The Doing and Undoing of the "Autistic Child":

Cutting Together and Apart Interview-based Empirical Materials

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Abstract

This paper discusses how posthuman and new materialist theories afford us opportunities to re-think the production of the "autistic child", drawing on a qualitative research project on parenthood in the context of childhood disability in Italy. We will put some Baradian's key concepts (intra-action, agential cut and cutting together-apart) to work in glancing at the complexities we keep encountering when a mother, Arianna, describes her relationship with her daughter Laura. The aim of this paper is two-fold: firstly, to methodologically re-turn the production of the "autistic child"; and secondly, to rethink and unsettle the dichotomies that constitute some children as "disabled human beings", abnormal and undesirable.

Key words: autism, posthuman, new-materialism, cutting together-apart, interview

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We begin in the middle of things by asking ourselves what do the empirical materials below do… produce… generate… fabricate… create…and…and…? Resisting the temptation to think about what a text means, what it represents, or reflects, we would like to imagine a different life for *this text*, a life where, what is full of meaning is no more relevant than what appears to be meaningless; where there are no absolute separations between the researcher and the phenomena s/he is integral to.

> *Actually, we arrived at the diagnosis after a whole series of observations - actually it was me who had been making these observations since she was born, because I immediately realized that she was a child who was learning differently … I can consider myself, quote, "a lucky person" because I was able to make this comparison, for the very reason that I'd seen so many little children of her age and so realised that she wasn't reacting like the others, because I worked for ten years in a crèche and for more than ten years in nursery schools. However, I realised that she was very unusual - I kept saying to myself "This little girl is too unusual," definitely very, very sensitive to anything that was … hmm … anything to do with the senses, and that was the first sign... in other words, in my opinion she over-reacted to everything. I was saying to myself … perhaps it's because it's a time when I'm alone, it's just me and her, her dad was far away for work so there was a lot of silence at home. I was finishing a university course at the time and I was studying for a lot of exams; and so my mother used to say: "Yes, there is too much silence here." She was four rooms away from me [in the house] and if a message arrived on my mobile she would wake up and call out to me, and when I used the mobile she would already want to look at what was ringing…*
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> *But I can assure you that this sensation became reality … you could say that by the time she was a year old she already knew all the colours, she recognised the letters on the*

laptop… I mean, she had an exaggerated attraction for anything that was new, so an insatiable desire to learn, by which I mean not only to look around, like other children do, and then to experiment with their body, I mean she really wanted to know the names of things…Yes, I think she said "Mum" at about four months, or something like that, but… she tried to give a name to everything she saw and I can absolutely guarantee that it wasn't me who was pushing her because I didn't have much time and to be honest, at the time I didn't much feel like talking (she smiles), it was a very tiring time for me … and still she had this desire to learn words.

When she was one year old, sitting in front of the computer, she would see the letters and name them. At one year and a half, she could read numbers, letters and words, I mean she would put the syllables together and try to read the short words; so much so that when she was nearly three, or maybe even earlier, together with the paediatrician we decided to take away everything, I mean everything. I took away everything, I mean books, newspapers, the clock, everything. Because the only thing that caught her attention was things to do with numbers and letters.

So I wondered… this little girl who always and everywhere finds letters and numbers, and all the rest, that is, playing, or relationships, she puts in the background, or rather, she didn't even notice them, she didn't…she didn't try to experience a relationship except for when she was trying to reach her goal… she really loved hearing letters and numbers repeated, so she kept asking for that, she kept asking… so this thing started to cause me anxiety and worry because, I mean, it was an obvious way of … basically, it was all too clear, in my opinion, that at that moment, she was different from other children of her age.

The above empirical materials are drawn from fieldwork conducted for a wider research project (Frigerio and Montali, 2016) focusing on parenthood in the context of childhood disability and mental health issues in Italy (1). In particular, the "data" we discuss comes from an interview with

Arianna, the mother of Laura, a 7-year-old girl diagnosed when she was 3 years old with "Asperger's Syndrome" (Mayes, Calhoun & Crites, 2001). Over the following pages we discuss some of the key issues/dynamics/intra-actions that prompt a mother (Arianna) to recognize her daughter's (Laura) "diversity" and eventually led to her diagnosis as an "autistic child". The aim of this paper is two-fold: firstly, to methodologically re-turn (2) the production of the 'autistic child' as we take up some theoretical affordances offered by posthumanism and new materialist theories; and secondly, to rethink the dichotomies that constitute some children as disabled human beings, abnormal and undesirable (De Schauwer et al., 2017). This is important because being consigned to the category of undesirable renders disabled human beings vulnerable and abject, experiencing systemic and cultural violence and abuse in their everyday worlds (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011). Posthumanism's problematization of the human subject (Braidotti, 2013) resonates with an approach to disability studies that challenges humanist conceptualizations, which traditionally define disabled people in terms of deficit or excess. Posthuman and new materialist theories (3) allow phenomena to be approached as connected entities, emerging from cuts that can never 'produce absolute separations' (Barad, 2014, p. 168) of one person or of one thing from another.

In particular, the inspiration for writing this paper emerged from our mutual interests in the potentialities of Barad's ideas of intra-action and cutting together-apart. Barad (2007) proposed the neologism intra-action to highlight:

> …the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual "interaction", which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. (p. 33)

Int*er*action would presuppose distinct agencies/individual beings (for example, the mother and her daughter), while int*ra*-action conceives subjectivities as emergent and entangled. Moreover, following Barad (2007), situated subjectivities are performative effects of specific agential cuts:

> A specific intra-action … enacts an agential cut (in contrast to the Cartesian cut —
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> an inherent distinction — between subject and object) effecting a separation between
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> "subject" and "object". That is, the agential cut enacts a local resolution within the
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> phenomenon of the inherent ontological indeterminacy. (Barad, 2003, p. 815)

In other words, agential cuts do not produce absolute separations (not cutting into two), but rather cutting together-apart, that is, material-discursive interventions that delineate phenomena, enacting boundaries, properties, meanings and categories, such as in this case the "autistic child". Following Barad (2007), the term "autistic child" is not a mirror/representation of the world, but an intervention in the world: cuttings are always practices/doings/actions disturbing and intervening in reality. Intra-actions create inclusion and exclusion and according to Barad we are responsible for the cuts that we help enact: 'It's all a matter of where we place the cut…. what is at stake is accountability to marks on bodies in their specificity by attending to how different cuts produce differences that matter' (Barad, 2007, p. 348).

Throughout this article we will try to put these Baradian's key concepts to work to address the process of ~~doing~~, ~~transcribing~~, ~~translating~~ and ~~analysing~~ an ~~interview extract~~ (4). Barad's agential realism offers us a different way to approach an extract of 'interview-data' as a form of 'boundary-drawing practice' (Barad, 2007, p. 140). The extract is itself a textual demarcation, a text bounded by the edges and constraints of the paper, simultaneously documenting an interview (arguably another bounded entity) that records a series of other bounded entities (child, mother, objects etc.). We have tried to perform the idea of cutting together-apart and see what methodologically happens: what is produced, what is created, what is separated but, yet connected, within an assemblage where matter and meaning are intertwined? Starting from those words, we will also ask ourselves if different cuttings (together and apart) of "autism" might be possible. As we have re-turned over and over again our encounters with Arianna and Laura, we have become interested in the production of Laura (a situated individual) as "autistic". This interest, as Højgaard and Søndergaard (2011) underline, 'includes a focus on how normativities of socio-cultural

categories work on, in, and through human beings; as well as how matter or materialities and technologies enact and are enacted in these processes' (p. 339-340). By cutting together-apart an interview excerpt, we are interested in exploring the co-constitution of the "autistic child", highlighting and problematizing how forces, intensities, ideas, objects, technologies and institutions may produce a view of difference, now called Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), that can be understood as an assemblage, in which everything contributes to the production of, and is produced by, other entangled agencies.

Over the next pages we will discuss the following cuts:

- Re-turning the interview technique and interview-based data

- Cutting disability anew

- Cutting together and apart data analysis or re-turning a piece of data

- Discursive cuttings across data

- Objects-Technologies-Affects: Cutting together-apart the Production of Laura, Arianna and the Interviewer

- Cutting together-apart an (in)conclusion

Re-turning the interview technique and interview-based data

What do posthuman theories do in the context of the interview? The writing that constitutes the 'data' is *cut* from a larger collection of empirical materials. The verb *to cut* here does not infer a severing or disconnection, but evokes a simultaneous 'cutting together-apart' (Barad, 2007, p. 176), where this child emerges at the intersection of particular 'apparatus of bodily production' (Haraway, 1991, p. 200), including the politics of data analysis; the models and practices of disability; the reception of particular vibrations of voices in the interview; the circulation of expectations, shame and desires, discomfort and disappointments; the metaphors, narratives and discourses drenched in history and culture and entangled in punctuation, grammar, semantics and other language traditions.

A posthuman approach to research necessitates the de-centring of the human researcher in a more distributed process of data "collection". If we are de-centring the human, who is 'collecting' data? From a posthuman perspective the researcher is merely 'part of and the result of the ongoing intra-actions of the world' (Nordstrom, 2015, p. 394) together with all the non-human, material and other 'participants', including the research questions, tools, techniques, and recording devices. The data extract above is not conceived only as a transcription of the interviewee's utterances generated by a particular research question; but rather, it is a phenomenon already connected and entangled with forces (like discourses and policies) that dictate and justify what is legitimated and allowed to be re-searched. The interview is the result of different and flattened forces that the research(er) has no control over (Benozzo, Bell & Koro-Ljungberg, 2013; Kuntz & Presnall, 2012; Nordstrom, 2015; St. Pierre, 2011). Becoming researching bodies is an effect of forces that play beyond the intention of the self-sufficient speaking subject-researcher. Moreover, the ~~analysis~~ does not focus on the individual, essentialist subject but relies on what is produced in the 'enactment among research-data-participants-theory-analysis' (Mazzei, 2013, p. 733).

The interview makes agential cuts; however, resolutions or boundaries in Barad's view are not fixed, but are spaces to make further agential cuts. In our case, these agential cuts concern also ordinary research practices such as the transcribing of the recording, the choosing of an excerpt for the paper, and the translations of the excerpt from Italian to English. The act of translating from a language to another, including the final editing made by a native English speaker, is another agential cut in which other cuts are reignited. From a humanist position, translation is always a betrayal of the "original" text, even when it is the only way to share it (Bonazzi, 1999). However, coming from a posthuman position, we conceive the transcriptions and translations as provisional boundaries, provisional cutting together-apart made by the intra-action between researchers, interviewees, translators, languages, readers, culture and discourses. Thus, the transcription-translation constitutes (rather than exactly represents) realities and meanings and, necessarily, it is a betrayal of any sense of "original" meaning. Here, the possibility to betray a text does not matter,

because the preoccupation for betraying is seen as the opening up of discourses of fidelity and truthfulness. The translation, the (re)reading and the ~~analysis~~ of that words are multi-layered processes of cutting together and apart, that is, of re-turning:

> as a multiplicity of processes, such as the kinds of earthworms revel in while helping to make compost or otherwise being busy at work and at play: turning the soil over and over or otherwise being busy at work and at play: turning the soil over and over – ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it. (Barad, 2014, p. 168).

Cutting together-apart implies a transformation of the interactions with both the topic of interest and the "data". No longer is there a separate and confined "topic" or area of investigation that excludes from its boundaries other themes and aspects that don't matter. If everything is caught up with other entangled entities, then the focus is "distributed", pluralized in multiple lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In our case for example, re-turning the phenomenon "autism" necessarily entails an openness to intra-actions with motherhood, objects, fatherhood, silence and psy-complex's theories and medical practices and and and…in a metonymical cross reference (Lacan, 2003). This metonymical cross reference never finds a point of stability or a definitive conclusion, but can be anchored in relevant streams through the practice of cutting together-apart, operating provisional and partial cuts within the messy entanglement of our lives. On the other hand, we argue that data are not anymore something to be collected or to be read in the light of specific theories or epistemological paradigms (Holmes, 2014). Instead together with Koro-Ljungberg, Löytönen and Tesar (forthcoming), data become part of a fluid methodological space, where paradigms, theories, methods, research questions and research design, analysis and… and… and… 'melt, transform, circumvent, infiltrate, appear, and disappear' (p. 3).

Cutting disability anew

Traditionally, ASD is described as a range of neurological disorders usually diagnosed in early childhood which involves a persistent deficit in social communication and social interaction, and

restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (APA, 2013). ASD has been at the center of debates regarding the ambiguity of its construction as a spectrum and the implications of this in relation to the boundaries of the diagnosis; a particular topic of discussion concerns the removal of the category of Asperger's Syndrome from the DSM V, in which the "subtypes of autism" have been incorporated into one category, ASD (Vivanti et al., 2013). Milton (2014) documents how ASD had gone through various psychoanalytic, psychological, medical, and sociological constructions, which reflect broader trends in shifting professional bodies of knowledge.

More recently, posthuman and new materialist approaches to rethinking ASD have emerged in disability studies (Vanderkinderen & Roets, 2015). These theoretical and methodological perspectives work to de-centre the role of the human, unsettling the privileged position held by discursive approaches and language in understanding the worlds we inhabit, suggesting that the role of matter and material forces are underestimated when encountering the world (Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016). In this section we will examine how posthuman/new materialist approaches can provide a relevant and important range of conceptual devices for understanding ASD and the production of the "autistic child" differently.

Posthuman disability scholars (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016) propose *the theory of dishuman studies*. They describe a dishuman reality as:

> one which … simultaneously acknowledges the possibilities offered by disability to trouble, re-shape and re-fashion traditional conceptions of the human (to 'dis' typical understandings of personhood) while simultaneously asserting disabled people's humanity (to assert normative, often traditional, understandings of personhood) (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016: 2).

Dishuman studies offer a way to refuse normative and often constraining notions of humanity – for example, that there is a notion of a 'normal' life through which all lives should be judged liveable. In this way, it is possible to recognize the inner humanity of disabled people's lives and to think

again about the disabled body as *the site of* possibility for a reconfiguration of the concept of humanity. A DisHuman perspective adds something distinctive to recent new materialist and posthuman philosophical writings (e.g. Braidotti, 2013), as a critical disability studies lens exposes humanism's 'convenient relationship with' medicalisation and pathologisation of the body (Goodley Lawthom & Runswick-Cole, 2014, p. 343). A critical disability studies approach shows that by deconstructing existing frames of humanity it is possible to promote an affirmative positionality.

Otherness that is represented by disabled people is constructed as a pervasive worry in capitalistic societies; disability, indeed, challenges and problematizes the very idea of the human. Those who are not aligned with whatever or whoever is constructed as the norm are often characterized as Other, denied their humanity and considered as ontologically deviant with respect to the binary categorization normal/abnormal (Vandekinderen & Roets, 2016). The impaired body has traditionally been understood as deficit, lack, limit or excess (Goodley, 2012), and disability has historically been linked to fear, monstrosity and freakiness (Goodley, Runswick-Cole & Liddiard, 2015).

Among the plethora and complexities of disability, a person understood as having ASD is often socially represented simultaneously as an object of interest and anxiety that evokes both threat and mystery (Rocque, 2010), monstrosity and freakiness; it is considered a "zeitgeist condition" (Murray, 2012, p. 72). ASD has been branded as both a lack and an excess with respect to normative notions of humanness; as Collins (2004) says 'autism is *an ability and a disability*: it is as much about what is abundant as what is missing, an overexpression of the very traits that make our species unique' (p. 161). This idea of simultaneous excess (abundance) and lack (something missing) calls into question the boundaries related to the definitions of identity and subjectivity and recall what Elisabeth Grosz (1996) has described as the *freak* and Margrit Shildrick (2002) as the *monster*. The freak is an ambiguous being that we cannot include in dominant social categories, but whose presence intimates the contradictions and incoherencies at the core of those categories (5).

Shildrick (2002) claims that the *monster* (or the monstrous) is a concept that has a disruptive force. Since *monsters* are not completely recognizable, understandable and contained by the binary structure (self and other), they remain the absolute others, the not-me. However, we could instead recognize how the monster can reflect back aspects of ourselves, which are removed and repressed, and then its status – not completely self or other – can become unsettling. The otherness represented by ASD is especially frightening, it is a monstrosity. Rocque (2010) argues that the depiction of ASD as mystery and threat support the autism industry; indeed, families, and especially mothers of "autistic" children, are pushed towards an idea of normality that is frequently presented by psy-professionals as the only solutions to the monstrosity of the child (Jensen, 2012).

Thinking disability differently, and through difference, may permit a reconsideration of the disabled body as possibility and a reconfiguration of the concept of humanity, which we would argue is now needed in the area of children's development, family and politics. A posthuman perspective highlights that human beings' lives are a continuous becoming, which is produced by the intertwined relations between nature and society, technology and culture (Braidotti, 2013). This position considers humans as part of a complex assemblage that embrace all entities in an environment and aims to produce an alternative vision/version of disability that celebrates its difference, relationality, potentialities and possibilities. A new materialist perspective goes beyond a poststructural reading of disability and works with the materiality of existence (Vandekinderen and Roets, 2016), because it focuses on the embodiment of impairment and not only on the discursive and social construction of disability (Palen, 2014). A posthumanist perspective does not deny the role of social discourses, but assumes that they should be conceptualized as something that do not act on a given and stable matter, but intra-act with the vital structure of materiality; this perspective 'rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature-culture and stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter' (Braidotti, 2013, p. 3). Posthumanism questions the humanist view of the subject – a unified, rational and self-conscious individual that creates a distinction between man and animal or man and technology. Humans instead are mutually

articulated with objects, animals and technology, as they are never delimited: everything does something to something else. According to Massumi (2002) prostheses and the body are mutually connected: 'The thing, the object, can be considered *prostheses* of the body – provided that it is remembered that the body is equally a prosthesis of the thing … if bodies and objects are implicated in each other … it is not clear who is used by whom' (p. 95-96). The common notion of prosthesis is utility-oriented and belongs to the realm of substitution. Massumi (2002) offers a different idea of prosthesis other than an object designed for the replacement of an organ, trying to make evident that prosthesis can belong to the order of *extension*. Within posthumanism, technological tools are not conceived as (re)habilitation devices, but as a form of superposition where body and technology augment each other in reciprocity: prosthesis is the exteriority that extends interiority, which in turn expands exteriority again and again.

Authors working with a posthumanist perspective have approached ASD as an assemblage, a lived, material, embodied and everyday reality that emphasizes the multiple relations in which every human being is positioned. In this respect, ASD and disability are 'the quintessential posthuman position' (Goodley, 2014, p. 846). It must be acknowledged, however, that ASD has been associated with a stereotypical and restricted understanding of posthumanism in ways that depict a future in which humans privilege virtual and mediated communication at the expense of "real" relation to others. Vice versa, "the child with autism" may be considered a figure of the posthuman because s/he shows that our existence is always dependent on, and in relationship with, a whole range of technologies that, in the case of ASD, may be letterboard, electronic devices, and text materials (Sharon, 2014).

Cutting together and apart ~~data analysis~~ or re-turning a piece of data

The piece of interview data above constitutes a cutting, which is connected to broader ways of thinking about disabilities as well as policies. We aim to examine the ways cultural and material forces intersect in open-ended intra-actions, producing the phenomena associated with physical and social expressions of ASD.

As qualitative researchers trying to understand this data, we could orient ourselves to all the separate entities that we already know and seem to offer themselves up for analysis (the child; the objects; the mother; the paediatrician; the (absent) father; the researcher/interviewer), things that we would argue have become solidified through what Barad (2007) would write of as repetition of boundary-making practices or material configurations of the world.

Coming from a posthuman position, we want to re-think data as a less definitive series of phenomena. We would argue that a process of cutting together-apart of separate (human) entities, enables matter to be understood more complexly. Such a process invites the data to ask new questions of us, re-turning different problems and forcing re-considerations of the specific intra-actions between the authors of this paper (invested in academia); the interviewer; discourses of child development; the child and the materiality of her environment (books, magazines, clocks, numbers, letters); her mother (with her body, the things she knows about, her past professional experiences, her fears, and her contingent priorities); and the spaces we all move through.

We would like to pursue two threads of thinking contributing to an entangled analytical context of past and future, space and time, bodies and objects, discourse and politics as we re-turn this data: 1) the discursive haunting of psychology and methodology; and 2) objects-technologies-affects: the production of Laura, Arianna and the interviewer.

Discursive cuttings across data

A plethora of powerful discursive resources haunt this text; for example discourses related to observation, research and inquiry, but also to pedagogy and education. Here we would like to return to one, in our opinion, most powerful discourse that infuse this data: the discourse of development psychology. Re-turning to Bowlby (1951), we can trace how traditional attachment theory still haunts conceptualizations of maternal deprivation, leaving us with a legacy that nowadays still orients the worries and concerns of parents, especially mothers. Erica Burman (2008) argues that according to attachment theory and, on a broader level, traditional developmental psychology, mothers are 'positioned as the objects and sources of children's affections' (p. 129),

and are often perceived as the person responsible for children's achievements or failure in development. Attachment theory can be seen as a point of reference around which mothers are evaluated and regulated. The popularization of Bowlby's ideas continues to have radical implications for women's self-blame and sense of guilt, for example as Arianna intimates in the data, *I didn't have much time and to be honest, at the time I didn't much feel like talking (she smiles), it was a very tiring time for me*. Bowlby's ideas have not only had an impact on mothers doubting themselves, perceiving themselves at "fault" for failing to be constantly available for their child and able to nurture a secure attachment, they also position the mother as a completion of the child's nervous system and affective/relational organization (Burman, 2008). In this regard, traditional theories reproduce a simultaneous division, and fusion, between the mother and the child, according to which the mother should function as a constantly present figure and the child should be thought as completely dependent on the dedication of his/her mother.

Arianna could be cut from the data as a discrete entity, self-contained and separate from her daughter who she seems able to perceive with a scientific, clinical eye. Her judgments about Laura's development seem based on another discrete entity, a body of knowledge about traditional stages of development, driving Arianna's attention to the child's interactions with other bodies and things. Her concluding comment, *she was different from other children of her age*, could be analyzed as an example and product of dualist logic or binary thinking coming out of traditional developmental theory that conceptualizes a clear sense of what is ab/normal and identity as essence or fixed. Laura's specific interest in objects and material things is described in terms of a normative discourse about a child's learning and development: in this way, the child becomes a subject with no (or very limited) interest in human relationships, rendering her "different". Arianna is able to stand back and discuss a world to which she seems to be contributing, but is also able to remain separate from, secures this sense of bounded and discrete entities at work. However, if we pursue 'a way of understanding the world from within and as part of it' (Barad, 2007, p. 88), we must re-turn Arianna and Laura as inseparable mother-daughter entanglements of intra-acting agencies

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(Barad, 2007). These entangled elements are less discrete, becoming far more complex and intra-active systems of flowing matter, dispersed and interfered with by memories, child development theories, politics, objects, ideas, methodological practices, familial relations, affects, educational and disability discourses, feelings of hope, guilt, inadequacy, anxiety and worry.

Across such intra-actions and in pursuit of thinking about Laura's "difference" differently, we are interested in how Arianna's comments might challenge absolute boundaries between bodies and between 'here and there, now and then, this and that…as the effects of enacted cuts in a radical reworking of cause/effect'' (Barad, 2014, p. 174). The materiality of spaces and environments that Arianna and Laura are inhabiting over time (the past as Arianna remembers the events; the present time of the interview; and into the future as we engage with the interview data now) are always becoming in intra-action with the forces of shifting material-discursive practices, politics, bodies, materials and matter, naturecultures. If 'the self originates in a body that interacts with its environment' and that 'depends on chance rather than on any unfolding principle or essence of the self' (Stagoll, 2010, p. 25-27), what does this entail for our understandings of the child's and the mother's entangled and flowing subjectivities? Lowe, Lee and MacVarish (2015) suggest that new work in children's brain development, for example, is shaping the contemporary policy context and that traditional child development theories are becoming imbued with more recent shifts to neuroculture. Following Haraway (2003, p. 5), the concept of naturecultures challenges traditional oppositions and gesture to the necessary entanglement of the natural and the cultural, the bodily and the mind, the material and the semiotic that offers a much more intricate and complex perspective on anthropocentric exceptionalism, sole maternal responsibility for a child's growth and development, and the ability of language. Potentially, these ideas allow us all (human, non-human and more-than-human entities) to become fully immersed in a constantly changing reality. Folded into this entanglement of intra-acting agencies, are differing patterns of what is considered pathological/abnormal in childhood and as parenting practices across and through what Barad refers

to as 'the making of new temporalities (spacetimematterings), new diffraction patterns' (2014, p.168).

Objects-Technologies-Affects:

Cutting together apart the production of Laura, Arianna and the interviewer

The attraction to everything sensorial and the intra-actions with technological artifacts is documented as alarm, worry and anxiety for the mother and the pediatrician. The ways in which Laura and the material world intra-act produces a keen interest in the materiality and symbolic value of certain objects, a desire to encounter, experience, and get to know the world with her body and senses. Interestingly, this comes to be read as a symptom of the fact that *something isn't working here*, which results in an event that suddenly deprives the child of her objects of interest and pleasure. These objects are the particular parts of the world she seems to be attracted to and perhaps the means by which she produces (self) and other knowledge. The child's corporeal enthusiasm for learning intra-acts with the mother's need and search for silence, a silence related to the fatigue and stress resulting from the contingent work/study situation. The child's desire to know and learn comes up against a desire for silence that ends up producing the child herself as a weird, eccentric subject. Thus, the child's relationship with the world is severely conditioned by the materiality of the environment, which takes the form of restriction and constraint. The materiality of the world is both part of and results from intra-action in agential realism: the materiality of the world provoked something, provoked a reaction.

One of the more-than-human things in play in the data includes silence. We would argue that the removal of material objects blocks the becoming of the child: deprived of what was able to catch her interest and mediate between her and the (human and non-human) world, the child is reduced to silence. This sanctioning enactment materializes a net of discourses (medical, psychological, and family) that produces a weird, different, even disturbing subject. This subject, deprived of the possibility of bodily intra-action with objects and symbols, simply becomes different from other "normal" infants of the same age, a subject out of step with her proper stage of

development. Following Brickman's (2014, p. 724) cue, we must ask ourselves whether, as a bounded entity, the child's "disability" produces her different-ness or whether her different-ness is produced within an entanglement that includes the availability of the diagnostic category, her mother's codified knowledge, the pediatrician's power, the desire for silence expressed by the mother, the father's material absence, and the child's idiosyncratic way of playing with objects.

In the interview with her mother, this apparatus could be understood as producing a 'disabled' subject. Indeed, the child's singular intra-action with objects and technologies would be later codified as her primary symptoms, that is, rigidity and inflexibility (APA, 2013). The label of autism expresses the intra-actions between the material and the discursive dimensions: being a label, the word *autism* evokes a representational dimension that encompasses all the images associated with this particular (psychiatric - medical - disability) category. In this case, autism is produced starting not from some kind of deficit but from a kind of surplus, from showing too much interest and precociousness in the concreteness and symbolism of the world: in colors and names, in numbers and letters, in words and technological artifacts. In this sense, the productive desire that circulates in the assemblage is transformed as a form of lack. As Barad (2007) puts it, the label becomes material: in this case, the label of autism produces a fixed reality and makes im/possible a whole range of interventions and acts. We would argue that attention is drawn to particular 'use-ful' apparatus, producing the child's body as out of kilter with the anticipated body 'proper' (MacLure, Jones, Holmes, & MacRae, 2011), simultaneously in excess and in deficit. The weight of traditional developmental, as well as more recent neuroscientic discourses of child development along with the history of play, the politics of inclusion, mothering and attachment, medical and sociocultural narratives of ASD enact an agential cut, which produces the autistic child, marking a boundary within the infinitive variety of the life. The researcher, the interview, the documentation all produce agential cuts that produce certain phenomena and reality in which the concept of autism becomes intelligible: they "enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering" (Barad, 2007, p. 148).

In intra-acting with these data and attempting to understand the actions of the mother in relationship with the child, how do we resist falling back into what Deleuze and Guattari identify as "strata" (1987), that is, social requirements that aim at producing bodily-organized, self-interpreting, singular and clearly defined identities. Both the mother and child could keep being produced in ~~analysis~~ as stratified in ways that do not consider their desires as productive, but as a concerned, yet desperate mother and an autistic child rather than becoming subjects. In this kind of ~~analysis~~, we are not relying on the mother's nor the child's potential by falling back into 'grand narratives' and available discourses that lead bounded individual lives to be territorialized and everyday experiences to be overcoded and ordered. Somehow the capability of the child to connect with her environment encounters a barrier that tends to reinstall binaries and imposes normalized forms over a flux of intensities and forces. The vitality of the child is constrained by the imposition of a combination of disablement, neoliberal motherhood, assessment, and categorization that produce a governance of the child in a way that block her flows of desire and limits the potential of the interconnected nature of human becomings. We could read the child's relational and embodied self that joins the extended possibilities of becoming deriving from intra-action with space, multiple actors, objects and technologies, as forced into practices of normalization directed by a unitarian and humanist vision of the subject. As Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) have highlighted, play has been categorized according to the stages of typical developmental trajectories. The child in our example is considered as engaged in non age-appropriate play, as her behavior is valued as too precocious and fast. This peculiar form of "disdevelopment" produces the child as displaying.

If 'listening is about being open to being affected' (Davies, 2014, p. XI), in the case we have presented, the assemblage seems to not listen to the child: the not-yet thinkable, the unexpected is reduced to regulation, and no space is given for joy of movement, experimentation and difference. Dominance of predictability and manipulation, directed at preventing non-predetermined outcomes, precludes the expansion of capacity for thought and action for the child and the whole assemblage. Indeed, questions of identity and normativity prevails on becoming. The fact that the child is fixed

as an object of observation and her experimentation is disqualified affects the entire entanglement, preventing the development of difference and inhibiting the not-yet known to emerge. The child is misrecognized, and thus her possibilities and potentialities are affected. Indeed, what it is possible for one 'to be depends on what kind of subject is recognizable in this context, and on what that context affords him - how it positions him, what modes of enunciations it draws on, and what it values' (Davies, 2014, p. 42). Given that the mind is embodied, the body schema for example expands in taking up tools and objects (Palen, 2014). In the case of our example, the creative exploration of the relations between the body and the space was not allowed - affecting child's psychological investment in her physical relations - and the mobility of life was substituted by foreclosure. Adopting the terminology of Davies (2014) lines of descent, with their power to fix, categorize and predict, prevail on lines of ascent, which open new modes of thought and ways of being. In the case of our analysis, the child's engagement with her body and the material reality of life is paralleled with a lack in her ability to feel empathy and relate with other human beings, implying an implicit attribution of inhumanity (Palen, 2014, p. 23). In contrast with this vision, the autistic child clearly shows the multiple relationships in which every human is inserted and expresses the self. The child's openness to the entireness of the environment is subjected to agential cuts that may have a disempowering effect.

Cutting together and apart: (in)conclusion

(In)conclusion, we want to re-cut and re-turn a number of texts, thoughts and images to keep addressing the production of the "autistic child". Erin Manning points out that method can be 'a static organization of preformed categories… an apparatus of capture… [which] stops potential on its way' (2016, p. 31). However, inspired by MacLure's (2006) call for a baroque method in qualitative research, our attempt is to explore the potentialities of method(ology) itself by re-turning to the idea of cutting together-apart and the substantive issue at hand, 'to spark more complicating connections … around research' (p. 738), creating an assemblage with fragments of ~~data~~, art images, research notes, and theoretical comments, 'attempting to set these in motion with and

against each other' (p. 738). We are not guided by the logic of analytical rigor but by the impulse to juxtapose, to pull together(apart) fragments coming from - only apparently - different worlds. It is the logic of *wunderkammern*, that is, of marvel and magnificence: "The wondrous is a meta-historical category that has been defined all along the eighteenth century, didactically first and foremost, as a form of knowledge, that is, a very special half-way stage, a kind of mental suspension that lies between ignorance and knowledge, which marks the end of ignorance and the beginning of knowledge" (6) (Lugli, 2006, p. 126, authors' translation).

The complexity of the pages of this article is to keep together diverse folds/streams that are only apparently distant from each other - methodology and topic, interview technique and autism, data and disability – to avoid the re-production of the couple "autistic child/mother of the autistic child". The impaired body, "autistic" or not, has traditionally been understood as occupying the borderlands of humanity, a space between monstrosity and freak. A posthuman ~~analysis~~ allows us, instead, a moment to reconsider the disabled body as a site of possibility that demands us to reconfigure the concept of humanity. In a time of global crisis, there is an urgent need to refuse normative and constraining notions of humanity and to recognize, at the same time, the inner humaneness of disabled people lives (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2015; 2016). Laura and Arianna find themselves entangled with psy-professionals and in the grip of the "autism industry" (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2016a), which seeks to treat the excesses and lack of the "disordered body" while maintaining dominant cultural values of dis/ability and associated exclusionary practices (Lester & Paulus, 2012).
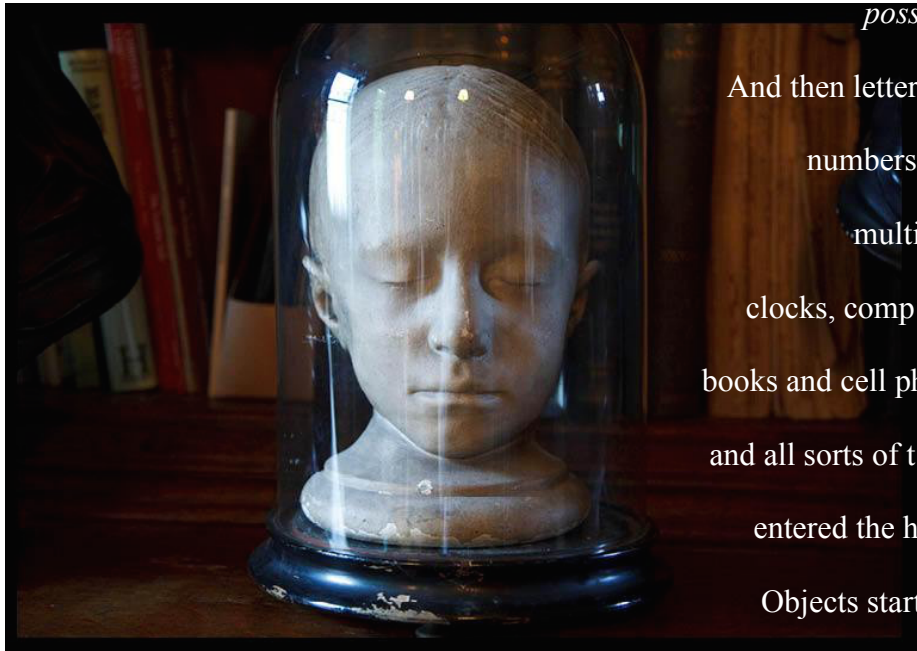
Tell My Mother Not To Worry (viii), 2014 (Ryan Gander)

However, something continues to escape from our thinking and writing, something slippery, something (im)possible to grasp. Indeed, in writing this paper, we have been constantly worried about judging the mother because we wanted to resist the mother-blame discourse that has underpinned so much psychological literature. However the complexity of this blame-story is enhanced and made even more seductive by the materiality of the data. Every time we read and read again the data, and we digest and then regurgitate the mother-paediatrician's decision to remove objects, technologies, books, newspaper, clocks and so on, from Laura, our stomachs churned. How many possibilities or potential (not only for the daughter, but also for the mother) have been stopped on its way? What lines of flight have been closed down by this separation/deprivation? Perhaps here we are in the middle of one of those knot/tangles of research where something else begins to glow:

> [S]ome detail … starts to glimmer, gathering our attention. Things both slow down
> and speed up at this point. On the one hand, the detail arrests the listless traverse of
> our attention across the surface of the screen or page that holds the data, intensifying
> our gaze and making us pause to burrow inside it, mining it for meaning. On the
> other hand, connections start to fire up: the conversation gets faster and more
> animated as we begin to recall other incidents and details (Maclure, 2013, p. 661).

In a posthuman approach, the myth of normality is exposed, as all lives are valued as a continuous becoming, and parents, like Arianna, are released from the burden of enforcing normalcy (Davis, 1995). By thinking about agency as not being attributed solely to a supposed intentional subject, conscious and in charge of him/herself, this changes not only how we think about the 'autistic child' but also the mother of an 'autistic child'. It becomes clear that *blame* cannot possibly reside within an individual, gendered body and mind but is produced, instead, through assemblages.

What other data are

possible?

And then letters and

numbers have

multiplied

clocks, computers,

books and cell phones

and all sorts of things

entered the house.

Objects started to

circulate,

they populated the

silence of the house

The Secret Museum (Joanna Ebenstein)

Addressing autism, again

We know, of course, that many parents, like Arianna, embrace the label of autism. This is not surprising in contexts in the global North where this label seems to offer families and children explanations, new understandings, interventions and resources to support the child's inclusion in school and the wider community. By offering information about difference, labels seem to offer a way of containing and normalizing 'abnormal bodies' and minds and managing uncertainty (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2016a, 2016b). Parents embrace labels that seem to have an explanatory power, which allows them to understand their 'disordered child'. And yet, the promise of the label is simultaneously so often disappointing and unfulfilled in children's and families' lives - understanding, interventions and resources remain elusive. The autism industry sells the label as a medical truth that offers a prognosis, or certainty, in uncertain times.

This is our home beyond nowhere

where shadows' footsteps fall,

> where memory echoes from the future,
>
> and comfort flows back from the past,
>
> where smiles have no need for faces.

Beatrice Han (Kia-Ki), 'Deligny et les cartes' p.188, in Manning, 2011, p. 92

Addressing methodology, again

Our attempt to create a space for transversal methodology, cutting across time, entities (human and non-human etc) allows us to resist / remove the need for the fixity of methods, the "…methodologies which may begin anywhere, anytime, but by doing so can create a sense of uncertainty" (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016, p.1). We have re-turned over and over a series of encounters with the label "autism" with the data where different propositions fold and unfold. No child, including Laura, conforms exactly to the diagnostic category, so the relief the label offers is always and only temporary. Every child, including Laura, becomes a diffraction, an abnormal version of the abnormal impairment category the label seems to offer (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2016a, 2016b).

> *Prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns away.*
>
> *I think prime numbers are like life.*
>
> *They are very logical but you could never work out the rules,*
>
> *even if you spent all your time thinking about them*

(Mark Haddon, The Curios Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, 2003).

When labels are understood as being produced in an assemblage, they are constantly re-negotiated, shifting and complex. The label becomes diffracted anew, 'an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling' (Barad, 2014, p. 168) bodies, discourses, objects, technologies and institutions and it becomes impossible to contain and normalize difference through the imposition of a label. So what do we offer Arianna and Laura? We offer an alternative vision/version of disability that celebrates its difference, relationality, potentialities and possibilities.

This paper has afforded us opportunities to think about data as assemblage, a complex mixture of dynamic entities under continuous reconfigurations, not as fixed structures, but always uncertain, in movement. As all the real and potential entities change and flow inside and outside to re-form other assemblages, the human researcher/observer remains displaced from her/his central position (Fox and Alldred, 2015). Within such an assemblage, 'expert' knowledge becomes one among many forms of knowledge and the psy-professions begin to lose their hold. The room is now open to what is uncertain, marginal, ineffable and at the edges.

The White Library (Wilfredo Prieto) (MONA – Hobart's Museum of old and New Arts)

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Footnotes

(1) The paper draws on a qualitative research project involving parents with children diagnosed with "Autistic

Spectrum Disorder" (ASD) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

(2) Here 're-turn' is used in baradian's way; see on page 7.

(3) Post-humanism and new materialism group a wide range of approaches, such as new empiricism, agential realism,

affect theory, actor network theory and ontological turn, which have been mobilized by theorists and philosophers

such as Deleuze (2004), Massumi (2002), Braidotti (2013), and Clough (2009).

(4) Here intentionally we literally are putting a structure under erasure (*sous rature*), that is we write 'a word, cross it

out, and then print both word and deletion... In this sense, we continue to use categories … because they seem

necessary, but at the same we cross them out because we think they are inadequate" (Benozzo, forthcoming; see

also Spivack, 1974, p. xiv).

(5) Grosz is clear in describing freaks as human beings 'who exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary

oppositions that govern our basic concepts and mode of self-definition. They occupy the impossible middle ground

between the opposition dividing the human from the animal …, one being from another…, nature from culture…,

one sex from the other…, humans and gods…, and the living and the dead' (Grosz, 1996, p. 57).

(6) "La meraviglia è una categoria metastorica che si definisce fino a tutto il Settecento, didatticamente prima di tutto,

come una forma di conoscenza, cioè uno stadio intermedio e particolarissimo, una specie di sospensione mentale

che sta tra l'ignoranza e il sapere, che determina la fine dell'ignoranza e l'inizio del sapere" (Lugli, 2006, p. 126).