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The uncomfortable teacher-student encounter and what comes to matter

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ABSTRACT

This article offers insights around how a posthumanist framing might allow us to know our teaching practices, performances and identities otherwise. Influenced by Baradian philosophy and the work of Sara Ahmed, it uses an *ethico-onto-epistemology* to conduct a diffractive rendering of the affective experiences of three female teaching academics (the authors) as they encounter uncomfortable teacherly moments in the course of their daily work. By repositioning emotions as both material objects and powerful (re)constitutive forces, they are placed at the very centre of teaching practices, performances, identities and teacher-student relationships. From here they function to redistribute agency through such things as words, past experiences, shared histories and bodily responses. This approach extends scholarly research in Higher Education settings beyond conventional humanist ontologies to examine the ways that power shapes the very surface of bodies as well as worlds.

KEYWORDS: Diffraction; feminist new materialisms; gender; affect; teacher-student relationships

Introduction

Research examining the quality and qualities of teacher-student relationships, encounters, practices and performances in the Higher Education sector is neither new nor homogeneous. While a significant portion of the work in this field has drawn on feminist ways of knowing that foreground teacher subjectivity, reflexivity and/or the affective (see Hobson and Morrison-Saunders 2013; Mercer-Mapstone and Mercer 2018^[AQ2]), to date the application of theories using post-humanist and/or non-representationalist understandings has been largely ignored. This paper claims its distinction from other forms of Higher Education research through its merging of the conceptual work of Sarah Ahmed (2004) around the cultural politics of emotion, and the work of feminist philosopher and New Materialist, Karen Barad (2007, 2010). A consummation of their ideas allows us to foreground the sexed, gendered, temporal and affective forces, fluxes and flows that are always already present in the teacher-student encounter, but can get side-lined by humanist ontologies and their tendency towards the apportioning of agency to teachers and/or students (Hobson and Morrison-Saunders 2013).

Specifically, this article examines three uncomfortable teacherly moments that emerged as part of the 'mutterings and

matterings' (Lennon 2017) of everyday life in a pre-service teacher education course at a large multi-campus university on the eastern seaboard of Australia. Using an *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* that endorses 'the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being' (Barad 2007, 185), the authors (henceforth 'we') use these moments to foreground the interrelatedness of *what* we know, *how* we know and *who* we are always becoming, with and through our entanglements with space, time and matter/bodies during the course of our daily teaching lives. The approach being used acknowledges the interconnectedness of the socio-material-affective forces that are forever at work pre-configuring and re-configuring our histories, relationships, practices, identities and performances. It repositions humanist subjects – including teaching academics cum researchers – as affective, connected and shifting beings, always in the middle of becoming and completely entangled in the personal, political and pedagogical materialities of their classrooms/research/worlds.

Using a feminist New Materialist approach in order to know differently

While the field of feminist New Materialisms is still being charted, a number of basic principles would seem to have emerged. Central to these is the decentring of the humanist subject in order that agency might be distributed through other matter (Fox and Aldred 2015). According to Barad (2007), 'if agency is understood as an enactment and not something someone has, then it seems not only appropriate but important to consider agency as distributed over nonhuman as well as human forms' (214). Two other tenets emerging in the feminist New Materialist space include an emphasis on the relationality of all matter and a desire to reconnect with the materiality of embodiment, without letting go of the importance of dialogue (Sellberg 2015). Such understandings trouble notions of research and researcher as disconnected from, and unaffected by, the objects of inquiry, thus laying the foundations for a different way of knowing.

Barad (2007), a quantum physicist cum social scientist and philosopher working in this space, introduces the concept of *agential realism* to describe how 'power and its effects on the production of bodies, identities, and subjectivities' (35) might be realised differently. Using a diffractive methodology she argues for the collapsing of space, time and matter into *spacetimemattering* (Barad 2014), so that the entangled nature of the universe might be reconsidered with and through all of its glorious 'ongoing iterative repatterning' (169). According to Barad, diffraction patterns occur when bodies/matter overlap and/or collide. It is the analysis of the effects of the resultant patterning produced by these collisions/encounters that is of particular interest to us in this paper.

A non-representationalist realist approach to theorising acknowledges the connectedness and dynamism of all matter – including discursive practices, material phenomena and historical and biological forces. These relational entanglements affect *becomings* that are forever and always being made and re-made through the course of our daily lives and our encounters with other bodies/matter. Agential realism appropriates aspects of feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, posthumanism, cultural geography and quantum physics in order to understand and explore how power works. Using Baradian philosophy to underpin our approach necessitates that we aspire to two concomitant research goals. By employing a subaltern feminist research epistemology, we are able to re-invent and enrich ways of knowing. Simultaneously, our approach offers ontological insights around the multiplicitous ways that power and gender are enacted and entangled in the production of the socio-material-affective relations and encounters of the Higher Education classroom.

Is it okay to conflate emotions and affect?

In this paper we put *agential realism* to work with Ahmed's notion of the 'sociality of emotions' (2004, 8) in order to conduct a diffractive rendering of three uncomfortable teacherly moments that took place in the course of our day-to-day work. Ahmed claims that, 'emotions are performative and they involve speech acts ... words are not simply cut off from bodies ... [they] circulate and generate effects ... they move, stick, and slide. We move, stick and slide with them' (2004, 13–14). She is interested not in what emotions are, but in what they do. By embracing these understandings we position words and emotions as both material objects and powerful forces that have effects and affects on bodies and relationships. It is these effects and affects that are of primacy to our research. In this way we honour the role of emotions in the production of teacher-student subjectivities, encounters and relationships. Our approach foregrounds the interconnectedness of the physiological consequences of the uncomfortable teacher-student moment while also illuminating its social capacity for reinscription.

It would be remiss to continue without some acknowledgement of the contentious history that has surrounded *the affective turn* in the Social Sciences, including ongoing debates between cultural, sociological, psychological and feminist scholars. These debates foment around rational male/hysterical female, mind/body, cognition/sensation dualisms (Ahmed 2004; Brooks 2014) and have reach into feminist New Materialist circles. For instance, Probyn (2005) argues that 'emotion refers to cultural and social expression, whereas affects are of a biological and physiological nature' (11). Massumi, Fish, and Jameson (2002) would seem to support this thinking with their claim that 'emotion and affect ... follow different logics and pertain to different orders' (27). Such views can be taken as positioning emotions as qualifiable and belonging to representational and/or sociolinguistic schools of thought while signifying affect as unqualifiable; a 'form of superlinear abstraction ... that is organized differently but is inseparable from the concrete activity and expressivity of the body' (Massumi, Fish, and Jameson 2002, 31). Ahmed (2004, 2008) has accused proponents of New Materialism of falling into the trap of privileging biologism over socio-cultural understandings of the affective by arguing that New Materialists' tendency towards the segregating of emotions and affects into two distinct camps perpetuates a nature/culture binary. Her suggestion is that, rather than building walls between affect and emotion, we 'explore how culture and biology are mutually implicated ... how they shape and inform each other' (2008, 38). Ironically, Ahmed, herself, has been critiqued by New Materialists (see Davis 2009) for reducing understandings of what it means to engage with biologism to conventional interpretations. Perhaps Skattebol (2010) best captures the conflated materiality and sociality of emotions and affects with her claim that, '[a]ffects are generative and contagious ... shame can produce a blush – the red heat that in turn produces more shame ... Furthermore ... the affective force is unruly and unpredictable because other people's affective responses and patterns transform the original affect' (78).

In this paper we straddle two sides of this contentious paradigmatic fence by adopting understandings of affects and emotions as imbricated and inseparable and putting these understandings to work with Barad's ideas around the materiality and entanglement of space, time and matter. This allows us to explore the agency of the material-discursive-affective forces that are *always already* at work pre-configuring and re-configuring the relationships, practices and performances of the Higher Education classroom without getting side-tracked by nature/culture wars.

Knowing the teacher-student encounter otherwise

In achieving our *ethico-onto-epistemological* goals, we focus on three individuated and uncomfortable teacherly moments which were produced as part of our teaching work. Through a foregrounding of the affective we use these moments to ask, 'How does power get articulated, re-articulated and/or collapsed with and through such moments?' 'How do our biologies and biographies enmesh to pre-configure and re-configure our words, emotions, bodily productions, practices and identities?' and

'How is a diffractive analysis able to add to understandings around teacher-student relationships and encounters?'

In our storyings of the uncomfortable moments, we make use of the singular pronoun 'I' to distinguish the teaching subject from the student subject. We deliberately use the lower case 'i' as a means of destabilising the agency of the 'I' and collapsing the teachers' experiences into a becoming with and through the words and worlds of their students. After each re-telling a diffractive rendering is offered. This allows for a further distilling of the effects and affects produced with and through the encounter. Our intent is to foster new understandings of the agency of the affective in shaping and reshaping our gendered/teaching performances, practices and relationships.

Teaching to unsettle: how emotions come to matter

The following uncomfortable teacherly moments constitute personal reflections written some time after the actual encounters took place. Our re-tellings are, in a sense, also our re-imaginings. We do not claim that these were the precise words that our students used – nor do we claim that these were our precise responses. Instead, what we encapsulate in these brief silhouettes is how our memories have recorded the material-discursive-affective experiences of 'the encounter'. Particular attention has been given to the personal, political and affective tensions that arose as multiple worlds collided. These were responsible for creating possibilities for action that could be taken up or shut down.

Uncomfortable teacherly moment #01

The two students burst into the seminar room with a look of wide-eyed panic in their eyes.

'Sherilyn! Sherilyn! We need your help. It's Allegra. She's in the toilets and we don't know what to do. She's fitting or something. Can you help? We don't know how to help her.'

Sorting handouts into four neat little piles in preparation for the pending tutorial suddenly seemed very unimportant. The look on the faces of the two young women was proof enough that something distressing was happening in the nearby toilet facilities. Swept up in their panic the surface of my skin became hot and prickly as i tried to steel myself for what was coming. The students' expectation that i would be able to 'do something' did nothing to quell my growing sense of unease.

I found Allegra in the foyer of the female toilets on her hands and knees; her whole body shuddering violently. Reverberating from deep within her were unintelligible primeval sounds. Her long black hair lay in stark contrast to the crisp white tiles of the floor. A protective group of five female students had gathered around her. 'She just started doing this a few minutes ago. We tried putting water on her face. She won't stop. We don't know what to do.'

I dropped to the ground and kneeled beside Allegra instinctively holding my hand beneath her face so that she could see my fingers. I began to count '... breathe slowly Allegra ... big deep breaths ... in two three four out two three four ... count with me ... watch my fingers ... in two three four out two three four ... say it with me Allegra ... in two three four out two three four ...'

Over the next sixty seconds or so Allegra's primordial sounds grew into intelligible words, '... in two three four out two three four in two three four ...' and the emergency passed. My thoughts returned to the tutorial.

Sally, can you stay with Allegra to make sure she is okay? If, after say ten minutes, she is fine and feels up to it, you are both welcome to join us for the tutorial. If not, would you mind taking her to the medical centre on campus here?

Sally agreed and i gathered up the rest of the students and we returned to the seminar room to begin the weekly tutorial. About ten minutes into the tutorial Sally and Allegra joined us. For the next hour and a half thirteen of us were immersed in a swirl of talk around lesson designs, potential English teaching texts and resources, pedagogical approaches and syllabus requirements.

At the end of the tutorial Allegra approached me. She wanted to thank me for helping her to work through her panic attack. From memory, this is how the conversation went:

Allegra	i just wanted to thank you for what you did earlier. That was exactly what i needed.
Me	Oh, that's good. i wasn't sure of what was going on out there?
Allegra	i was having a panic attack. i started having them when i was twelve.
Me	Well i'm glad it worked out this time but, i have to be honest, i'm a bit concerned about what comes next for you. Have you factored in how you are going to manage panic attacks in the classroom when your students are present? For instance, how are you feeling about doing your micro-teaching presentation in front of your peers next week? Is that sort of thing likely to trigger another attack like the one you've just had?
Allegra	Oh no. i'll be fine. i don't mind getting up in front of a crowd. That won't be a problem at all.
Me	(Perplexed) i don't understand. What was it that caused the panic attack then?
Allegra	It was your lecture.
Me	(Surprised) My lecture? What? The one i delivered today? Just before the tutorial?

Allegra

(Nodding) Yes. That one. When you started talking about all the consequences of that macho behavior in your hometown, you know, with the boys and the rugby players and how they were treating the girls – or anyone who didn't conform – well, it just brought back a whole lot of memories for me of what my life was like. I grew up in North Queensland in a small town just like yours. Those men you talked about and their attitudes to women and school and anyone who didn't fit the norm, well, those men were my brothers. Those men were my father. What you were saying totally resonated with me. It also made me really angry. Angry because I was seeing it for the first time from a distance. Angry because I had to put up with that when I was growing up. Angry because it's still going on in other places. You know, that's the reason I chose to go to uni. I'm the girl you talked about who was using her education to get out of town and I can tell you, I'm never going back. I will never allow myself to be treated like a second class citizen again just because I'm female. Your lecture brought it all back for me. It reminded me of where I've come from and why I left. I haven't had a panic attack for nearly four years – in fact not since I started here at uni. I'll be fine with the microteaching next week. Don't worry about me. Great lecture though!

And with these words she flicked her long black mane, spun on her heel and walked out of the room leaving behind a rising tide of conflicting emotions.

The visceral response from Allegra to the ideas and materials presented in Sherilyn's lecture attests to the interrelatedness of words, worlds, biologies, cultural histories, experiences and emotions. In a singular encounter, the teaching identity, student identity and time are collapsed through the shared experiences of being female and from a small country town. Barad (2007), captures the dynamism of this *spacetime-mattering* with her claim that,

[T]he past is never left behind, never finished once and for all, and the future is not what will come to be in an unfolding of the present moment; rather the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming. Becoming is not an unfolding in time, but the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering. (2007, 234)

The injustices that the two have likely encountered as a consequence of their shared histories and biologies forge an affective bond that is at once knowing, painful and powerful. The intensity of emotions experienced by Allegra and Sherilyn affords insights into the lived realities for females from communities where hypermasculine beliefs and practices prevail. According to Ahmed (2004) 'knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation' (171). She goes further to claim that 'feeling [is] crucial to the struggle against injustice, but in a way that does not take feeling as the ground for action, but as an effect of the repetition of some actions rather than others' (196). For Allegra, the effect of participating in a lecture that mines old memories and past injustices is both physiological and intensely emotional. For Sherilyn, the effect of recognising that one of her students has had similar experiences to her own and that her words have been responsible for opening old wounds that lead to a panic attack leaves her reeling emotionally. As a consequence of this encounter the two are re-inscribed through a congealing of shared histories and experiences bound up in rurality, masculine hegemony, female subjugation and an intensity of feelings. In this way our pasts can be viewed as entangled in our presents from where they are forever re-creating possibilities for our futures. Barad argues that 'both "internal" and "external" factors – intentionality and history – matter' (2007, 23). We would argue that they are in fact inseparable.

Uncomfortable teacherly moment #02

It was the sixth tutorial of a foundational year course focused primarily around issues of Indigeneity, identity and difference. The course, co-convened by my two colleagues (Indigenous Australian male and Australian non-Indigenous white female) and myself (a Canadian, non-Indigenous, white female) was designed to encourage prospective teachers to think critically about issues in relation to racism, discrimination, colonialism, and privilege. As a recent immigrant to Australia, I was aware of how critiques to a country where one was still, at times, regarded as an outsider could be considered with suspicion. Yet I had taught about similar issues in Canada, a country that shared a comparably dark history in relation to its treatment of Indigenous peoples, a fact I shared with my Australian students as a reminder of colonialism's far-reaching tentacles across the globe and into present day realities. And so, while still apprehensive, I felt reasonably assured that I would be able to handle any angst that came my way.

I had tasked students with reading an opinion piece written a few years back critiquing an incident that had occurred on a popular Australian reality TV show. The piece highlighted just one of the many micro-aggressions representative of more insidious racist and discriminatory acts occurring daily within Australia. Students were engaged and intrigued in their task, having just watched a YouTube skit by the 1491s (2013), a group of Indigenous comics, who use humour to instigate dialogue on social and political issues related to Indigenous peoples.

Students were asked to read the article, individually documenting any emotions that arose in their journals before sharing their reflections with their 'home group' prior to coming together for a larger classroom discussion. With the exception of Gillian, a white female who had initially expressed excitement about taking this course, students seemed to be responding to this format well. I was impressed with the level of respectful, honest, and critical dialogue that ensued. Yet Gillian was clearly distressed and seemed reluctant to contribute to the larger classroom discussion.

I was torn. Instinctively, I wanted to make sure she was okay, to see if there was anything I could do. Until this point, Gillian had been an active participant in class discussions, including those that took a critical look at Australian history from an Indigenous perspective. Yet as the classroom discussion grew increasingly animated, Gillian seemed to sink further into her chair. When the students moved back to their individual groups, I used the time to check in with Gillian. 'Are you okay?' I asked. 'Yes,' She replied. Then, taking a deep breath, she continued, 'I just sometimes feel like in this class, we are made to feel bad if we are white. I just think there are other ways these issues can be presented. I just thought you'd understand.'

It was my turn to feel unsettled. I accepted her feedback and she accepted my offer to speak after class, where we spent more time unpacking the article, the notion of 'white privilege', as well as her discomfort around them both. While our following discussion remained pleasant and productive, my feelings continued to be unresolved. These feelings remained even after the student had submitted her final assessment on the concept of white privilege, a topic she had self-selected and one that was completed with both care and respect. So why were my feelings still unresolved?

I was keenly aware of the mixed feelings that can arise from such courses, and for this reason I had made a concerted effort to be open with my students about my own struggles to come to terms with my particular place of privilege as a white and educated woman. I was well versed with the widely publicised critiques of white women who (whether intentionally or not) bring the focus back to personal feelings of hurt, frustration, and resistance when instances of racism and discrimination are

discussed (Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore 2002). Even as i write, i remain aware and am critical of the fact that i am doing this now.

And so, while the intensity of Gillian's resistance was not entirely unexpected, i was frustrated by what i regarded as my lack of ability to address the situation in a more productive way. Had i been too critical or was i not being critical enough? Should i have stopped the class and invited her to contribute or should i have been more adamant in my articulation of why these issues are important; more adamant in my defence of the ideas expressed by the author? Had i been too hard on her for resisting or had i not been hard enough? Had my actions/non-actions towards Gillian been detrimental to my other students who had challenged themselves to engage in 'tough talk'? How might i respond next time? I continued to ruminate over these questions and others throughout the duration of the course.

I left our conversation feeling drained. On the one hand, i wanted to console Gillian to make her feel better. On the other, i felt frustrated that she just wasn't 'getting it', that she was making it all about her. I thought about the students in our class who had experienced these kinds of issues first hand. I knew that to vocalise their stories to their peers was a risk and so i felt aggravated that her defiance in the moment had inhibited her from seeing their pain. Yet, i also felt compassion because i got it. I had been there too. I still am there at times. And so i also felt irritated at myself for my own frustration. I should be more empathetic. Coming to terms with one's privilege is a difficult and treacherous journey that is ongoing and the urge to cry out, '... but I'm not like that!' can be overwhelming. Yet, i also knew from experience that through patience and understanding, combined with a personal willingness to do the work, the move from guilt, shame, and defiance towards meaningful action is possible. And i knew this student had it in her. I also believed she was worth the effort. But for now, i was exhausted.

So i opened up my office window, slumped into my chair, and breathed.

Tasha's story highlights the tensions that arise when expectations based on shared – and multiple – identities collide. Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore (2002) claim that, in courses addressing issues of racism, white students may initially take comfort in their ability to personally identify with an educator who shares their racial and/or gender identity. However, they suggest that this comfort may dissipate as students begin to recognise that shared identities do not necessarily equate with shared understandings or values. For female educators, students' agitation may increase when their gendered expectations of 'woman as caregiver' are not met, particularly in moments when tensions arise in the classroom. Gillespie et al. argue that, 'as [white female] students become uncomfortable, they may expect us [as white female educators] to care for them as they assert either an essentialist view of race or the colour blind person' (245).

In this moment Tasha's gendered identity as a woman configures her as needing to comfort and console Gillian, yet her political and professional identity as an 'antiracist educator' collides with this configuration to unsettle and remake it. Drawing on Butler's (1993) work around performativity, Barad describes gender as 'a temporal process that operates through the reiteration of norms' (2007, 57). In other words, gender – like teacher – is a *doing*, not a pre-formed and static state. Tasha's experiencing of this uncomfortable moment makes it clear that it is not just our students who are being made and re-made with and through the teacher-student encounter. Our material, discursive and affective experiences are forever colliding and coalescing to produce new wounds – or *agential cuts* (Barad 2007, 2014) – that offer openings for producing alternative insights and future possibilities. These wounds/*agential cuts* destabilise notions of the teaching academic as rational, reliable and remote from other objects and/or bodies through a reframing of teachers as affectively, historically, biologically and politically entangled in a process of *always already becoming* (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) with and through their encounters with other bodies – human and non-human. Ahmed (2004) posits that emotions have 'a rippling effect ... they move sideways ... as well as forwards and backwards ... hence "what sticks" is bound up with the "absent present" of historicity' (45). At the same time emotions are able to accumulate, spread and circulate, thus rendering them as an affective economy whereby "the subject" is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination' (46). Ahmed (2004) hints at entanglement theory when she argues for the importance of making links between emotions, ideas, bodily affects and performances. In this uncomfortable teacherly moment, emotions present as material objects that have social, cultural and physiological effects and affects on the pre-configuring and re-configuring of Tasha's practices, relationships and performances.

Uncomfortable teacherly moment #03

A Wednesday morning. Not too early. I am feeling prepared and enthusiastic about this next lecture. Despite there being approximately 300 students in the lecture theatre, i am able to generate discussions during the lecture that will prepare students for more in-depth and robust tutorial discussions later in the week. My feeling is that lectures have been going well, and i am happy that many students appear to be engaging passionately in these discussions and articulating their viewpoints on often complex and sometimes sensitive topics. Today's lecture takes up the theme of gender and constructions of family. An ice breaker: the overhead projector above us beams a sketch of a 'male' and a 'female' adolescent brain. On each of the drawings a collection of words signifies stereotypical characteristics attributed to men and women. The word association graphic is meant to provoke a response – reflection, perhaps laughter and indignation. The intention is to move quickly to a discussion about the social construction of gender identity, whether we recognise any of these associations, how they resonate with our own experiences of growing up, and/or how they may affect the attitudes we hold today. I dig deeper – 'How do we come to "know these things"?'

After several comments a young man in the back row raises his hand – 'Good', i think to myself, i always feel particularly pleased when those who sit in the back row volunteer a response – 'i appreciate that you are using humour to get us thinking about stereotypes', or words to this effect, 'but aren't you simply ignoring the fact that male and female brains are different? Male adolescents really do focus more on sex than girls'. I am simultaneously pleased and annoyed by the question. At once it opens up possibilities for a discussion of the nature/nurture debate, as well as broader discussions around discourses normalising gendered behaviours – but i also feel 'caught out'. I wasn't quite prepared for this question. I am annoyed with myself. I should have been prepared for this question. I feel a challenge in the tone of the question directed towards me. I stifle my initial internal response and the desire to ask 'Why is it that we are so quick to look for a "scientific" explanation for our behaviours?' or perhaps more provocatively, 'What do you know of adolescent girls' brains, or their sexual behaviours for that matter?' but i check myself, not only because i am a teacher, but because my years of experience outside of the classroom suddenly come flooding in, raining down on my attempts to remain 'composed'. Rivulets of remembered injustices make their way into the saliva of my mouth and threaten to soak my teaching vocabulary with variations on the 'f' word – feminism, the feminist movement, feminist methodologies, feminist pedagogies ... i clench my teeth and glue my lips together lest the floodgates open.

My teacher role reminds me that this educational space must remain a safe one. All comments should be welcome, as long as they are respectfully articulated. I repress my initial urges and instead offer a much safer verbal reply, reminding the group that in this course we aim to explore education through a sociological understanding of how and why we educate. Differences between boys and girls then, are discussed in relation to how society constructs and normalises gendered behaviour – nothing

to do with biology, genetics or the brain! I silently shoot a question to the back of the room – ‘Got it?’. I sense that I have merely skirted around the initial point, and that it remains suspended in the air above us all calling for a ‘proper’ response. I add: ‘the social construction of gender is the substance of our tutorial activities and discussion this week’, but at this moment I am aware only of this one young man at the back of the room, and again I sense his dissatisfaction with my words. I try to gauge the feelings in the room by asking if anyone else would like to speak. Deafening silence. Why doesn’t anyone say anything? It is unusually quiet. Should I offer more? Use more words in an attempt to restitch the wounds that have opened? I suddenly feel weighed down by it all. Why does talk around gender and gendered behaviours so often do this?

This unsettling moment reminds us of Ahmed’s (2004) claim that feelings have a ‘weightiness’ that is ‘in some sense, material; like objects, feelings do things, and they affect what they come into contact with’ (85). The weightiness that Sue feels in this uncomfortable moment links her derailed expectations around how the discussion should evolve to the male student’s essentialist notions of gender. The collision that ensues is a reminder that the teaching-learning relationship is constantly being made and re-made – sometimes in ways that are unpredictable and/or undesirable, bell hooks’ (1994) work emphasises building relationships through creating classrooms as ‘radical space[s] of possibility’ with a notion of ‘teaching that enables transgressions’ (12) in order to address issues of social justice. In this uncomfortable teacherly moment a student’s articulated response works to unsettle the teacher while simultaneously opening up further material, discursive and affective possibilities for transgressive thinking.

While Sue offers the student a generic response about the purpose of the course, she largely chooses to allow the students’ challenge to socio-cultural understandings of gender to stay ‘suspended’ in the air. The weightiness of his words continues to trouble her as do thoughts around the (in)adequacy of her response to them. According to Haraway (1992) ‘a diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear’ (300). Sue’s indecisiveness and self-questioning are the effects that have been left behind as the traces of her collision with the students’ words. They open wounds that expose a vulnerable teacher, weighed down by a plethora of possibilities – two of which are to avoid or provoke further conflict. Barad (2007, x) observes that, ‘[t]he world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting’ and asks ‘[h]ow then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter?’ Her focus on possibilities, rather than outcomes, destabilises linear lock-step notions of knowledge as commodified and/or stable, and reminds us of the intensive nature of teaching. Creating ‘possibilities for becoming’ takes time and trust that does not privilege the teacher or the student as they become with and through the *spacetime-matterings* of the uncomfortable teacherly moment.

Some final matterings and mutterings

This article has merged the conceptual tenets of Ahmed’s work around emotions with elements of Baradian philosophy in order to produce an alternative way of knowing how power and gender are imbricated in the political, social, affective and historical forces, fluxes and flows of the Higher Education classroom. By embracing a subaltern onto-epistemology for inventing and enriching ways of knowing, we have been able to shift the focus from that which gives agency to the teacher and/or the student to that which gives agency to such things as emotions, physiological responses, words, relationships, past histories and prior experiences.

A diffractive rendering of three uncomfortable teacherly moments, experienced during the course of our daily work, has reprised emotions from the margins to reposition them ‘right at the centre of thought [and practice] itself’ (Ahmed 2004, 6). Far from delegitimising and/or disregarding emotions as irrational, insignificant, unworthy of serious research and/or pathologically feminine, our posthumanist approach has allowed us to know them as agentic in the shaping and re-shaping of our gendered, classed and racialized performances. This, in turn, has worked to situate teaching in Higher Educational settings as ‘knotty work’ wherein multiple subjectivities, identities, bodily performances, histories, speech acts, relationships, experiences and emotions are forever and always entangled in ‘the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering’ (Barad 2007, 234). Such understandings position teachers as part of the socio-material-affective phenomena being produced and reproduced with and through the uncomfortable classroom encounter – not as somehow separate or apart from them. Ultimately, by foregrounding the interrelatedness of the micro-political practices and performances of the classroom and the macro politics of wider cultural, social and political forces, we have been able to illuminate the affective, social, temporal and cultural materiality of power and its ongoing iterative reinscription of our gendered, sexed and pedagogical practices and performances. This allows us to know our teacher-student relationships in ways that redistribute agency beyond the humanist subject while situating teaching in the Higher Education classroom within an ethics of care, criticality and concern.

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