The literacies of things: Reconfiguring the material-discursive production of race and class in an informal learning centre

Jaye Johnson Thiel and Stephanie Jones
The University of Georgia, USA

Abstract
Drawing on our documentation of transforming an informal learning centre (the Playhouse) in a multilingual, working-class neighbourhood, this paper presents significant and deliberate material-discursive changes at the Playhouse that produced unpredictable shifts in belongings among young children. More specifically, this paper entwines our place-making experiences with theories of feminist new materialism, to explore the object as a material-discursive apparatus in the production of literacies, particularly literacies of race and class. Implications for careful analysis of the racialized and classed literacies produced through the materiality of educational spaces suggest that when we entangle ourselves with material-discursive apparatuses, through play and otherwise, we acquire such literacies and that issues of accessibility always involve the more than human.

Keywords
Feminist new materialisms, out-of-school literacies, place-making, thingpower, race, social class

Turning into the driveway of the community centre, the material remnants of play served as a sort of tableau vivant of the activities from the day before. Bookcases, plastic crates, broken flowerbed edging and old white window security bars were assembled in some of the spaces typically reserved for parking.
The two bookcases were placed in the driveway when we (Jaye and Stephanie) were busy changing the inside space of the informal neighbourhood learning centre called the Playhouse. The other items (crates, broken edging and security bars) were discarded objects retrieved from the skip or given away to children in the neighbourhood earlier in the week during the renovation of the community building.

We had recently inherited leadership of the community centre (see Jones et al., 2016) and were labouring on its physical reconfiguration, believing that what materializes as early literacies is inextricably linked to the materiality of space where children spend time. Pre-reconfiguration, the interior walls of the Playhouse were lined with seven-foot tall bookshelves and the floors were covered with tables and chairs, dominating the space and restricting the movement of grown-ups and children alike. Our intention was to create more moving space, room for different kinds of movement, including floor areas for lying down or making things, and areas that can be seen from different vantage points in the Playhouse rather than blocked off by chunky furniture. Consequently, several tables and plastic chairs were moved to an off-site storage space, but we wanted to repurpose the hand-built wooden bookcases into raised beds for a garden outside, so their placement in the driveway was a holding spot until decisions regarding their fate were made.

Each day we arrived to find new reconfigurations of the bookshelves and objects (which varied). We rarely got a peek at how the bodies of bookcases&children&driveway&discarded objects entangled to fabricate such materializations, as it was difficult to remake the Playhouse space when young, excited bodies were knocking on doors and windows. We were mostly left with the artefacts, tableau-esque configurations, some stories from children themselves and the occasional phone snapshot to stitch together pieces and imagine what might have been done. However, when we worked past 3 o’clock we could get a real-time glimpse into how the objects in the driveway pulled children in as they shuffled off school buses after school.

Late one afternoon, the former director of the learning centre came by to move more of her belongings to her new location and she observed as the sturdy shelves that once held books became a bicycle ramp.

She was not happy.

We were thrilled.

Those are bookcases, she insisted.

But aren’t you amazed by the creativity and ingenuity, we wanted to know.
The bookcases remained in the driveway for several days and the co-
constitutive power of bookcases&children&driveway&discarded objects
produced so many possibilities: Bicycle ramps for jumping fun and compe-
titions, tabletops for games to be played, a jail, a stage for performances,
hiding places for hide-and-seek, and a three-dimensional blueprint for
houses to be lived in (see Figure 1):

In this photo, the bookcases create a small, covered space where children
moved in and out. Another shelf became a door, and bricks from the flo-
erbed of the Playhouse shaped the entryway. The old metal window bars that
had been removed from the windows of the building had found their way
back to the Playhouse, now being the bars of a prison holding those who
could not pay their rent or utility bills in the bookshelf apartment community.

Free from books and the confines of a small indoor space, what had once
been items given predetermined and specific purposes through a particular set

Figure 1. Bookcases become more.
of material (objects, space, bodies) and discursive (language practices, written text, ideologies, gestures) forces, were now opened up to a multitude of possibilities. While the bookcases could no longer hold books, they could become other things that have the potential to produce different types of literacies for and about young people.

In this paper, we explore the role of objects/materiality as part of a material-discursive apparatus producing literacies, particularly literacies of race and class. We call these raced and classed literacies, as in literacies that we all acquire that have particular ways of perceiving race and class embedded within them. Building on our earlier place-making work (Jones et al., 2016; Thiel, forthcoming), we explore the idea that what we come to know about race and class is literacies we acquire through material-discursive intra-actions (Barad, 2001) in specific places. Drawing on our documentation of the transition of the centre from a national after-school programme to a space shaped by a partnership between a FoodBank and College of Education department, we merge place-making experiences in this transition with theories of feminist new materialism (Barad, 2001 2007; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2010; Chen, 2012), to illustrate significant material changes that shifted what became possible in the informal learning space. Implications for careful analysis of the raced and classed literacies produced through the materiality of educational spaces are suggested. Literacy educators and scholars concerned with equity and justice can at tend to the ways literacies of race and class are embedded and produced through the material-discursive apparatus of the places where young people spend time. Thus, a key argument we make is that educators and scholars engaged in place-making with and for young people are engaging in a political project, perpetuating and disrupting literacies of race and class.

**The playhouse: Place as a material-discursive apparatus of production**

Neither space nor time nor matter is neutral, and we have argued elsewhere (Jones et al., 2016) that all educators and educational researchers are engaged in the political act of place-making as they tell stories about places (discursive production), as they engage with places (material production) and as they literally “make places” where youth will spend time (producing conditions of possibility). The Playhouse and the surrounding neighbourhood are no exceptions, and we acknowledge the political acts in which we have been engaged being there physically, as part of the apparatus, and now as we materially,
discursively produce those places through research stories. Stovall (2010) writes

The politics of place includes the site-specific effects of policies created by political entities that have the potential to negatively impact [on] the work we do with young people, teachers, community members, and administrators inside and outside of traditional school spaces. (p. 410)

The Playhouse is built on the Southeastern red clay in a neighbourhood we call South Woods. The working-class families living in the community predominantly self-identify as Latinx (mostly first or second generation Mexican immigrants) and as Black or African American. As researchers entering this space, we knew our bodies were always, already entangled with the community even though we’d never physically put our bodies in that space before. As two White women from the university, we are materially and discursively produced as part of a sedimented history that long precedes us—one where the university serves as an apparatus that offers affordances of opportunity for some and marginalization for others. In a town built around an educational institution, many of the people who grow up here never step foot onto the college campus. In fact, due to anti-immigrant state laws, many cannot even imagine attending the university because powerful political forces have deemed them “undocumented” and therefore excluded from the “selective” (although state) four-year universities in the state.

Furthermore, the apparatus designed and put in place by the national organization that was in this neighbourhood before we were involved held tightly to rigid expectations about how time, space, materials and the bodies of children would/should interact. We would argue many of these expectations work to control bodies (i.e. cost of attendance, homework policies, regulated time schedules, restricted access to different kinds of materials to work with). The Playhouse had padlocks on fences, bars on windows and one entire room in a very small building was designated as an office space that was off-limits to children.

These “truths” about the Playhouse yield particular understandings about the place where the centre is located, telling (raced-and-classed) stories about the community and the people who reside there. Barad (2001) tells us that stories work to “explain the relations between economic forces and formation of practices that colonize which shift the center of production and reform subjectivities” and she calls these forces a “material-discursive apparatus of production” or “an instrument of power through which particular meanings
and bodies and material-discursive boundaries are produced” (p. 80). Rather than fixed understandings, meanings emerge through intra-actions where they are mutually constituted through their relationships with each other. We argue that what is produced in our intra-actions with material-discursive apparatus is literacies. And as we, and young children, entangle ourselves with these material-discursive apparatuses, through play and otherwise, we acquire literacies – ways of making sense of places, people, things and events.

We also believe that all places are profoundly pedagogical, as Sommerville (2007) explains, “as centers of experience, places teach us about how the world works, and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy” (p. 151). All places, thus, are also material-discursive apparatuses of production, producing meanings, which become literacies we use for making sense. In other words, different places produce different kinds of literacies; and different places are produced by different ways of the material and discursive coming together to form what becomes possible in that particular space. All places, then, are teaching us something, filled with literacies to be acquired, including public locations which Burdick and Sandlin (2010) argue are important sites of public pedagogy. They write:

> These public pedagogies—spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside schools—are just as crucial, if not more so, to our understanding of the formation of identities and social structures as the teaching that goes on within formal classrooms. (p. 1)

Therefore, the materiality and discursivity of the Playhouse were important apparatuses in place literacies – or how we come to perceive, talk about and engage with a place – and are intricately connected to literacies of race and class (see Jones, 2015). The Playhouse “is not just a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game – a force with detectable and independent effects on social life” (Gieryn, 2000: 466). Consequently, our work has been an attempt to engage in place-making with young people to open up the possibility of expansive literacies and possibly produce a shift in the literacies mired in deficit perspectives acquired by children and adults about this place.

Braidotti (2010) posits that a posthuman orientation might offer more nuanced understandings of how racism, for example, is not located within a binary opposition but rather produced and lived in different ways through intimate exchanges among humans, objects, places and discursive engagements. She argues that a “shift away from anthropocentrism, in favor of a new emphasis on the mutual interdependence of material, biocultural, and
symbolic forces in the making of social and political practices” could open up multiple belongings that might “pave the way for an ethical regrounding of social participation and community building” (pp. 203–204). In other words, the material-discursive apparatus of the Playhouse produces ways of being and knowing – or literacies (social and political practices) that could alter a more ethical social participation. We agree with Braidotti and share the concepts that have helped us think with these theories (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012) in the following section.

**Feminist new materialisms: Thing-power as a material-discursive apparatus of production**

Feminist new materialism (a specific movement within the posthuman turn) helps us rethink the human and our relationships with the world. One of the ways this theory calls us to do this is through careful attention to the ways objects (like the bookcases) are a material-discursive apparatus of production. Chen (2012) writes that typically “matter . . . is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise ‘wrong’ [however it] animates cultural life in important ways” (p. 2) and listening carefully to the liveliness of the other:

> Interrogates how the fragile division between animate and inanimate—that is, beyond human and animal—is relentlessly produced and policed and maps important political consequences of that distinction. (p. 2)

Therefore, paying attention to the liveliness of things is a necessary practice if we are to better understand social practices (Bennett, 2011). In the bookcase example, the emerging conflict among adults (ourselves and the former centre director) was centred on the policing – or not – of the purpose, use and location of the bookcases. While we recognized some ideological differences between the ways we approached being with children at the Playhouse and in the neighbourhood, this example of human conflict around an inanimate object illustrates the “fragile division between animate and inanimate” and maps “important consequences of that distinction.”

Bennett theorizes (2011) affect beyond that of human bodies to denote how nonhuman bodies are productive and work to discipline in political, social and ethical ways. For Bennett (2010), “thing-power gestures towards the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience” (p. xvi). Take for example the white metal
bars removed from the Playhouse windows and repurposed by the children as a “prison” in their reconfiguration of the bookcases and other objects. The metal bars might have been repurposed as ladders or many other things, but their use on the Playhouse windows to keep people out (or in) seemed to continue reproducing a particular “aliveness” as an object of punitive measures even when detached from the windows and reconfigured as a part of a new apparatus. While the bookcases seemed to offer many divergent possibilities for ways of thinking and doing in their reconfigurations, it seems the literacies that children had acquired of the metal bars were somewhat sedimented, at least at the time. One might consider the productive power of the metal bars “affective energy” (Thiel, 2015a) that produces what becomes possible for humans to think, do and be in their intra-actions with such objects.

Ergo, thing-power (Bennett, 2010) and animacy (Chen, 2012) open up new ways of thinking about literacies and how they produce ways of knowing and being in the world through “dynamic entanglements of human and nonhuman agents, social and political forces, and cultural beliefs” (Thiel, 2015b). It is through the lens of these theories that we read our first few months as part of the material-discursive apparatus of the Playhouse.

**Literacies of things: Objects as a material-discursive apparatus of production**

As researchers concerned about issues of diversity, equity and justice, we are keenly interested in the ways that racialized and classed literacies are embedded in everyday objects and how a material-discursive apparatus in a particular place produces literacies for children and adults to acquire. We find it interesting that the literacies materially produced by the bookcases shifted with a new context and therefore changed the possibilities for thinking, doing and being with them. However, the bars that were on the windows that had been removed and discarded were still used as bars for a prison. How was it that the bars couldn’t escape the literacy of criminality, of keeping things in (and out), once they were liberated from the windows they held shut? What condition of possibilities about people and places (particularly about race and class) did the bars fabricate? And if the bars constructed criminal expectations in this particular place, what other objects produced similar literacies? Objects (like the bookcases and bars) are part of a material-discursive apparatus that produce literacies of race and class. Below we narrativize theories introduced in this section to make sense of other parts of the material-discursive apparatus of the Playhouse that produced certain kinds of
literacies – or ways of being, knowing and doing in humans’ intra-actions with them.

Padlocks, fences and gates

It was week one in our first summer when the Playhouse wasn’t quite the Playhouse but instead was in the changing-of-the-guard stage where one group is fumbling their way in and another is slowly tiptoeing out. I stand on the playground and walk the fence line. It has been secured with big, dangling metal chains and steel keyed locks. All the children have gone home and have no hope of reentering the playground through the traditional methods of walking through open gates. To reenter, they will need to climb up and over the chain-link fence – a feat I’ve watched them perform all week. When they are locked in, they escape over like bodies being held captive against their will. When they are locked out, they sneak in like rogues, as if they must be thieves to take what is rightfully theirs—a playground in their neighbourhood. One thing is certain, children don’t tend to let locks deter them from their ambitions.

Earlier, when the children were here, family members stood at the gates talking to their kids as if miles divided them, although only inches of galvanized metal walled them apart. The kids might jump the fence but the adults never did. When I asked the former director about the locks I was told, “We need them to keep the kids in and keep the bad people out.” A point I found rather curious considering the children lived only doors away from the playground and the only people outside of the fence line were family members and neighbours.

As I turn to leave the playground I notice a pile of freshly cut human hair clumped together on the playground side of the fence. I remembered that the family living in the house next door had cut several heads of hair that afternoon while I played with the children on this side of the fence line. Now the remains of those haircuts sat idly on the playground, which had become a dumping ground for excess that the neighbours no longer wanted in their yard. “The chains and locks,” I thought to myself, as the clump of hair demanded my attention. “There is something about these damn chains and locks.”

The chains and locks produced literacies of race, social class and ways of belonging or not belonging. The thing-power of these objects (Bennett, 2010) encouraged overtly monitoring the playground and the surveillance of bodies—black and brown working-class bodies of children and family members in the neighbourhood being monitored and surveilled by a white woman (and sanctioned by a middle-classed institution) body who was the former director.
Additionally, the chains and locks fortified a criminalization of the working-class black and brown children and families living literally around the fences that were being barred, a material-discursive apparatus that produces racialized and classed literacies in the United States that have become taken for granted as commonsense. African American boys and men are incarcerated at much higher levels than any other group (Alexander, 2012) and immigrants – particularly of Mexican descent – are detained in private detention centres while awaiting a court date and facing inhumane conditions (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016), and poor people from all backgrounds are more likely to face criminalization of their everyday financially insecure lives, including the inability to pay fees, fines (American Civil Liberties Union, 2010).

Bars, chains, fences and locks are part of a broad societal material-discursive apparatus that produces literacies that make sense of black, brown, immigrant and poor humans as potentially criminal and in need of being contained or restricted; belonging or not belonging. And in the local context of the Playhouse neighbourhood, the metal objects seemed to be marking a distinction between "us" and "them" or "this place" and "that place" in a way that literally made it okay to dump one's rubbish and hair trimmings inside the fence line where neighbourhood adults didn’t belong and didn’t participate. As Braidotti (2010) reminds us, tending to the powerful and interdependent material, discursive and symbolic forces of social and political practices can help us reimagine a more ethical way of being and doing. The fences, chains, bars and locks were not neutral objects but rather active agents in the literacies that children and adults had acquired about the place of the Playhouse and the surrounding neighbourhood.

Eventually, the chains came off that summer. It took some time and finesse, but within a few days the gates were free to swing open and the kids were free to run in and out. The playground didn’t feel as closed in – as exclusionary as Barad (2007) might say. The opening of the gates seemed to welcome the playground to the rest of the neighbourhood and vice versa. But just as it takes time to create a material-discursive apparatus, so it takes time to shift them into something different.

With the gates opened, children whirled by as they had the day before when the chains were in place, chasing each other across the playscape, stopping at the fence line on the other side of the yard as if the locks where still there. Families continued to stand on the opposite side of the fence to talk to their own children – even though the gates were open. Removal of the chains and locks, then, didn’t immediately change social practices, or the literacies (ways of being, doing, thinking in a particular place), for a while. Like the bookcases
and the window-bars, the padlocks, fences and gates construct certain kinds of literacies about people, places and things, literacies that have been materially and discursively produced well beyond the Playhouse and the community of South Woods, including commercials about home invasion, home-security and terrorism, police blotters, black hoodies, the working-poor and slave narratives (the list could go on and on). Chains and locks are not simply chains and locks but rather they exert a thing-power and vital animacy that stretch well beyond the metal gates they hold shut.

Although the locks and chains were neither our rule nor a practice we considered continuing when we began spending time at the Playhouse, they were remnants of the messiness left behind even once conditions began to change. We slowly noticed new literacies emerge in everyday practices. Eventually children started using the rest of South Woods as an extension of the Playhouse and vice versa, rather than feeling forced to stay inside the fence line when on the playground. Families started coming to the Playhouse more often when we were there and now, four years later, mums, dads, grandpas, grandmas and aunts and uncles usually walk onto the playground to chat with children and us without hesitation. Indeed, different social participation practices began to emerge and we would argue that these, in many ways, were more ethical and not reproductions of unjust raced and classed literacies. However, the literacies produced by these chains continue to serve as a powerful reminder that:

Place-making for children and youth is a political act, and all educators and educational researchers are engaged in such politics. Spaces can be created to produce control, indoctrinate, colonize, and discipline young bodies/minds just as they can be created to produce and actively cultivate creativity, curiosity, and social critique. (Jones et al., 2016)

These chains also remind us “that schools are not the sole sites of teaching, learning, or curricula, and that perhaps they are not even the most influential” (Sandlin et al., 2010). In fact, it appears that like humans, objects are pedagogues, too, producing literacies that control, indoctrinate, colonize and discipline young bodies as much as they can cultivate creativity, curiosity and social critique.

Barred windows, opening indoor spaces and literacies of possibilities

After that summer we made further material changes that we believe were significant in shifting the possibility of conditions around literacies of race, class and place.
The Playhouse was the only building/home in the entire neighbourhood that had bars on the windows, making it stand out as an exception. The bars – installed by an institution that placed itself voluntarily in the neighbourhood – echoed the same raced and classed literacies as the chains and locks on the fences. The material-discursive literacies produced by the barred windows include fear of working-class communities of colour and an assumption that certain kinds of crime will be attempted (breaking and entering, perhaps, or theft). These raced-and-classed literacies are not only acquired about the place of South Woods by outside visitors, but they are also acquired by children and families who live there themselves. Acquiring these literacies, neighbourhood residents might perceive their own community as potentially dangerous and a place to be feared, or they may resent the production of such literacies about their homes, choosing to resist institutions and the people representing them. While we have no way of knowing what, if any, role the different material-discursive apparatus of the Playhouse played in their perceptions of the neighbourhood, several adult residents over the years have said things to us like, “This used to be a dangerous neighbourhood, but it isn’t any more.”

Inside the approximately 700-square-foot home that was now the Playhouse, there were two rooms that had previously been reserved for adult administrative work and a restricted computer lab. Children rarely got a glimpse of the office, which gave it great weight in the children’s lives, nourishing a power relationship between the room and the bodies of children who were unable to use it. The computer lab produced the same kinds of tensions because it was a space that could only be used at certain times and only under direct adult supervision, and both rooms were locked with metal padlocks at all times. Building off the interests of the children over the summer, we transformed both rooms into spaces to create and design. The office became a room that was used for construction where a built-in desk became a work table to tinker with materials and the filing cabinet was replaced with a cart with natural wood blocks (see Figure 2). The closet that once served as a place for files and office supplies became shelves full of loose parts (Nicholson, 1972) to make with (boxes, corks, lids etc.).

The door to the cupboard that had also been locked with a padlock was removed completely to open up access to children at all times and a way of adults and children belonging in the space in a more egalitarian way. Making these two rooms accessible to everyone shifted the centres of production to reform subjectivities (Barad, 2007), it literally changed whom we could be in
our intra-actions with other humans and non-humans in these spaces, producing new literacies as a result. Liz Jones (2013) writes:

The classroom becomes part of a violent confrontation, a context of simultaneous space and event, where bodies violate spaces and spaces violate bodies a series of complex relational politics within the space the classroom creates and the activities it embodies. (p. 605)

What once were apparatuses that produced children as bodies at the Playhouse that needed to be controlled and regulated because of their presumed criminal dispositions now worked to produce them as creative, capable and curious beings who have much to offer the world.

In addition to these two rooms, design was reconfigured to add an overall softness and provide the centre with fluid and relational aesthetics (Ceppi and Zini, 2003). These elements were an important commitment to providing a
space that welcomed freedom to explore and move from place-to-place without feeling confined to one area in the Playhouse (see Figure 3) and simultaneously were meant to encourage creative endeavours (i.e. removing some of the bookcases that took up most of the floor space in the library). Spaces that once looked like the one in Figure 2 became spaces like the one in Figure 3. Aware of the impact of economic, political and social forces on community centres like this one, it was also important that the children were invited to access the Playhouse on their own time and in their own ways. Redesigning the Playhouse as a makerspace, we wanted to ensure more fluidity and accessibility by being free of charge. The national programme running the centre before us charged fees to attend, and sometimes even families that lived next door to the community centre were unable to use the Playhouse. In the United States, accessibility to afterschool programmes is often mired in who has the various resources to send their children (money, transportation, schedule,
English language reading and writing literacies), limiting possibilities for families like the ones in South Woods. Furthermore, makerspaces are often costly and found within more affluent spaces. Afterschool centres that focus on creativity and special interest classes are rarely accessible to working class children and children of Colour.

Additionally, without adhering to strict schedules and rules, children were invited to access space and materials on their own time. No one at the community centre was forced to complete homework but they could receive homework help if they chose to do so. No one had to check children in and out each day, but all family members were welcome at any time. Bodies were free to come and go as they wanted – a social and political practice and way of belonging in the community that was already embedded in the neighbourhood literacies “outside” the Playhouse fences, but not integrated inside the neighbourhood Playhouse.

Once the Playhouse reopened, the newly designed space produced its own set of literacies – some new and some old. While the space and the materials within it produced affects that emerged as power for young people to make-design-invent, so also did they emerge as power to destruct. For the first few weeks after these radical changes in the material-discursive apparatus, children were a bit rougher and louder in these spaces, particularly the spaces where they weren’t allowed in the past (the former office and computer lab, for example). It was as if they were telling the space, “You belong to us now.”

Unlike the subtle and slow-changing social practices around the absence of chains and locks outside, the transformations in the indoor rooms were bold and blatant. Children would stand just outside the former office, peek at it around the corner, and then hurl their bodies onto the rug, rolling around and kicking while laughing loudly. As their young bodies entangled with the bodies of objects in the rooms, the children wanted to make sure the space knew they were there. Sometimes blocks went flying, forte singing reverberated, and paint splattered windows, walls and doors. At other times, objects were used feverishly and in bulk to feed what seemed like an insatiable need to crumple and discard materials. Could it be that the young people were wielding their power to dominate the materiality of the space like it had dominated them for so many years? We worked through these power dynamics by adding noise absorbing elements such as rugs and curtains, and we had conversations with children reassuring them that the rooms and the materials would continue to be available when the building was open, negotiating the ways we all wanted to take care of these areas with responsibility and...
accountability to the space and people and materials within it – acquiring new literacies of place through our intra-actions with it.

We do not intend to romanticize the messy and difficult work of place-making and the intention to create material-discursive apparatuses that produce more open and just literacies, but with time, the material and discursive productions of bodies shifted (and continue to do so). Rooms began to produce creativity rather than exclusion and domination. Like the bookcases, the art supplies, books, building materials all became part of a different kind of pedagogy, one that seemed to push back at “the confining space of existing cultural models and vocabulary of teaching, learning, and curriculum” (Burdick and Sandlin, 2010: 339). Bodies of paper, fabric, boxes and children co-produced in powerful ways. Like the bookcases, material objects became more than their predetermined socially constructed use; fabric and pipe cleaners became the tools of a superhero (see Figure 4) and paper became spinners (see Figure 5) producing new expressions of language and literacy.

Figure 4. Pipe cleaners become the tools of a superhero.
desirings (Kuby and Gutshall Rucker, 2016), as well as constructing different conditions of possibilities for humans and nonhumans alike.

The vibrant thing-power of objects, space and children reconfigured literacies of race and class, narrating young black and brown children in a working-class community experiencing tremendous economic challenges as creative and intellectual makers at the Playhouse. Furthermore, issues of accessibility always involve the more-than-human, particularly since the things that are typically being accessed are nonhuman themselves. Access always has and always will be about the power of things, further illustrating the necessity of paying attention to the powerful literacies that vibrant matter exerts.

**Back to the bookcases: What the literacies of things taught us**

The bookcases in the driveway serve as a metaphor and concrete reminder of how the reconfiguring of materiality (with space and time) creates different

---

**Figure 5.** Paper becomes spinners.
conditions of possibility and produces different ways of being, thinking and doing – or literacies. The Playhouse itself is in constant reconfiguration, but those early (and major) material changes we write about in this paper were profoundly linked to specific raced-and-classed material-discursive productions about the children, families and neighbourhood that radically shifted our being together in the space. Every material change we made at the Playhouse was linked to/entangled with particular material-discursive apparatuses that produce what it means to be whom these young people in this particular neighbourhood at this particular historical time in the United States are. These shifts also produced possibilities for change in material-discursive productions that circulate within the community about each other and that outsiders have about the people that live in South Woods, and other neighbourhoods like it. As Chen (2007) reminds us, “images of the cultural practices of others, if sought from a vulnerable position, can easily slide into fodder that strengthens defensive or protective nationalist sentiment and build a sovereign project” (p. 6). In other words, the deficit orientations, which are embedded in some classed and raced literacies, we acquire as part of the material-discursive apparatus to which we belong work to perpetuate fearmongering, rejection and dominant racist and classist ideologies about others, neighbourhoods and even ourselves.

Many families in the South Woods community have shared with us that they did not interact with one another before the newer version of the Playhouse was created. Children who had never spoken to one another – even though they lived on the same street – became friends who play, argue, visit one another and have deep discussions about many things they are interested in and concerned about, such as how events like the horrific mass murders in Charleston and ongoing reports of police brutality unfold. We do believe these are more ethical ways of being with children and communities, and even as we continue to face challenges in the Playhouse community and South Woods neighbourhood, such as persistent racist and sexist language and actions, we are committed to continuous shifting of the material-discursive apparatus that opens up different and perhaps even mutant (e.g. Jones and Woglom, 2016) ways of being, doing and thinking while actively resisting the reproduction of material-discursive apparatuses that restrict and constrain brown and black working-class and poor children’s literacies.

Overall, reconfiguring literacies of race, social class, place and the material-discursive apparatuses that help produce them offers new possibilities for doing and thinking about pedagogy and research within the field of literacy.
If we are to pay attention to the ways all bodies (human and otherwise) produce literacies (included literacies that are raced and classed), we have a better chance of engaging in more ethical and justice-oriented practices. Noticing the power more-than-human things have in the world offers deeper insights into who and what produce literacies and what counts as pedagogy circumventing traditional forms of power. In addition, shifting literacies to include objects has the potential to help educators better understand the ways humans and nonhumans are always in concert with one another. Furthermore, these literacies are always emerging rather than fixed, rupturing the neoliberal forces of social entanglements that often relegate how literacies are produced within institutional and public structures. As educators, we find the idea of continuous-emergence and the potential for change it represents as a beacon of hope in what has become an even more contentious climate on issues of race and social class in the United States.

Putting feminist new materialisms to work in our research endeavours offers a way to reconfigure literacies as active and lively, animated through human and non-human intra-actions rather than static constructs. Furthermore, in our search for a more ethically responsive way to approach place-making, Karen Barad (2007) reminds us that “questions of space, time, and matter are intimately connected, indeed entangled with questions of justice” (p.236). It is our sincere hope that by thinking with these theories, educators will tend to matters of intentional place-making with and for young children. Recognizing that the materiality of places is pedagogical, always teaching certain kinds of literacies and not others, and that such literacies can be perpetuating or disrupting raced and classed understandings about the world, is a significant move towards an expansive notion of justice-oriented literacy education.

Declaration of conflicting interest
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Note
1. This first-person narrative is written from the perspective of the first author.
References


