiplicities that can come together and fall apart in ways that both deterritorialize and reterritorialize relations of power.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1988), desire is a body's potential to affect or be affected by other bodies in ongoing relational flows. 'Body' here includes humans, non-humans, objects, systems, ideas and so on, all in relation with other bodies. These flows and intensities of affect form assemblages that can produce coherence and some form of stability (territorialisation), habitual ways of relating in orderly, striated space, for example, in the production of streets, in ways that are necessary for everyday life to go on. Equally, desire can deterritorialize such habits producing smooth, nomadic spaces, if only momentarily, as in moments of playfulness, moments where life feels worth living.

As Lester (2020) notes, 'Life goes on through a desire to form arrangements or assemblages that are conducive to being well; bodies and things co-compose situations in which life can flourish' (p. 85).

These moments are important in terms of increasing desire – the body's capacity to seek out and connect with whatever will enhance life – and the desire to persevere in our own existence. The joy of playing engenders an anticipation of further moments of playing and the capacity to be well.

Lester (2020) presents a Deleuzian ontology of playing, or the desire to enliven life, as coming about through the entanglement of three dynamic realms of reality. The first is what we see, the actual apparent reality of playing, often understood as a steady state that might be categorised as a particular form of play or activity or ascribed an instrumental value for something other than playing (for example, cognitive or social development, physical activity or community cohesion). However, such fixing masks the virtual multiplicities that both precede what is seen and are ever present. The second is the process of actualisation, the moment of 'what if . . . ?' that brings form to multiple desires and virtualities and that can at any moment dephase or destabilise, always containing the

possibility of becoming something else. The third is the virtual, or the plane of immanence, the constant flows, forces and materials that connect, disconnect and reconnect to form 'reality'. This view raises certain challenges to humanist definitions of play as being voluntary or freely chosen, working instead with the ongoing flux and relations that continually become different. Play becomes an open-ended process, continually emerging from the entanglements of desires, virtualities and whatever is to hand whenever temporal, spatial and affective conditions allow, interwoven into everyday life, an ongoing process of making the world anew, of becoming different (Lester, 2020). This affirmative stance offers the possibility of thinking about children's play, as 'a pleasurable expression of "being well" arising from the actualisation of desire' (Lester, 2020, p. 93), as children's own capacity to affect and be affected by, and as a way of looking beyond the damage narrative without denying damage done.

We turn now to read this desire framework through two fragments of data from research which explored the remaking of street space and the emerging patterns of playfulness with children, their families and communities during the first English lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19.

### **The remaking of streetspace during lockdown**

Our research focused on the emergent and ongoing (re)production of streets through the encounters in-between material, socio-cultural and affective spaces, seeking to explore how these aspects of street geography encountered the rules and affective atmospheres of the first lockdown in ways that enabled, shaped and curbed opportunities for play and playfulness. The small-scale research, mostly with those living in mid- to low-density housing, included an online survey and 13 follow-up online interviews during which we also collated maps, videos and photographs. We do not draw any generalisations from the research. Instead, we have chosen an 'exemplary' method (Massumi, 2002), working with the singularity of specific examples. Each example is intensive and can stand only for itself. Yet at the same time, examples can also imply a wider extensive relation, but not in any linear or generalisable way; they are 'revealing in their own right' (Martin, 2018, p. 167).

The lockdown, between late-March and mid-May 2020, rapidly reshaped everyday lives, as people were required to 'stay at home' and as many of the ordinary spaces beyond the home were closed, including children's playgrounds. People were allowed to leave their homes for approved reasons only, including one form of daily exercise, but there was confusion regarding what constituted exercise, and how this related to children's play (UK Government, 2020; Stenning & Russell, 2020a; Weir, 2020). Stories circulated of children and young people being cautioned by police or told off by other adults for playing on their streets, highlighting concerns over children's unequal access to outdoor space to play (Stenning & Russell, 2020a). The powerful curbing flows and forces of lockdown, which meant children could not meet up with friends or even be outside unless for 'exercise' or other designated activities that did not include playing, produced a different and changing affective and material street geography that emerged in relation with previous dominant spatial productions.

At the same time as public spaces for play were being closed down, in many communities, 'internet-enabled global flows of ideas, affect and materials' (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 4) gave rise to a range of playful acts that emerged as a way of connecting on streets,



particularly in mid- to low-density places (Mehta, 2020), whilst remaining distanced. The increased physical presence of many on their streets whilst working at home, being furloughed, schooling remotely and staying local was also coupled with the proliferation of street Facebook and WhatsApp groups used and/or created to offer mutual support and contact at a distance, such that the online and offline spaces worked together to remake the social space of neighbourhoods. All kinds of socially-distanced outdoor activities were reported by respondents, including claps for the NHS, bingo, doorstep discos, music, dancing, singing, sports (including street marathons for charity), cycling and scooting, chalking, nerf wars, chalk trails and hopscotch, nature trails and bug hunts, rock snakes, rainbow trails, teddy bear trails and tea parties, toy and book swaps, kerby, hula-hooping, and more (Stenning & Russell, 2020b). In the context of all these activities, the pavement became repurposed; as Mehta (2020, p. 3) notes ‘pedestrian space [was] no longer limited to the meagre sidewalk and the pavement [became] a space to walk, run, bike, have conversations and active play’. However, Mukherjee (2020) points out the powerful, perhaps romanticised narratives of hope and solidarity attached to these playful acts can act to further exclude marginalised children and those without the resources to engage.

### The importance of kerbs

Both of our fragments of data involve kerbs, a mundane but significant material aspect of street geography. The two stories highlight what can happen when the entanglements of the materiality of streets, the history of design intentions for kerbs and their significance in a car-dominated era, and children’s relationship with space encounter a radical disruption of the striated spaces of everyday forces and flows of street life. They also offer a glimpse of the possibilities for post-pandemic spatial justice for children.

Kerbs form part of what Amin (2006, p. 1013) calls the ‘machinic order’ of towns and cities comprising all manner of ‘objects-in-relation’ (*ibid.*) such as pipes, traffic lights, and timetables. These form different alignments that structure the everyday rhythms of life and keep urban and other settlements going, and that also affect civic codes and behaviour in ways that can exclude. The original intended purpose of kerbs was to create a drainage channel for wastewater, keeping pavements clean and curbing backflow into buildings (CIHT, 2010; Fernández-Abascal, 2019). Over time, as the built environment has become increasingly regulated, and as traffic flows have increased, their design functions have changed, and they have now come to signify a separation of carriageway and footway, of vehicles and pedestrians, curbing encroachment of one into another’s space, albeit unequally.

These functions work with everyday spatial practices to produce what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) term striated space. Their purpose is utilitarian, aimed at keeping things moving in as efficient a manner as possible: goods, people and the economy. Everyday movements and affects reinforce these functions, territorializing and reterritorializing the street. Many of these were disrupted during lockdown, opening up both possibilities and constraints for children’s play.

Kerbs have long been seen as archetypal sites of play in ways that deterritorialise the forces of striated space. The game of kerby – in which two or more players try to score points by bouncing a ball off the facing kerb – has been ‘played by generations of children

since the construction of roads with raised kerb stones' (Burke, 2005, p. 46) and its persistence, despite increases in both moving and parked traffic, 'indicates the well-being of a transferable play culture and the importance of informal neighborhood landscapes for children's play' (*ibid.*). That kerby is frequently the exemplar of nostalgic recollections of street play amongst older generations on social media reinforces the importance of kerbs in memories and desires for play. Yet, the recuperation of kerby in commercial products which seek to replicate the game in the safety of domestic gardens or other traffic-free spaces adds to forces that make the kerb a contested space for children's play.

Similarly, skateboarders are drawn in by the 'trickability' of kerbs and other micro-materialities of the street such as gutters, steps and handrails (Borden, 2001; Woolley & Johns, 2001), 'dwelling with' the space (Pyyry & Tani, 2019). However, kerbs are contested spaces for skateboarders too, as a range of practices including policing, byelaws and design seek to control and limit skateboarders' use of public space, which is seen as potentially anti-social and damaging to the urban fabric (Woolley et al., 2011).

## Dancing in/with the street

Our first fragment is from an interview with Cath (and briefly her 8-year-old daughter Josie), in which they spoke of how Josie and her friend Maddie danced on the kerbs across the street from each other. The curbs of lockdown prevented them from playing together, but remaining on the kerbs opposite each other was a very visible way of maintaining the required two-metre distance apart. Cath had commented how not being able to play with her friends had made Josie 'sad'. Not being able to see or play with friends was cited frequently as one of the aspects of lockdown that children found difficult (for example, All Party Parliamentary Group on a Fit and Health Childhood, 2021; Barron & Emmett, 2020; Cowie & Myers, 2020; Egan et al., 2021). Some children could stay in contact with friends online, and indeed this was the case with Josie and Maddie. They had practised dance routines together on their phones, and then they had danced on opposite sides of the road in a 'dress rehearsal', disturbing the segmented oppositions of children's online and offline worlds and friendships. Cath and Josie's house is connected to the neighbouring street by an alleyway that comes out right opposite the house of Josie's friend, Maddie. Cath explained the layout of the space to the researcher, Alison Stenning, as they explored their street using Google Street View (see, Figures 1 and 2).

Cath: Our back gate comes out on that alleyway see, so we were on that alleyway, if you like, and her house is literally opposite, the front door is opposite there so we did it on that street. So they would do, they'd practice their dance routines on their phones and then they kind of like go and do a practice, like a dress rehearsal, I don't know if we ever saw the final show but you know they did do the dress rehearsal out there.

Of interest here are the forces, flows and desires that produced the dancing-with-the-street assemblage. The desire to connect, to dance the practised routines together, rubbed up against the molar forces of lockdown and the affective atmospheres of the street, producing a tension that could be partially and temporarily resolved through the materiality of the kerbs that could ensure distancing was maintained. Cath repeatedly expressed great anxiety about what her neighbours might think:



**Figure 1.** Josie's alleyway and kerb.



**Figure 2.** Maddie's kerb.

Cath: We just, I just worried that they were, you know, maybe it was in my head, but ... I didn't want to be seen as the person who was kind of breaking all these things ... because we knew that everybody on the street could see them. And it was quite blatant, you know, we were really on it and made sure there was a road width between them ... Josie and her friend kind of dancing across the street from each other, that worked brilliantly.

At various points during the interview Cath remarked how well Josie and her friends had learnt to maintain a two-metre distance. But it was also clear that one of the most important aspects of girls dancing on opposing kerbs was that their distance was clearly visible to anyone who might be observing, what Cath described as 'like 20 kind of twitching curtains, which there may not have been but, you know'.

For Josie and Maddie, the kerbs enabled them to dance together, offering a performance space, slightly raised to give a better view over the parked cars, and perhaps suggesting a sense of a stage, although Josie had said, 'I don't think we ever got to show it to anybody'. We can see here the mingling of Deleuze's three dynamic realms of reality described above, with virtual multiplicities ever possible in how the phasings and dephasings of the desire-dancing-kerb assemblages. We have no way of

knowing the imagined performances and audiences, or what a 'dress rehearsal' might have comprised; all are virtual possibilities that may or may not be come into being.

The apparent reality of dancing-with-the-street did enact a deterritorialization of the segmented function of kerbs. Atkinson and Scott (2015) highlight how dance in striated spaces can disrupt everyday assemblages 'relationally in enabling different movement and interactions and affectively through shifts of discomforts and excitements' (p. 86). For McCormack (2008), dancing bodies not only encounter urban space but also "'produce" or generate space', transforming not only the physical space but also 'the imaginative, affective, sonic and social qualities of this space' (p. 1823). The altered qualities produced through Josie and Maddie's dancing brought to the street, especially in the context of the pandemic, the possibility of alternative or emergent spatialities. Such playful acts 'rework the atmosphere' (Pyry & Tani, 2019, p. 1221) of the street and have the potential to enable a deepening of relationships with space through affectual 'moments of joyous togetherness' (*ibid.*). These are moments of 'dwelling with', what Pyry (2016, p. 10) describes as 'practical – seemingly trivial, yet often deeply affectual – playful involvements with the material world that can sometimes be accompanied with the inspiring experience of *enchantment*, a surprising wonder-at-the-world' and which entail both a sense of engagement with the world and a claiming of space.

Tani (2015) builds on the work of Franck and Stevens (2007) to conceptualise tight and loose spaces; as with Deleuze and Guattari's striated and smooth spaces, these are not always fixed binary oppositions but co-exist dynamically through appropriation, tension, resistance and discovery. Josie and Maddie's dancing with kerbs enacted both looser space, in that they used kerbs in ways not intended by designers and planners, and at the same time followed the rules of tight, striated space by staying the required distance apart. These smoother or looser moments are political – they make it 'possible to be somehow otherwise' (Pyry & Tani, 2019, p. 1226).

## Jumping off kerbs

Our second fragment is an extract from an online family interview that featured eleven-year-old Theo, alongside his two siblings and his father. In these interviews we invited participants – adults and children – to draw maps of their neighbourhoods and the places that were significant for them during lockdown. Mapmaking was used more as a process of knowledge creation – the kind of situated wisdom that Tuck (2009, 2010) sees emerging from desire – than as what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) term a 'tracing', the production of a fixed or accurate representation. It was a way of creating a 'knowledge space' (Turnbull, 2000), eliciting a situated account of children's own wisdom about their neighbourhoods as a messy, dynamic and fluid assemblage of the human/non-human, material, cultural, historical and affective.

In Theo's mapping of his play during the first lockdown (see, Figure 3), he did not initially mark anything of significance on the street; the focus was on the park (marked with an exclamation mark, a big tick and a smiley face), a big hill to the side of it (another smiley face), and his friend's house (even though he was unable to see his friend during lockdown). Even during lockdown, the street did not feel safe for playing out.

After a conversation about the spaces marked on Theo's map, the researcher asked specifically about the street, and Theo then spoke animatedly of a place where he liked to

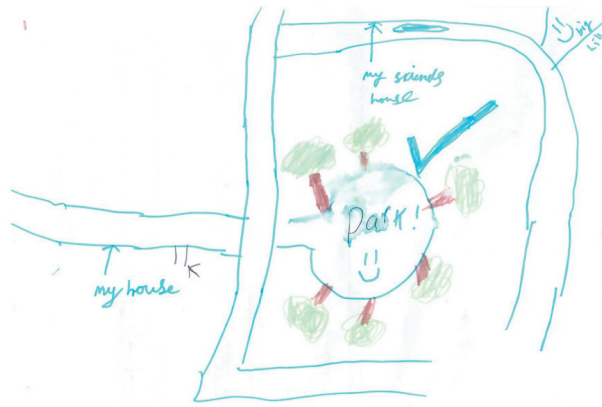


Figure 3. Theo's map.

jump off the kerb on his bike, 'because it's like all dippy and uneven, so it's like really fun to jump off like that. And there are like slopes and stuff that you can ride over'.

The invitation of the 'dippiness' and unevenness of the kerb called to Theo (Pyry & Tani, 2019); the liveliness of the kerb joined with the desire to seek out moments of vitality, of uncertainty, for the thrill they offered through the assemblage of unpredictable kerb, bike, embodied tension and the anticipation of successful resolution. It was 'a meshwork of movements and affects, a *milieu* formed from the middle with its own conditions, forces, flows and time structure' (Lester, 2020, p. 95). Bodily responses to/with such assemblages as they go on include increased heart rate, flows of neurochemicals, heightened alertness and responsiveness and openness to the possibility of further co-produced moments of uncertainty, but not in any detached Cartesian manner that separates mind, body and *milieu*. Such complex arrangements contribute to 'well-being' through priming stress response systems, building emotion regulation, building place attachments and through the pleasure they produce (Lester & Russell, 2008).

Given the significance of such a moment, we might ask why Theo had not marked this place on his map. It is possible that he had not considered the street a 'play space'. As he could ride his bike to the park, it is likely that Theo jumped kerbs on his way to the park, illustrating how play is interwoven into the timespaces of everyday life. However, Theo had not initially considered this a 'play activity' showing also how molar, segmentary forces produce dominant understandings of play, even with children, that situate it as a time and space bound activity separated from the rest of life (Lester, 2020). Mapmaking and the discussions alongside opened up possibilities for paying attention to the conditions that support playing-as-process to emerge, giving a sense of patterns of movements, rhythms, routines, habits, relationships, materialities and events as assemblages that produce moments of playfulness and of being well (Lester, 2020).

Jumping off kerbs on a bike is not an intended use of kerbs. Nor indeed is balancing along the kerb, something that Theo's eight-year-old sister said she enjoyed doing, though her progress was often curbed by parked cars. Both these mark a line of flight from the plane of organisation that segments pavement and carriageway (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), 'disregarding – and subverting – primary, adult-coded purposes of streets'

(Carroll et al., 2019, p. 299). They are examples of children's momentary dwelling with the street (Pyry & Tani, 2019), deterritorialising the adult assumptions that curbed lockdown 'exercise' as moving through.

### Politics, desire, mo(ve)ments of playing and children's well-being

Children's play is caught up in politically-driven metrics (such as Body Mass Index, educational achievement, hours of physical activity, screen time) that 'over-code interactions and reduce complex relationships to standardised accounts' (Lester, 2020, p. 89). In this context, some forms of playing are valued over others (Alexander et al., 2014). This was evident during the pandemic when play was only permitted as a form of exercise, and, at the same time, concerns arose regarding children's increasing use of screens. Similarly, well-being is segmented as a collection of components to be measured and to be possessed or acquired by individuals rather than 'an effect of complex relations, constituted and constitutive of both place and time, as assemblage and as always becoming' (Atkinson & Scott, 2015, p. 78). Such territorialising assemblages produce narratives of lack and damage, fixing children as requiring professional intervention.

Desire, as a social formation rather than an individual one, allows for the possibility of lines of flight from such neoliberal planes of organisation. Curti and Moreno (2010) develop the idea of mo(ve)ments to capture the emergence of play entangled with and assembled by the many spaces of everyday life. They define mo(ve)ments as 'embodied and shared micro-political moments as movements' (2010, p. 414). Theo and Josie's mo(ve)ments offer up accounts of how children's street play during the first UK lockdown was entangled with and assembled by myriad local phenomena including the liveliness of the materiality of the street, the disrupted spatial practices of lockdown, parental permissions and curbs on outdoor play, the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic and of censure from neighbours, and the desire to affect and be affected by the momentary sense of vitality and affirmation such mo(ve)ments produce. These examples are singular, intensive: they can only stand for themselves. At the same time, they are extensive, forming connections and (com)possibilities in a rhizomatic manner (Lester, 2020; Massumi, 2002).

Jumping off and dancing on kerbs embody both the ordinariness and the power of playing as 'a "mode" of being that can be characterized with openness to the world. It is joyous ontological energy that works against the heaviness of neoliberal framing of life' (Pyry & Tani, 2019, p. 1227). More than just playing *in* space, new affective spaces emerge through the encounter, through the joint participation of players and the materiality and affective atmospheres of public space. This is what opens up a 'more-than-human playful politics' (*ibid.*).

For Deleuze and Guattari (1988), desire is 'socialised through codification (i.e. the attribution of symbolic meaning)' (Buchanan, 2008, p. 20). Such codification becomes the way societies function and therefore how desire works; it is for this reason that they describe desire as infrastructure. Jumping off and dancing on kerbs are assemblages that temporarily deterritorialise and can be understood as minor political acts of protest. 'Protest' here is not a premeditated and deliberate intention to overthrow molar orderings of time and space completely, merely the desire to create a separate timespace that is more vibrant and where children can feel more capacity to act on the conditions of their lives (Lester, 2014), something that became even more important during lockdown given



the curbs placed upon children's ability to play outdoors and the fears the pandemic brought. Carroll et al. (2019), drawing on the work of Yates (2015), suggest children's playful lines of flight might be seen as 'prefigurative politics'. Acknowledging that children are 'losing out in the spatial justice stakes' (Carroll et al., 2019, p. 294), playful acts that disrupt the limits of kerbs can therefore be seen both as a deterritorialisation and as prefiguring the kinds of spaces they want. They are forms of what Deleuze and Guattari (1988) call 'micropolitics', acts that rupture the segmented lines of striated spaces, 'attending to the possibilities inherent in the micro fabric of a life' (Houle, 2005, p. 92). In addition, in making space anew (Pyry & Tani, 2019), albeit temporarily, such playful politics opens up possibilities for the new social formations of desire.

Although Theo and Josie's mo(ve)ments might be valued as part of the daily exercise encouraged during lockdown, they also have other forms of value that contribute in complex ways to well-being. Lester and Russell's (2008, 2010) reviews of contemporary perspectives on play highlight how children can create their own well-being through playing when the conditions are right. In addition to the more instrumental theories on the benefits of play, these reviews position playing as children's primary form of participation in their communities and as a way of relating with the world that momentarily enlivens (see, also Pyry, 2016). For example, Theo's playing with the uncertainty of the uneven and unpredictable kerb may be an expression of emotion regulation and healthy stress response systems; Josie's dancing with Maddie of peer attachments and embodiment; both examples generate attachment to place and a sense of pleasure. These values – tricky to measure, predict or replicate – echo Sutton-Smith's claim that 'play promotes the immediate liveliness of being alive and keeps us emotionally vibrant and capable of joy in an otherwise hostile and scary world' (2017, p. 241).

The very ordinary mo(ve)ments of playing described here emerged from assemblages of singular conditions, in time and space, and the children's desire to affect and be affected by them, producing 'a more pleasurable state: a state of "being well"' (Lester, 2020, p. 85). Theo says twice that jumping off kerbs is 'fun', and Josie uses the same word to describe her dancing with Maddie. 'Fun' is an aspect of playing that is often sidelined in the adult tendency to rationalise play's value for something more worthy, something other than playing itself (development, learning, physical activity and so on), yet it is the pleasure of playing that generates moments of 'being well', moments where life is better. Beyond relational ontologies of children's play, such assertions on the value of affective aspects of playing such as pleasure, attachments and uncertainty can be seen across a range of disciplines such as neuroscience (Panksepp, 2010), ethology (Spinka et al., 2001), cognitive and developmental psychology (Colle & Del Guidice, 2011), psychotherapy (Youell, 2008) and early education (Breathnach et al., 2019; Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2019). Whilst pleasure and other vital affects emerge in the present, there is a case to be made for a 'trickle down', what Sutton-Smith (2017) terms 'adaptive potentiation', or a more lasting benefit, although not in any predictable or linear manner, leading to his assertion that the opposite of play is not work but depression (Sutton-Smith, 2003). To summarise, Lester (2020) suggests the relationship between playing and well-being:

can be found in the expression of desire as a force that flows between bodies, materials and their affects. It is actualised in mo(ve)ments of connections that defy rational explanations and common sense by subverting the normal course of events. (pp. 99–100)

## Conclusion

Affective atmospheres of public space emerge through multiplicities of forces that include design, ideology and spatial habits, for example, increased privatization, the institutionalisation of childhood, fewer children out in public space because of fears of traffic, traffic itself and the expectation of it, even during the first lockdown. They create expectations of children's 'place', affecting their right to the city (Russell, 2020). In a highly-planned, striated city that produces both physical and affective/sensual curbs that denote who is allowed where, both opportunities and desire for difference – for 'political action' – diminish (Pyry & Tani, 2019). Children are increasingly 'controlled in and planned out from' public space (Pyry & Tani, 2019, p. 1224) by a range of cumulative design features, technologies and practices.

Our encounter with the pandemic and everything it has brought with it (including lockdowns, death, fear, greater inequality, glimpses of how things could be different, how we could 'build back better') has brought a multiplicity of changes both to everyday lives and 'profound alterations' to children's spatialities (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021, p. 2). Our examples have shown how children can co-create temporary timespaces for themselves when the conditions are right, producing moments of being well. Looking to desire whilst acknowledging damage (Tuck, 2009, 2010) offers up ways to think differently about children, the spaces of their neighbourhoods, and what this might open up for imagining approaches for recovery. Although children's playful productions can be read as resistance to adult curbs on time and space, this operates in complex ways. For example, Cath's fear of her neighbours' disapproval of Josie potentially breaking lockdown rules and her strategies for addressing those fears both reproduced them and resisted the curbs on Josie's dancing in the street with her friend by using the kerbs as a very visible distancing measure.

Tuck (2009, p. 418) sees the productive force of desire as 'not mere wanting but our informed seeking ... It is closely tied to, or may even be, our wisdom' (Tuck, 2009, p. 418). Such wisdom can be seen in the ways that children drew maps and talked about their own ways of knowing about and remaking their environments, ways of knowing that adults do not have and often dismiss.

Both our examples, and a longstanding literature on children's geographies, show how children's mobilities on their streets are far from linear (Russell & Stenning, 2020). For Theo and Josie, the street was for jumping in, shouting across, and dancing around, and it was these kinds of non-linear mobilities and spatialities that expressed their desires. This connection between space, desire, curiosity and the world is echoed in Lester's (2020, p. 71) description of mo(ve)ments of children's playfulness as 'lines of desire, entangled movements of bodies and things that co-create a more joyous state which is indicative of life going on in an affirmative manner'. In these instances, children's desire lines meander, dwelling with the street (Pyry & Tani, 2019), unlike traditional desire lines that seek to make arriving at a destination more efficient. For children, the desire to connect to place and to each other, the collective memories and stories of mo(ve)ments, of being well, offer up a different perspective to the dominant accounts of straight lines of ages and stages of development, transporting children on the efficient route to adulthood.

Children's capacity to develop playful desire lines is seen as critical for an affirmative sense of their being well and for an intimate and vital connection to their everyday environments, their streets and neighbourhoods. The unusual conditions of the first lockdown created new



assemblages and entanglements that children and their families negotiated and produced on their streets, and elsewhere, to find space for the desires so critical for children's play, and to generate a state of 'being well', despite the constant threat of ill-health.

In this sense, theorising the fragments we explore here as desire allows us to see them as a productive force. The visible, audible, visceral affective expression of children's playful desires on streets during the first lockdown has allowed for a reimagining of the spaces and possibilities of the street in ways which prefigure the conditions for children's play. These kinds of mo(ve)ments disrupted the existing order of residential streets, previously (and again) dominated by traffic and marginalised as everyday spaces of play for children. The expression of children's desires can be seen as affirmative and productive, opening up another kind of prefigurative politics on the street, and one which could be part of a generative response to recovery from the pandemic.

As well as recognising the limits and losses of lockdown for children, we can also see the conditions and desires that enabled play in the assemblages of streets, kerbs and cars, the presence of family, friends, and neighbours, the histories of play, the shape of the street, and the temporalities and spatial proxemics of lockdown. Such assemblages enable life to go on in an affirmative manner (Lester, 2020) in ways that mitigated the damage of lockdown measures and the pandemic itself. They also produced temporary deterritorialisations of space in ways that prefigure possibilities for 'building back better' after the pandemic, for all children.

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