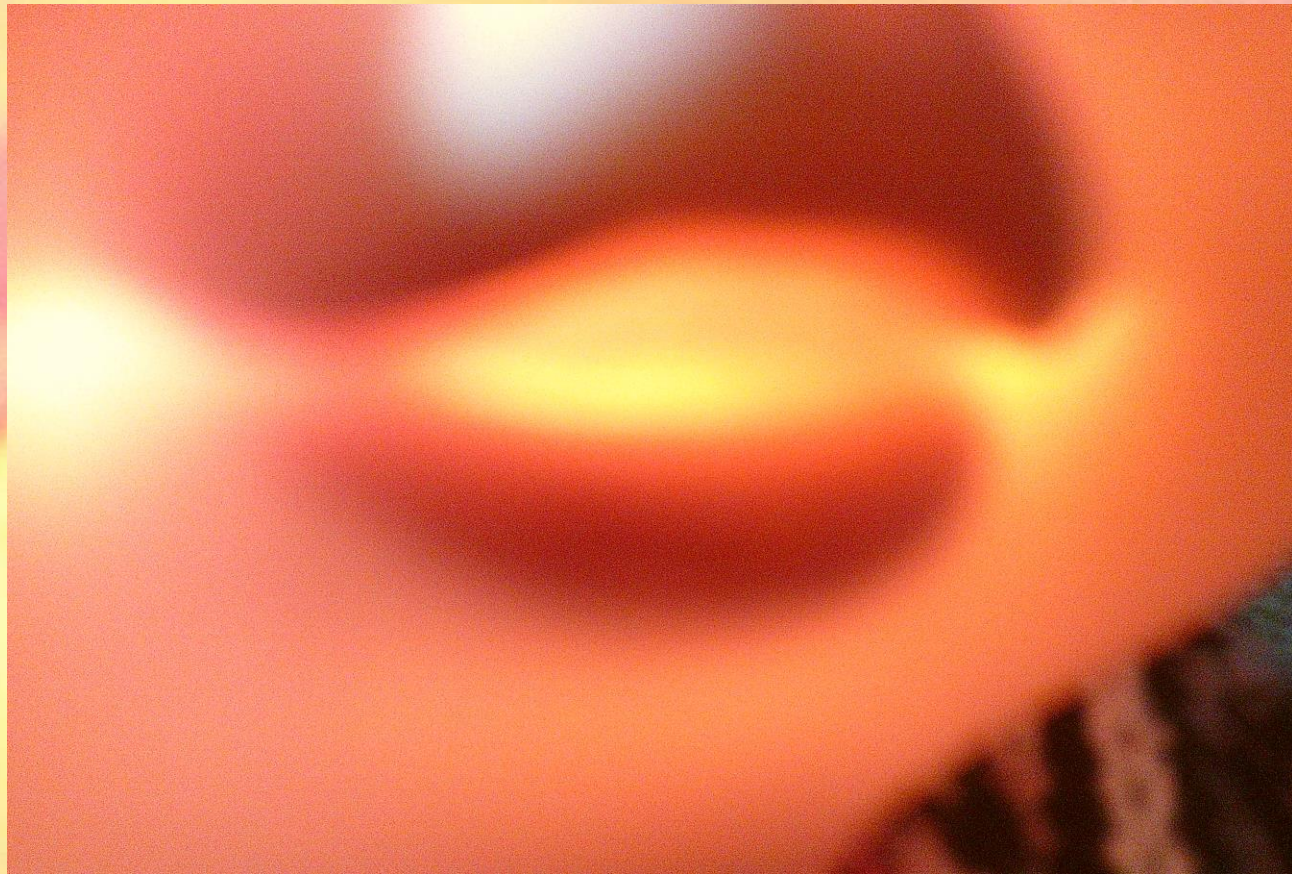


# “Still, No One Was Naked”: Amplifications of Textile/Children Entanglements

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Daily and nationally children enter classrooms clothed. Foregrounding the taken-for-granted nature of clothing as a classroom material, this project was a layered invitation to these preschoolers to think-with the textiles in their classroom. Textiles, for us, were those that the children wore, carried, played with, sat upon, and were offered for consideration. Rooted in sociomaterial understandings of agency and entanglement, we wondered alongside our textiles for several months, giving particular attention to how children’s stories and expressions about their textiles underscores relationality between textile/child(ren). Beginning with the t-shirts that children wore daily we sought to decouple our textiles from mundanity — to remove our blinders – by giving these same textiles deep pedagogical attention alongside the children.





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Amplifications of Textile/Children Entanglements**

Catherine-Laura Dunnington – The University of Winnipeg

Project place: Gather Round Preschool

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## Introduction

The University of Winnipeg is located on Treaty One Territory and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis. These are the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anisininew, Ininiwak, Oceti Sakowin/Dakota Oyate, and the Métis Peoples. This territory is also a place of significance for the Denesuline and the Inuit, some of whom have been living here for generations. My water is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation in Treaty Three Territory, and most of Winnipeg's hydro-electricity comes from Treaty Five Territory in northern Manitoba. I acknowledge that I am an uninvited guest and work here in a spirit of humility, truth, truthful acts, and justice.

I would also like to acknowledge the children of Gather Round Preschool, their educators, and their families. I have sought to both represent and respect your thinking, processes, questions and considerations as you thought-with textiles. I am humbled by your inquiry. It has been a great joy to think alongside you. Any errors or misrepresentations are solely mine.

The Senior Years classroom at Gather Round Preschool is filled with objects. No matter how tidy or freshly washed the space is, there are always things everywhere. There are toys in use: small cars in hands, cardboard tubes complexly stacked, an old velvet purse being toted around, and books with broken spines lovingly spread open. There are toys awaiting play: baby dolls sitting in their crib, scarves hanging on a peg, wooden apples in a basket, and a glass jar filled with marbles. Then there are abandoned items lingering on the floor: beads, sequins, smears of pasta sauce, dry oats, and a few blocks. Finally, there are items awaiting practical use such as washed rags, nap mats, the broom, and the dustpan.

Sociomaterial studies try to reveal the minute dynamics and connections that are continuously enacting the taken-for-granted in educational events: the clothing, timetables, passwords, pencils, windows, stories, plans, buzzers, bubblegum, desks, electricity and lights – not as separate objects, but as continually combining with (and dissolving away from) other assemblages. (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011, p. vii)

These children are literally surrounded and immersed in things. Ignoring these things in the classroom, or passing them off simply as stuff and not involved in learning, seems neglectful at best.

In many ways, stories themselves are a knit sweater. Try to observe an isolated stitch on a knit sweater. It is nearly impossible. Because knitting is defined as the fabric or garment made through a series of interlocked loops of yarn, the edges of one stitch necessarily blend into the next. You will find there is no such thing as a single stitch (noun). The singular stitch does exist as a verb, to “take one stitch”, however, if we cut one imagined stitch within a whole sweater it quickly comes unraveled. There is no clear ‘one’ stitch, yet, there is a place where each singular stitch exists momentarily tied to another. If this connection is broken, the stitches unravel. We no longer have stitches in the plural and we no longer have a sweater in the singular.

Productions of research are sweaters. There are singular acts of research (verb) yet it is difficult to view research as a singular noun. Singular productions of research exist, but these are collections of any author(s) work and of previous authors who have informed that work. If we tug too hard and break a research ‘stitch’ we envision the ‘production of research’ unraveling before us. We are singular stitchers, yet we require action of the group to make any sweater. The pedagogical narration that follows is situated within one larger research sweater, yet is equally its own sweater.

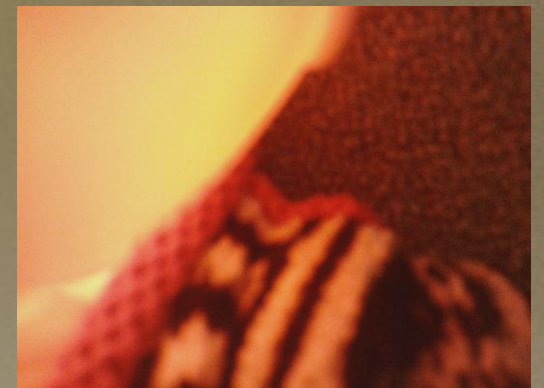
Situated within sociomaterial epistemologies the pedagogical narration that follows is one facet of a larger narrative study of one east coast Canadian preschool's three-month endeavor to think-with textiles. It is a written conversation. This project borrowed equally from sociomaterial theories of education and from early childhood education for sustainability (ECEfS) to delve into how children experienced, represented, considered, and thought-with textiles within their own classroom experiences (Siraj-Blatchford, Smith, & Samuelsson, 2010; Somerville & Green, 2015).

Just as stories and sweaters unravel if we separate them from plurality, from *becoming*, so too does this pedagogical narration (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The metaphor of the knit sweater physically structures this work. Most knitters can explain to you the myriad ways to knit a sweater. You can knit from the bottom of the garment, toward the neck. You can begin with the neck hole and knit downward toward the waist. You can knit the front, back and sleeves separately, then sew them together. You might even, though it is rare, start from the cuff of one sleeve and knit across the sweater, ending with the second cuff. Just as there are many ways to enter and exit a knit sweater, so too can this pedagogical narration be entered and exited from many points. This is a non-linear account.

A note on the **images** featured in this work:

I am wearily attuned to how often the bodies of children feature in our pedagogical narrations. You will notice this work features no images of the children themselves. Rather, I have visually attended to two particular narrative accounts.

The first account is that of the materials we encountered, hopefully aiding us to see story in “inanimate” space and material. In particular the textiles, particularly our clothing, are drawn into focus. The second is that of how the children documented their own entanglement with textiles. They were offered many ways to record this visually through their own eyes. Photographs taken by them background each slide. Featured artworks, sketches, and play compositions are authored by these same children.





## **You're all wearing shirts!**

A new-to-us educator sits down to a circle time. Day 3 for him. Day 93 for me. He seems to notice a child wearing a shark shirt, and then one with intricate sequins. Aloud he seeks a connection. “You are all wearing some *cool* shirts,” he states, smiling and nodding around.

Everyone pounces on this comment. In a flash, all the children are standing, baring their tummies and shouting above one another to describe *their* cool shirt.

Perhaps overwhelmed, the educator claps loudly three times and redirects the children to sit.

“Yeah, we're all wearing shirts,” he finishes.

## You're (still) all wearing shirts!

What was so startling about this energy and passion regarding t-shirts? Echoes of other questions float toward me...

*What does a cow say?...*

*How many trains do you see?...*

*Did you wash your hands?*

What if I join my attention *here*, to these t-shirts and these children (Pelo & Carter, 2018)? What if I wander and amplify these cool shirts?

What if I notice (startlingly) that  
**none of us**  
were naked?







You, educator, got dressed. You did not come here naked.



The children got dressed. Maybe they chose what they are wearing.  
Maybe not. They did not come here naked.



The clothes were chosen. The clothes get dirty, get washed, get dirty again.  
They lay in drawers. They are beloved, detested, ignored, itchy, worn once.



This shirt seems invisible we see it so often.



Everyone seems to have this exact style of pants.



Here is a favorite dress that visits us weekly.



Mundanity...



could be...



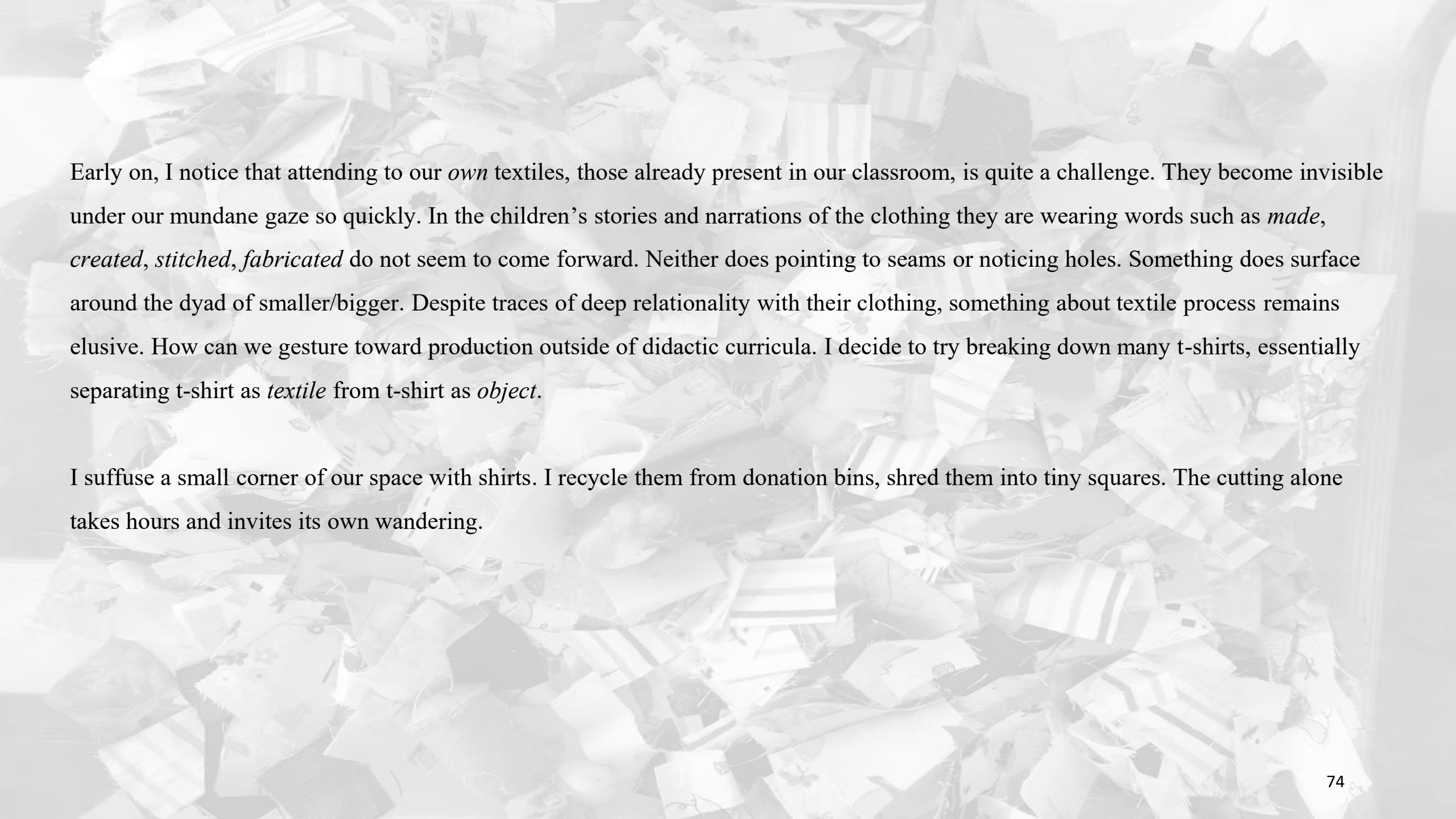
radical.

Clothing, used every day, is necessarily mundane. Imagine life if, all day long, you were consciously aware of what you wore? The closest we can imagine is often a time we wore something uncomfortable all day. How often do we consider our silverware or our flooring? These items become invisible under the everyday gaze of their users. It is easy to ignore clothing because it is, in a sense, designed to be ignorable. Recent publications that begin to address the connection between textile and story are often aimed at the role of clothing in our lives. Thus, books such as Emily Spivack's *Worn Stories* (2014) and *Worn in New York* (2017), or the work of Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits and Leanne Shapton (2014) who collected stories into the book *Women in Clothes*, all focus on how clothing functions as story for the wearer. These publications ask what role did an item of clothing play in your life? Such memoir style collections all harken to the notion that clothing tells a story for the wearer.

In dwelling on the nature of clothing, it is helpful to discuss the distinctions between art and craft as follows: “[...] craft works must be functional, whereas fine art need not, even should not, have any practical use” (Boden, 2000, p. 289). Artistic examples of high fashion aside, clothing fits this definition of craft quite well. Made for everyday use, clothing is generally designed to provide modesty or protection; “The crafts are grounded in, and deliberately evoke, enactive psychological mechanisms. Not only are their artefacts typically functional, but many of their functions concern basic aspects of life and domesticity: eating, drinking, cooking, mating, grooming, and keeping warm” (Boden, 2000, p. 297). This rationale does much to deepen our understanding as to why clothing remains clearly visible, yet overwhelmingly overlooked. Boden highlights that the function of our clothing is supposed to be subtle: we are not intended to notice functional items most of the time.

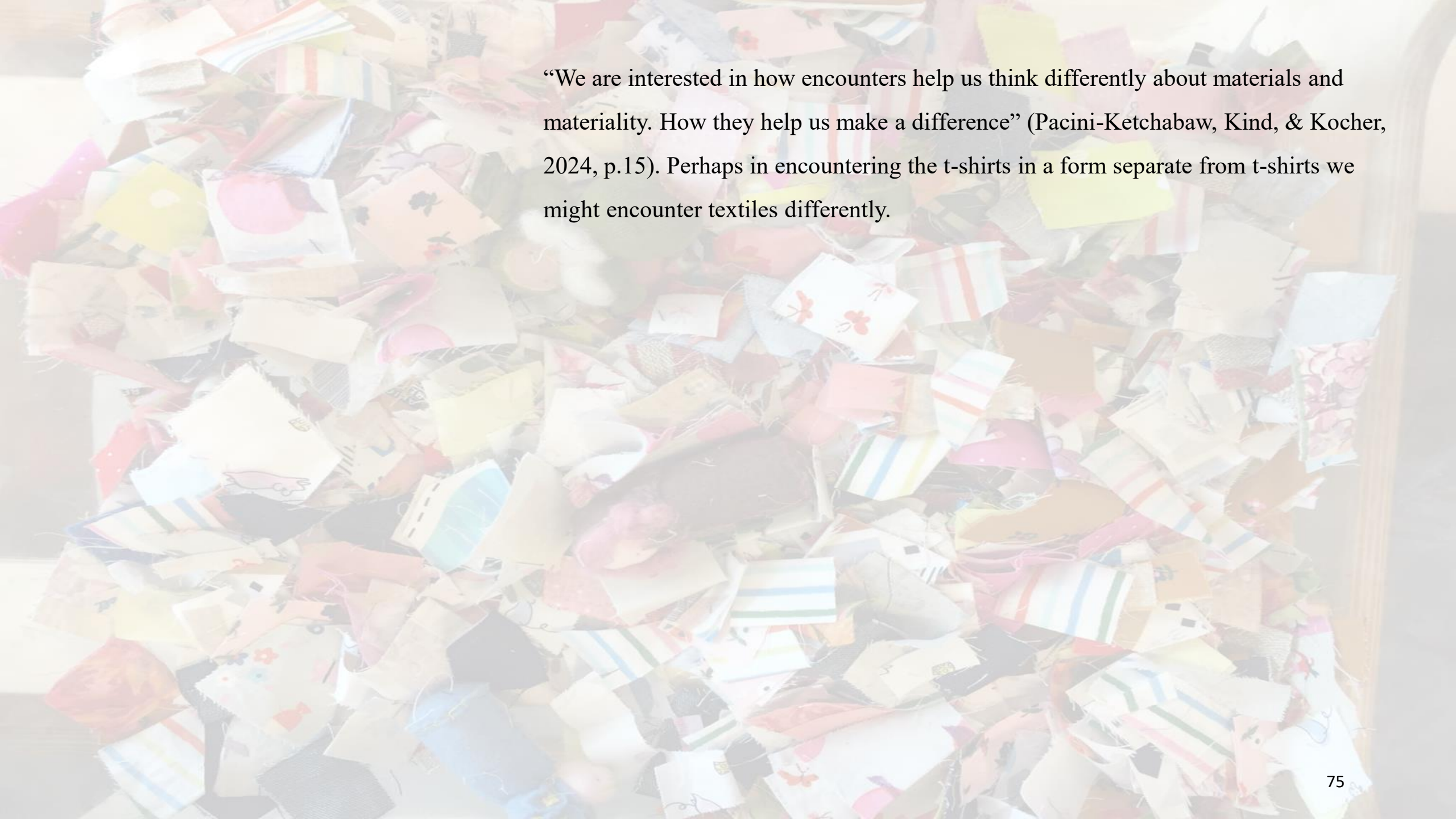


The children and I had wandered alongside our textiles for weeks. Offering ways in was a challenge. But eventually I noticed that the children were quite intrigued by the idea of clothing either being *taken apart* (“making it smaller”) or being *put together* (“making it bigger”)



Early on, I notice that attending to our *own* textiles, those already present in our classroom, is quite a challenge. They become invisible under our mundane gaze so quickly. In the children's stories and narrations of the clothing they are wearing words such as *made*, *created*, *stitched*, *fabricated* do not seem to come forward. Neither does pointing to seams or noticing holes. Something does surface around the dyad of smaller/bigger. Despite traces of deep relationality with their clothing, something about textile process remains elusive. How can we gesture toward production outside of didactic curricula. I decide to try breaking down many t-shirts, essentially separating t-shirt as *textile* from t-shirt as *object*.

I suffuse a small corner of our space with shirts. I recycle them from donation bins, shred them into tiny squares. The cutting alone takes hours and invites its own wandering.



“We are interested in how encounters help us think differently about materials and materiality. How they help us make a difference” (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2024, p.15). Perhaps in encountering the t-shirts in a form separate from t-shirts we might encounter textiles differently.





Three children ask for glue. Right away, they ask for glue.

Lucy asks first. Cyrus and Job are quick to echo the request. They nod at me and run their fingers through the heaps of fabric scraps on the table in front of them. They repeat again “can we *please* have glue?”

“The liquid or the stick kind?” I ask. All agree. Liquid!

Some paper comes off the shelf, too. It has a previous purpose and is printed with large capital letters.

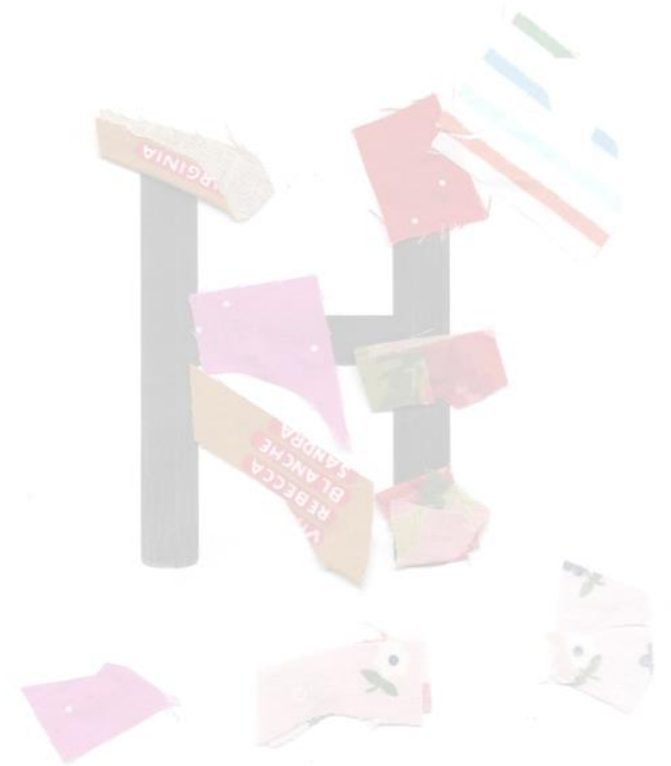
Lucy, Cyrus and Job take those small squares of t-shirt and glue and arrange. Glue and arrange.

Peel, peel.

Glue and arrange again.



“This makes it bigger.” -Cyrus





“This makes it bigger.” -Cyrus



“It makes it bigger too much!” -Lucy



“It makes it bigger, but I can’t wear it yet.” -Job

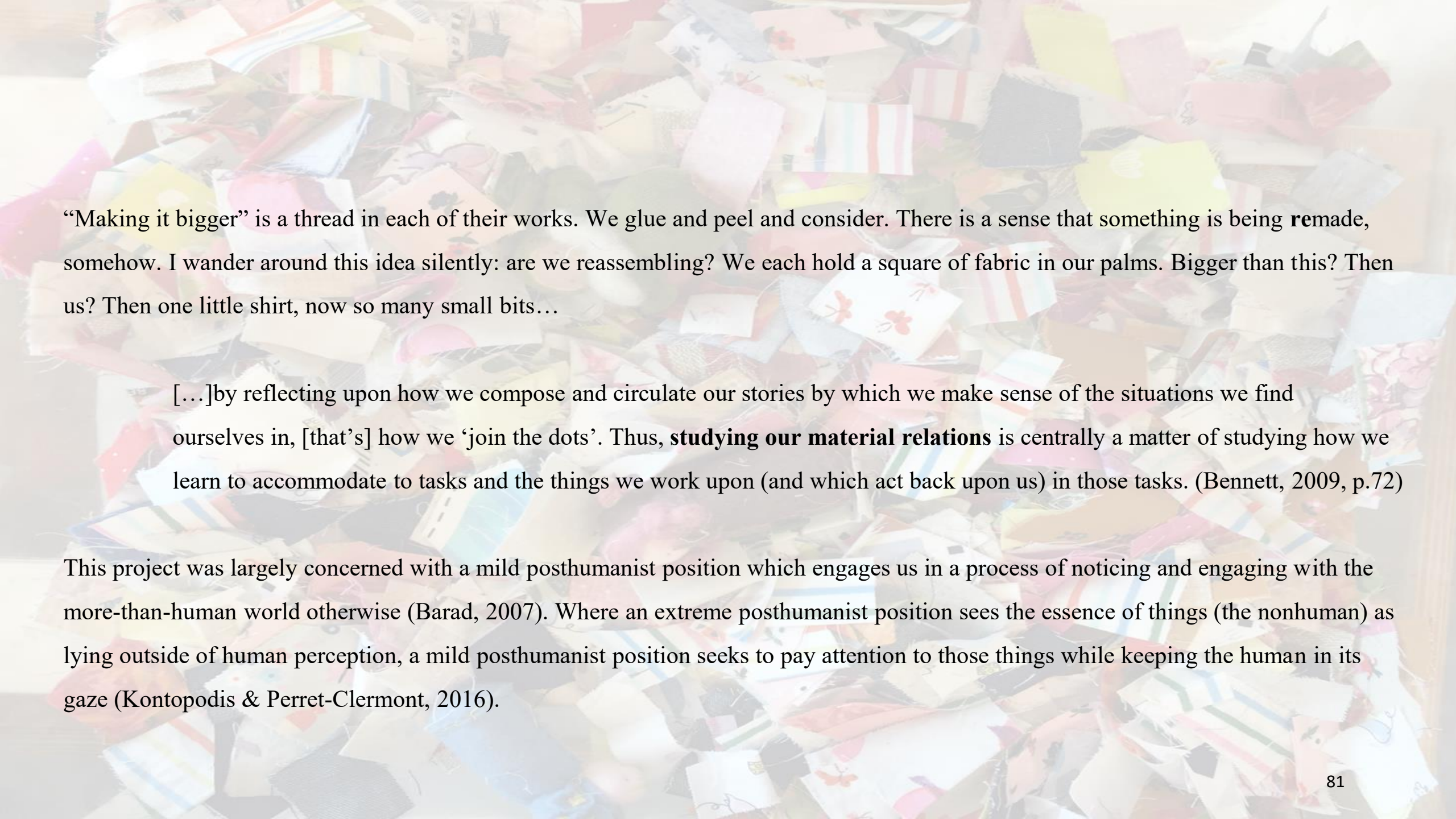


“This makes it bigger.” -Cyrus



“It makes it bigger too much!” -Lucy





“Making it bigger” is a thread in each of their works. We glue and peel and consider. There is a sense that something is being remade, somehow. I wander around this idea silently: are we reassembling? We each hold a square of fabric in our palms. Bigger than this? Then us? Then one little shirt, now so many small bits...


[...]by reflecting upon how we compose and circulate our stories by which we make sense of the situations we find ourselves in, [that’s] how we ‘join the dots’. Thus, **studying our material relations** is centrally a matter of studying how we learn to accommodate to tasks and the things we work upon (and which act back upon us) in those tasks. (Bennett, 2009, p.72)

This project was largely concerned with a mild posthumanist position which engages us in a process of noticing and engaging with the more-than-human world otherwise (Barad, 2007). Where an extreme posthumanist position sees the essence of things (the nonhuman) as lying outside of human perception, a mild posthumanist position seeks to pay attention to those things while keeping the human in its gaze (Kontopodis & Perret-Clermont, 2016).

Turning back to that t-shirt (the one we are all wearing), and to those now tiny squares of “recycled” shirt...

“The figure of an **intrinsically inanimate** matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (Bennett, p. ix, 2009). A resident of any Western country throws away about 70 pounds of textiles a year accounting for an average of 5% of our landfill space (Conca, 2015; Duhn, 2012). Children are textile consumers even though they do not (typically) purchase textiles themselves. Guardians do so on their behalf. They are current and future textile consumers.

Note: The concept of a fibershed is a solution to fast fashion and pollution (Burgess & White, 2019). The authors write that we all need “place-based textile sovereignty, which aims to include rather than exclude all the people, plants, animals, and cultural practices that compose and define a specific geography” (p. 7). For Burgess and White, we need our textiles to be deeply local; keeping our farmers, ranchers, weavers, artists, seamstresses, investors and/or crafters connected to produce the textiles we wear and use daily.



So, we have “made bigger,” even “bigger too much.”

We have wandered around the idea of reassembling what has been cut.

But what about **animate**?

I hold up a faded denim shirt. It used to be my mother's shirt. Surreptitiously, I smell it.

Though it is now quite threadbare, it is still a recognizable shirt-shape

Holding the shiny fabric scissors, I contemplate aloud where to cut a square.

I consider a few spaces on the shirt. **Una gasps as scissors meet cloth.**

“Does it hurt?”

We are now thinking with *this* microscope, *this* square cut from one particular shirt.

We alternate peering through the scope. We can never see what another one of us sees. I look in once or twice too, between the children who have joined me. There is a whispered quality around us. Something confessional seems to have settled in.

Una: “It looks like worms.”

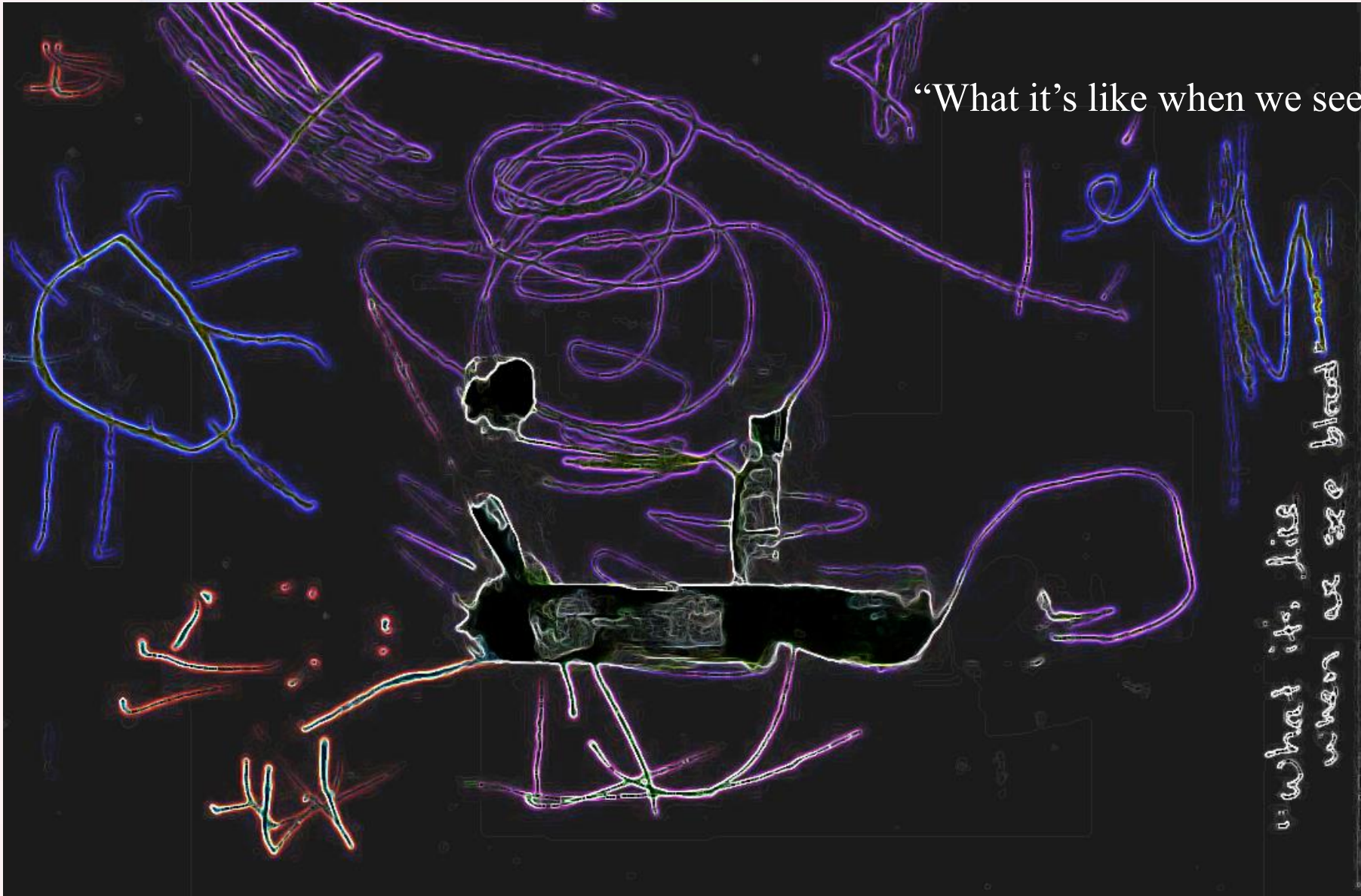
Evelyn: “Like stripes.”

Lucy: “I see what’s **inside it**. Threads.”

Bentley: “Oh! The ocean.”

Cyrus: (nodding) “Fur.”

“What it’s like when we see **blood.**” -Lucy



Is the shirt animate now? **Only** now?



Collectively, the children move from simile

... to being. The fabric isn't *like* something else; it might *be* something else.

Two weeks later  
and the fabric  
remains, but strips  
have been added.  
The edges from the  
square project were  
found. They have  
been reclaimed.



The microscope has  
been put away.




Job, standing near the door, takes hold of his own denim belt loop and gazes at a long fabric strip. He says, “Dad and I’ve got jeans. I’ve got pants like Daddy with hooks! Daddy and I both have hook jeans on!”





Sally, standing nearby, looks down and whispers: “And I’ve got jean shorts.”



“[H]ighlight[ing] children’s relational entanglements [... opens] up possibilities for rethinking children’s mundane and seemingly trivial everyday encounters with the non-human world around preschool settings. By acknowledging these entanglements and expanding children’s possibilities to be entangled in all that is around us, early childhood educators can provide an approach into a more connected way of being in the world ” (Weldemariam & Wals, 2020, p.22).



Here, we wander along the threads from the textiles we wear and bring into our preschool on purpose.

The t-shirts and the jeans capture our attention. Demand our relationality. How are we tied together, even in our absences, through textiles we share? What has been made bigger? How is a t-shirt scrap like blood?

...and still, **no one was naked.**



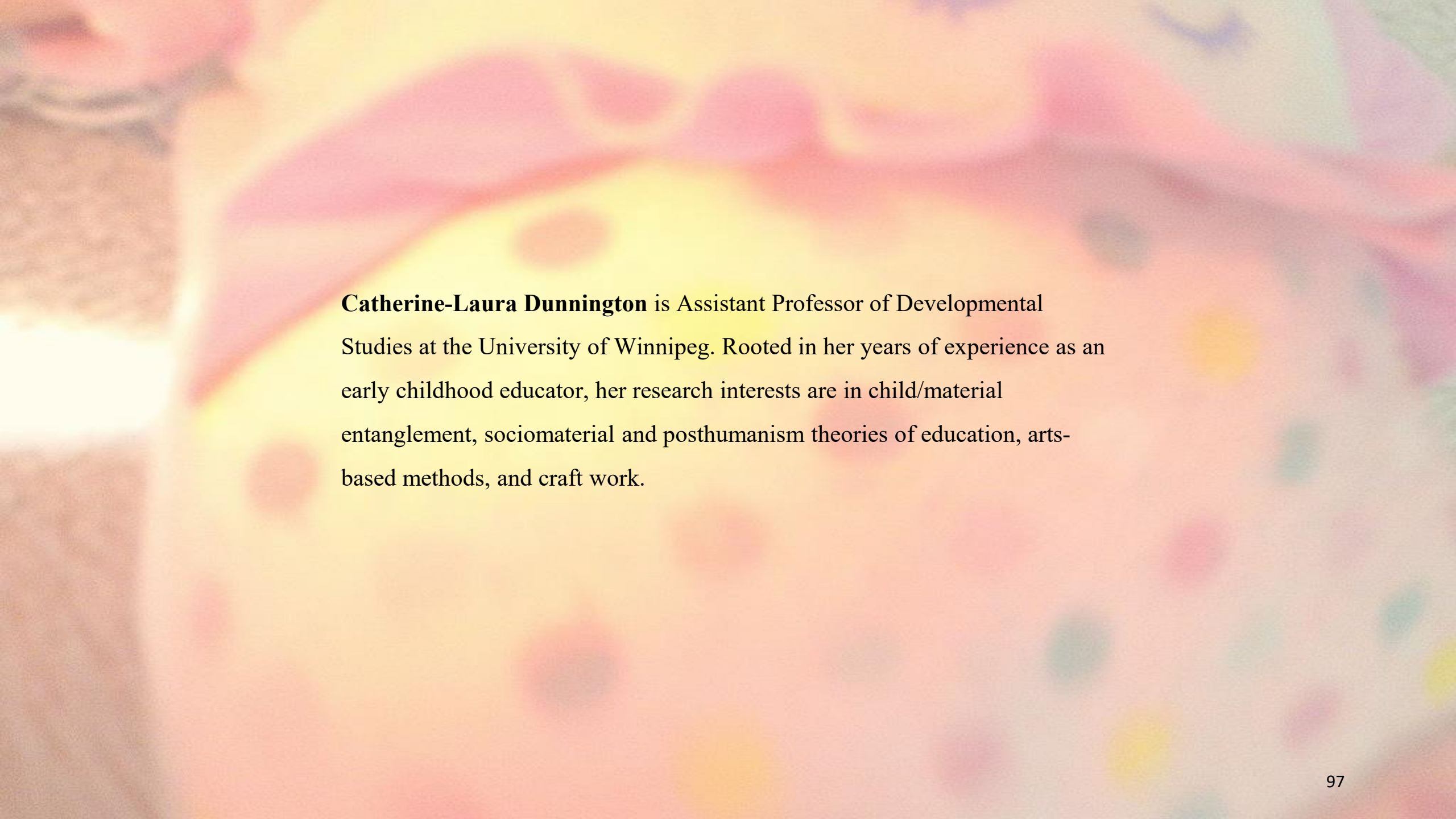
Thank you again to the children, families, and educators  
at Gather Round Preschool.

I am so grateful.

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