The Vital Life of Kitchens in Higher Education Institutional Workspaces: Material Matterings, Affective Choreographies and Micropolitical Practices

Carol A. Taylor[1]

Abstract

In higher education institutions (HEI), whose primary functions are oriented to the activities of learning, teaching and research workspace kitchens are disregarded spaces. Yet kitchens do vital but unnoticed work in everyday institutional life. This article develops a post-human, post-disciplinary and post-methodological analytical framing to give kitchens, and the confederation of connections they produce, the attention they deserve. The article draws on a post-qualitative data bricolage of mobile phone snaps, assemblage ethnography, vox pop and memory story to analyze the posthuman matterings within and of HEI kitchens. Theoretically, the article is grounded in a post-disciplinary approach which draws conceptual resources from sociology, human geography, anthropology, material culture and education. It explores the HE workspace kitchen as a productive site for the enactment of a multitude of material, affective and micro-political institutional practices. The article argues that kitchens matter as important liminal spaces for the materialization of institutional rules, values, norms, belonging and community.

Keywords: *Bricolage; Kitchens; Post-disciplinary; Posthuman; Post-qualitative*

Introduction: Kitchens matter / kitchen matterings

In higher education institutions (HEIs), whose primary functions occur in formal spaces explicitly orientated to teaching and learning (lecture halls, seminar rooms, learning centres, libraries), or research (meeting rooms, laboratories), and whose "other" spaces (offices, helpdesks, cafés, student halls of residence, atriums, single or multiple computer spaces, breakout spaces) also explicitly exist to support those primary functions, kitchens are ignored, unnoticed, taken-for-granted. Nevertheless, as shared, non-academic spaces within academic higher education institutional workspaces, kitchens are vital places where daily sustenance is prepared, where *ad hoc*, informal and arranged meetings occur, where staff of different roles and grades may interact, and where moments away from time-on-task whether that is teaching, research or administrative desk work may be gratefully grabbed. Kitchens are vital spaces in another sense too: they abound with vibrant matter, from the box containing plastic bottle tops, to the posters on the noticeboard, to the plants near the window, to the germs happily multiplying on the countertop, on the cloths and in the fridge that it is often nobody's job to clean but yet somebody often does. In COVID-19 times, conversely, kitchens have been subject to deep cleans, the bodies which use them and the flows those bodies produce have been regulated like never before. In lockdown, kitchens have become abandoned spaces, the electronic hum of the fridge the only disturbance in the quietness as stale air circulates –

[1] Carol A. Taylor, University of Bath, Somerset, England. E-mail: C.A.Taylor@bath.ac.uk.

but even here dust continues to form as solids slowly break down, spiders and other creatures continue to do their work, microscopic particles of dead human skin settle, and new odours emerge. Human-nonhuman relations produce kitchen matterings.

This article focuses on higher education institutional kitchens using posthuman, post-methodology and post-disciplinary approaches to consider kitchens as spatial sites of/for posthuman entanglements. It contributes a novel understanding of kitchens as material, affective and political places which shape and co-constitute the habits, routines, practices, values and norms of the everyday institutional life they are enmeshed within. The article's insights contest the common idea of the kitchen as a space whose liminality in an educational institution enables its significance to be ignored, undervalued and easily dismissed. The next sections outline the three 'posts' which provide conceptual framings for the kitchen analyses that follow, in which I consider time and the kitchen, kitchen belongings, kitchen rules, and kitchens in motion.

Posthumanism and the higher education institutional kitchen

Kitchens are disregarded, unnoticed and marginalized in the university workplace. It is therefore unsurprising that, to date, there are so very few academic studies of higher education workspace kitchens. This article makes a start in addressing the paucity of studies on HEI kitchens which, to date, is confined to a small number of very disparate studies. These include: a systemic approach to waste management on university campuses (Zhang et al., 2011); a student engagement project on food rescue and hunger relief which aimed to reduce waste in campus cafeterias (Remington & Barton, 2011); and a study of bacterial populations in university kitchens (Price, 1979). There are a few analyses of kitchens in students' living accommodation in campus halls of residence which consider kitchens as (a) a social space (Holloway et al., 2010; Rickes, 2009), (b) a space for learning cultural etiquette in intercultural contexts (Edwards & Ran, 2006), and (c) an index of the influence of consumer culture on higher education (Thelin, 2004). There are a few studies of kitchens as a factor in design for learning in higher education to improve collaboration, interaction and authenticity (Keppell & Riddle, 2013; Souter et al., 2011); and a study by Davis (2009) in which the Southern plantation kitchen – a crucial site of struggle in African American women's traditions – was drawn upon as a womanist 'safe space' from which to contest male domination within the US academy. As important as these individual studies undoubtedly are, they remain isolated accounts. None of them pay any serious attention to the materialization of kitchens as human-nonhuman assemblages and none provide insights into the practices of mattering that make kitchens such a crucial liminal place in the HEI workspace.

Posthumanist approaches offer analytical tools which extend traditional conceptions about what matters in research, how the role of the researcher is conceptualized, and how nature, the 'world', and what comes to matter in it might be investigated (Taylor, 2016, 2019, 2021). My use of posthumanism draws on multiple sources. Braidotti (2019, 8) writes of the "posthuman condition" as a need to "move beyond the Eurocentric humanistic representational habits and the philosophical anthropocentrism they entail". She argues the need to refuse human exceptionalism and instead to focus on how:

> Understanding of matter animates the composition of posthuman subjects of knowledge – embedded, embodied and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others (Bradiotti, 2019, 34).

Like Braidotti, I see posthumanism as a critical call in three respects. First, posthumanism displaces the theories and methods that have for too long centred White Western Man and his epistemological lies, scientific cruelties, genocidal tendencies and destructive necro-politics. Two, posthumanism aims to replace these with ways of being, doing and knowing that, instead, emphasize relational connections, affirmative ethics and multi-directional knowledge formations that are oriented to including more and including others who/which have so far been excluded and marginalized through historic and ongoing violent practices of colonialism, racism, misogynistic patriarchy and capitalist appropriative economic logics. Three, posthumanism requires us to go about this task of displacement and reorientation in recognition of its complexities, differences and challenges, knowing that building connections across species, nations, languages are fraught with genealogies of damage and distrust, but also knowing its necessity given what Haraway (2016, 16) identifies as the "just barely possible" task "of a finite flourishing—now and yet to come".

Crucial to my definition of posthumanism and the task of working across species and boundaries is post-dualism which, as Ferrando (2019, 54) notes, is about critiquing and undoing the binaries—self/other, man/animal. Man/women, white/non-white, culture/nature—that have so rigidly defined Western selfhood, identity and subjectivity and have shaped systems of social dominance and ecological damage. The posthumanism I invoke is pluralist, materialist, open-ended. It requires empirical investigation attuned to the specific, and aims to produce knowledge that attends to located practices (i.e., it refuses the "god trick" of generalization and universalization) and their entanglement in broader material, affective, political forces and flows. In this respect, I pick up Karen Barad's (2007) arguments about space-time-mattering and Jane Bennett's (2010) concerns with thing-power to show how HEI kitchen matter(ing)s—when considered via a posthumanist, vitalist, immanent ethico-onto-epistemology—is advantageous in a critical exploration of the personal, material, cultural, social and political in the nonhuman-human relations of institutional life.

Post-methodology

My kitchen investigations took shape during my work as an academic at a large UK university. On the floor on which I worked, there were a number of seminar rooms, three academic office workspaces, the cleaner's storage cupboard, a large, open plan student support office, and a student and public helpdesk staffed by administrative staff. All staff on the floor have access to a small, shared kitchen. The kitchen is a necessity as a place to make tea and coffee or use the microwave to heat lunch to be eaten at one's desk on a busy working day. It is an occasional place for casual and personal conversations, time-out or momentary escape from the intensive rigours and routines which shape the rhythms of the working day. It is also a place where reminders of things going on in other times and places in the world "outside" the university—for example, information about a charity run, local festival, or a swimathon may appear on the kitchen noticeboard. While these mundane and everyday kitchen experiences, encounters and events are likely to resonate with many across academia, it is also possible they may be dismissed as being micro matters undeserving of serious research investigation. In making its case for the use of a more positive appreciation of the HEI kitchen as a materially productive space, this article deploys post-methodology, and specifically post-qualitative research practices, as an epistemological framing.

Post-methodology refuses the normative rules and representationalist logics of what Brinkman (2015) called Good Old Fashioned Qualitative Inquiry, in favour of a radical experimentalism oriented to producing knowledge otherwise. Koro-Ljungberg (2016, 6) refers to "methodologies without methodology" in which "researchers are simultaneously working within and against existing methodological structures, ideas, and established … literature". Post-methodologies, she says, are 'methodologies without strict boundaries or normative structures' (2), they "may begin anywhere, anytime" (2), they request we become more "comfortable with uncertainty" (8), and they are oriented to a questioning stance for attending better to process, unfolding and emergence. In my case, the post-methodology used in my kitchens project can be seen as a form of "method assemblage" (Law, 2004, 144), as nomadic empiricism (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), as a mode of "edu-crafting" (Taylor, 2016) and/or as research-creation (Manning & Massumi, 2014). The term "post-qualitative" offers a useful umbrella term for post-methodological approaches attentive to what can be produced when moving outside normative research prescriptions and, instead, enabling data to "proliferate through sustained entanglement and interference" (MacLure, 2010, 281). Post-methodology and post-qualitative research, like posthumanist and feminist materialist approaches, are anti-foundational; they refuse of "off the peg" methods in favour of research as a journey whose methodological possibilities are multiple and whose methods are emergent (Lather & St Pierre, 2013). The post-methodology I developed brings together empirical materials from four small-scale qualitative research forays which approached the vital life of HEI kitchens via:

1. *Mobile phone snaps*: 11 colleagues responded to my request to email me with images taken on their phones of their workspace kitchen;
2. *Assemblage ethnography*: five professional doctorate students worked with me on a collaborative workspace kitchen project (Figure 1);
3. *Vox pop*: five staff talked to me during various 5-minute periods on one day as I hung around the kitchen;
4. *Memory story*: I composed a short piece on kitchens.

Figure 1. Shared kitchen (*assemblage ethnography*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

The data were generated in 2015-16 during a larger funded project as I came to tune into the ongoing happenings in the shared institutional kitchen, and to the kitchen matterings that unfolded intermezzo during the project. The project obtained institutional ethical approval and pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

Post-disciplinarity

Post-disciplinarity produces knowledge outside and beyond individual disciplines. In this article, I utilize theoretical resources from sociology, human geography, material culture and education to explore kitchen matterings. A post-disciplinary *bricolage* is not a variant on a mixed methods approach. Rather, it offers "conceptual tools for boundary work" (Kincheloe, 2001, 686) in production of "thick, complex and rigorous forms of knowledge" (689). The intellectual power of post-disciplinarity is that it encourages us to activate keener "arts of noticing" (Tsing, 2015) to better attend to embodied and embedded power circuits, entangled complicities, and ethical accountabilities entailed in the relations, connections and dynamics unfolding between human-nonhuman bodies, materialities and spaces. Details matter. The micro matters. Post-disciplinarity is allied to long-standing feminist critiques of the "god trick"—that masculinist view from nowhere—and works against the valorisation of "objectivist", "rational" research endeavours and the regimes of scientific 'truth' they maintain (Haraway, 1988).

In addition, post-disciplinarity aligns well with the constructive, inventive, creative risk and play encouraged by post-methodological approaches. Indeed, the three posts- I summon into use in this article align well in their critique of neopositivist, evidence-based, performative approaches to qualitative research which have taken such hold in the field of higher education studies.

> Focusing specifically on the notices and signs, I note the size of the text is considerably large, there is no way I can avoid reading these notices. The colour – red – also has an impact. I feel it is like being at traffic lights. Red Light means stop – do not proceed. Perhaps, on reflection this is the motive of the individual – to ensure that people stop, read and take note of the signs. What does this mean for staff? Personally, I have a particular aversion to these signs in the kitchen. I consider these to be anonymous and incredibly authoritative. There is no ownership of these signs and anyone can put up a sign without any resistance or permission from another. Why does this make me feel so anxious and uncomfortable??...

> *(assemblage ethnography)*

Time-space-mattering and affect in the higher education institutional kitchen

Space, time and matter are entangled in the work done in and by the HEI kitchen. In traditional theorising, space, time and matter are thought as separate entities. In Karen Barad's (2007) theory of posthuman performativity, these are thought together as constitutive forces within human-nonhuman natural–cultural worlds which shape subjectivities and relationalities. In classical physics, time and space were conceptualized as external units of measurement. Barad, drawing on quantum physics, re-works this: "time and space are produced through iterative intra-actions that materialise specific phenomena, where phenomena are not 'things' but relations" [which means that] mattering and materialising are

dynamic processes through which temporality and spatiality are produced as something specific (Juelskjaer, 2013, 755).

Thinking space in this way makes posthuman inroads which unsettle the human-centric presuppositions of spatial theory, including the long-held view that place is specific while space is general (Agnew & Livingstone, 2011). Furthermore, the presumption that "space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning". (Tuan, 1977, 136), is another Humanistic interpretation that then spins off into, and upholds, further distinctions: place is local/space as global; place is phenomenal, nostalgic, regressive, reactionary/space is progressive, radical, the location for global technological change; place is the past/space affords mobility to transcend the past. Tuan (1977) is, though, helpful in drawing attention to the different modes of sensory experience – tactile, sensorimotor, visual, conceptual – through which place and space can be interpreted and which gives rise to "complex—often ambivalent—feelings" (7). However, here again, "feelings" are considered as interiorised, individualised and psychological effects of human subjectivities. Contra to this, posthumanist/feminist materialist conceptualisations view feelings via the lens of affect, or what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) refer to as "desiring forces", which are the energies, forces and flows which circulate across and are distributed amongst multiple human-nonhuman bodies. Affects are transpersonal, occurring "beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity" (Anderson, 2009, 77), and the "betweenness" of affective atmospheres are both ambiguous and potent. These different understandings of space-time-mattering and affect dis-place the place/space binary and demand a more fluid sense-ing in accounting for what matters in the HEI workspace kitchen.

The HEI kitchen's space-time-mattering is best approached through the anthropological notion of liminality, from Latin *limen*, which refers to threshold or boundary. It is then possible to conceptualize the HEI kitchen as a liminal materialization of/for workspace habitation practices; it is, in Shortt's (2014) terms from organizational studies, a liminal "transitory dwelling place" at work. This line of post-disciplinary thinking helps attend to the HEI kitchen as a temporary space carved out and claimed as a "micro-territory" which exists in flux and tension with the surrounding dominant space. Although Shortt does not mention kitchens, she notes that lifts, doorways, stairwells, toilets and cupboards can be co-opted as informally owned terrains separate from formal staff rooms and official workplace spaces. Shortt's (2014, 634) characterization of these informal spaces as "somewhere in-between front stage/backstage" is pertinent to the HEI kitchen as a between-space which criss-crosses various borders: academic/ administrative/ ancillary staff; teaching/administration/support services; classrooms/ offices; work/home. "Fancy a frock?" (Figure 2), a data cut from the kitchen project I undertook, entangles and criss-crosses multiple borders: nightlife colour-institutional blandness; entertainment-utility, past-present, leisure-work, mine-yours.

Figure 2. Fancy a frock? (*mobile phone snap*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

The invitation, "Fancy a frock?", bears farther investigation. It is an invitation to all: it is a momentary and material instantiation of an act of giving in which nothing is required in return; in which, in fact, the giver would be happy to see their item disappear from the kitchen as soon as possible, its appropriation welcomed by others and re-moved to a different (home) space. Similarly, biscuits, food, and assorted non-food items frequently appeared in the kitchens in the project for anyone to freely appropriate. Some colleagues make tea and coffee for all, many contribute to staff kitties, some throw out-of-date milk and food away, clean the fridge, and wash the tea towels, as indicated in this data fragment:

> C. What about things like, you know like tea towels, do you bring stuff like that in?
>
> F. Ermm, I don't bring them in but I do take them home and wash them.
>
> C. Do you?
>
> F. If they're on the side. If they've been left on the side I take them home and wash them and bring them back the next day. I can't do with grubby tea towels!
>
> (*vox pop*)

These acts of unbidden voluntary generosity are done with no obligation for gratitude in return. They are mundane and anonymous acts of kindness. Yet these small matterings matter hugely in producing affective circuits of fleetingly felt and embodied modalities of connectedness. Going into a workspace kitchen and seeing chocolate biscuits bearing the sign "help yourself" can feel like a small wonder during a grindingly difficult and alienating workday. You smile, take one and enjoy the taste without knowing who supplied them. The importance of such affective space-time-matterings was alluded to by one participant in the

assemblage ethnography research foray who said "the fact that it [the kitchen] works makes me optimistic about people".

Dale and Burrell (2008, 239) say that liminal space is "no man's land" but evidence from the research forays conducted in this project indicate that the HEI kitchen as material non-human place-space aspires to be an *all-persons land* in which differentiation by institutional role or striation by function is momentarily suspended. In addition, the 'you are welcome to take it' discloses an invitational economy of gifting as giving away which contrasts, on the one hand, with Mauss's (1967) anthropological insights into the gift as a powerful mechanism that ties the parties involved into social conventions of exchange, obligation and repayment and, on the other hand, with anthropological, sociological and psychological analyses which emphasise gift-giving as exemplifications of social structure, internal motivation or socially approved behaviour (Sherry, 1983). Such analyses are limited by their disciplinary perspectives and focus on the gift as exchange but ignore the material aspects of the gift. Thinking gifts within posthumanism via instances of space-time-mattering is about recognising the contingent relations, movements and effects provoked by nonhuman objects and the work they do; it is about how gifting as giving away enables objects in flux to materialize—become material nodes for—the affective flows between bodies of all kinds. As Bissell (2008, 97) notes, even small objects (a biscuit!) have the "the capacity to intensely move, both affectually and physically".

Focusing on kitchen space-time-matterings disrupts the conventional notion of kitchens as an institutional non-place (Augé, 1995). A post-disciplinary, posthuman lens discloses how considering the gift as affective irruption in that space problematizes usual assumptions that the micro matters less (in fact it matters more) and confronts us with how the nonhuman is entangled with the mattering of sociality.

Kitchen un/belongings

The project data provided ample evidence of the positive affects that small kitchen kindnesses produced. The photo and caption (Figure 3) indicate this. The simple matter of the anonymous donation of cloths for the collective effort of cleaning the kitchen points to how HEI workspace kitchens emerge, and their ongoing mattering are enacted in everyday ways through dynamic discursive-material practices that enfold nonhuman thing power (Bennett, 2010) with human and nonhuman doings, bodies and affects. This posthuman account of kitchen matterings supports Barad's desire to "give matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, 136) in recognition that "bodies do not simply take their place in the world ... rather 'environments' and 'bodies' are intra-actively constituted" (Barad, 2007, 170). Miller's (1987) work on organisational cultures indicates how materiality shapes social relations, activities, and modes of engagement in accordance with patterns and habits of institutional life.

Figure 3. So, we started kitchen life well-equipped (*mobile phone snap*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

And yet. While kitchen matterings materialize these patterns and habits as particular and unique instantiations within open and mobile kitchen assemblages, such matterings, in Tsing's (2015, 23) words, "drag political economy inside them". Considering the micropolitics of the vital life of kitchens in the accelerated academy oriented to individualism and competitiveness helps to shift gears and focus. Kitchens as workspace places collect, condense and magnify the conflicts, power plays, anxieties and stresses of that broader institutional context. From an organization studies perspective, the point of the kitchen's existence is to facilitate workers' adherence to tasks, a space for a short break before returning refreshed to work obligations. The HEI workspace kitchen, in effect, demarcates a place which (re)produces persons as better able to fulfil their organisational functions as responsible workers with bodies oriented to work tasks. In this, positive affects produced by kitchen matter(ing)s, such as those considered above, can instead be seen as a form of "cruel optimism" Berlant's (2006, 21) term for a relation of 'attachment to compromised conditions of possibility' in neoliberal higher education contexts whose performative exigences on daily basis wear you out. In Berlant's framing, the positive affects engendered though free kitchen offerings, and the generosity of communal tea and coffee making etc., helps kitchen inhabitants mask the numbness or misrecognize the pain which attends the "ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity" (Berlant, 2006, 23). Berlant's (2006, 35) line of thinking suggests that liminal moments of irruption of positive affects help workers retain an "optimistic fantasy" about their institutional belonging but that they do nothing to shift the structural inequalities that underpin socio-economic relations within contemporary workspaces.

The participant who captioned her mobile phone snap with the phrase "so we started kitchen life well equipped" (Figure 3) was undoubtedly referring to the positive affect generated by what she called "nothing big and dramatic, just little things" which in a "quiet fuss-free way" meant that kitchen life went on well. But who are the "we" referred to? "We" academics do this all the time! "We" is a word to be wary of, lest it slide too easily into humanist presumptions of representationalism and co-option (in which "I" speak "for" "you") and which then elides the violence of that co-option under a smooth epistemic surface of the collective. At a broader scale, "we" statements often reproduce colonial ways of knowing and, in this context, it is interesting to note that some have criticized the constitution of

posthumanism and feminist materialisms as new academic fields of knowledge which continue to be underpinned by a "white episteme" bound up with the geopolitical materialization of racialized modes of knowledge production (Sundberg, 2014; Taylor, 2019). Given Bayley's (2019, 364) note on the need to be cautious particularly when making statements about how 'we' have 'cut the world into pieces', and Haraway's (2016, 177) warning that the "*specific* work to be done if we are to strike up a coherent form of life" requires "refiguring conversations with those who are not 'us'", it behoves us to proceed with care when summoning any "we" into existence as testimony of "our" collectivity. This is not to deny the potential of mundane, material things to release positive affects which create momentary alliances through the energies that swirl amongst human-nonhuman participants within kitchen assemblages—like Stewart (2007, 23), I think "matter can shimmer with undetermined potential"—but, like Braidotti (2020), it is necessary to ask: who are "we" because we are not all in this (by "this" she is referring to the Covid-19 pandemic) together and we are not all human and we are not all one and the same.

Interrogating who "we" are, or which "we" is being hailed and summoned into existence, can make us attend more closely to the in/ex/clusions any "we" materialises and enacts, and the vulnerabilities, hierarchies and inequalities exposed when "we" are invoked. Figure 4 shows a notice blu-tacked to a fridge with the directive to kitchen colleagues to "clean up their spills before someone gets poisoned". While the message is couched by a humorous phrase—"the cleaning fairy is on strike"—the notice works as a nodal point for some of the stresses and strains endemic to shared spaces in academic institutional life. It reinscribes binaries (me/you; clean/dirty; good/bad; healthy/diseased) as a means to try to contain and regulate the 'dirty matterings' and unclean behaviours that this particular kitchen participant finds so offensive that they spend time and energy constructing an anonymous sign for public display.

Figure 4. The cleaning fairy is on strike (*assemblage ethnography*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

This notice tries to reinstate the centrality of human governance in quelling and constraining the intra-active posthuman potential of germ-human relays emanating from fridge spillages that are said to be so dangerous that they might even kill. This notice was before the pandemic and its humour now seems archaic in the face of the ravages that Covid-19 has wrought on higher education and all modes of public life, and the scale of death it has induced. A recent mobile phone snap from my institutional kitchen on a deserted day on a January 2021 walkaround (Figure 5) shows the Covid-19 campus and its kitchens as places marked by the absence of human bodies but within which posthuman material matterings continue to unfold in heterogeneous and multiple ways. Hand sanitiser sits next to breakfast cereal in new and frightening instances of here-ness, this-ness and now-ness unthinkable when this project began.

Figure 5. Covid-19 kitchen

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

That kitchen matterings are entangled in naturalcultural global flows and movements is also indicated by the global economics of coffee consumption (open the cupboards and look at the different kinds of coffee and their places of origin) and charitable doings, such as the collection of plastic milk bottle tops (Figure 6) being collected for a local homeless charity, but which at the same time brings debates about plastic pollution and ecological ruination compellingly into view.

Figure 6. Put your bottle tops in here (*mobile phone snap*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

The institutional higher education kitchen produces through itself through such social-political-material-affective choreographies in entanglement with nonhuman-human differences, hierarchies and inequalities at different registers and scales. In its ongoing (un)making and dynamic (re)doing, the institutional kitchen is "always under construction" (Massey, 2005, 9) and "in constant motion" (Thrift, 2006, 141). The post-methodology of this particular project, refracted through a posthuman, post-disciplinary lens, indicates that the participants' particular HEI kitchens disclose a   continual enactment of un/belongings. Such material markers of how space-place materialises provides insights into the micropolitical matterings of claiming a collectivity and the increased stress and exhaustion bound affectivity into and across bodies by individualistic, competitive, neoliberal higher education regimes, which have produced a 'psychosocial and somatic catastrophe' for university workers (Gill & Donaghue, 2016, 91). The next section tunnels further into kitchen micropolitics.

Kitchen rules

A considerable number of data fragments from the project were concerned with milk in shared kitchen fridges: the naming of milk bottles, the ownership of milk by individuals and teams, the stealing of milk by anonymous others (Figure 7).

Figure 7. milk labels (*mobile phone snap*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

Such mundane labels on milk cartons powerfully materialise micropolitical practices of belonging and exclusion. In particular, the "heart" label was a simple and evocative visual sign; as was the word "hub", both denoting bounded teams whose members had access to this particular shared commodity. The "Smiley Face Milk Club" was, perhaps, the most fully elaborated instance of the power of the milk label, a club which came into being as a co-operative venture to do away, what one participant called, "the lots of separately labelled milk bottles and little hoards of labelled things [which were] closely guarded by separate teams". This particpant commented that the "Smiley Face Milk Club … is a thing of note, you'll see I've capitalised it". It might be thought that things as ephemeral as labels which trace the barely perceptible dynamics of group in/exclusion are of little value. On the contrary, these minor matterings have powerful consequences for people's sense of self, identity, and institutional belonging: over the course of time, the Smiley Face itself morphed – one week it grew fangs, another week it developed freckles – tiny touches materializing an unspoken code for a certain community whose boundaries are not porous but known, clear and definite. Such material matterings constitute institutional micropolitics as practices which "work at the edges of knowing, at the register of the sensibility minus a sensible normativity" (Jellis & Gerlach, 2017, 564).

C. I notice that you're putting your name, or your team's name on your milk.

M. It's partly because we tend to be in a group to use the milk. So for members of that group to identify which it is, because if you're an individual you might say "oh, yes, that's the one that I put in there", although you find some that's about two weeks out of date … but you do find that it gets used. Somebody reaches in and grabs hold of the first that comes to hand. So it just flags up who it belongs to.

C. Do you think that by having a label on it that the person who is using your milk will feel a bit guilty for doing so, if it's got a label on it?

> M. It depends on their conscience, because I think you sometimes think that people will say 'Oh this is from Student Admin, we know them, they won't mind us using a bit of their milk', for instance (laughter) so It's just happened that from time to time one particular carton has gone down very quickly and you just think, Wellllll-
>
> (vox pop)

One milk label had a stern "keep off" warning—"for T/P use only, feel free to contribute to our fund if you wish to use". Another milk label which read "buy your own milk, this is mine" spiraled a chain of abuse and distress: it elicited a written "fuck off" response written directly in pen onto the label (Figure 8) and led to an anguished self-examination and subseqent team discussion as the comments in the box indicate. That some small piece of materiality such as a milk label can produce such visceral affects and effects indicates the submerged violence of kitchen micropolitics. These liminal encounters may be unseen (the anonymous writer of the offensive phrase remains unknown) but their meanings and matterings proliferate in some profound ways. Milk labels as entangled nonhuman-human matters cannot be dismissed as trivial or peripheral. As Bissell (2016, 395) notes, they matter because "they have transformative powers in and of themselves". Indeed, the participant whose milk label generated the written expletive response referred to the event as "Milkgate" to try to name the wide and deep damage it had caused.

Figure 8. Milk label with response (*mobile phone snap*)

Interesting Things That Crop Up. I stuck a fairly 'aggressive' label on my milk. I was having a bad day. Person or Persons Unknown does/do appear to be helping themselves to my milk. I know this because I know how long my milk lasts me. Person Unknown has made their feelings clear. Proper temper tantrum from me. What can it all mean? Will you need to sanitize it? We have taken an office vote and we think we have identified Person Responsible. I do hope it was a joke … for a short while in a very fraught week it did upset me. And actually it really was a very small label on which to make a bold joke.

(*assemblage ethnography*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

In humanist frame, a focus on micropolitics traditionally addresses the ways in which power is enacted by an individual or a group in order to effect an outcome, achieve a result or promote an interest. In contrast with the macro-perspective of political economy, a micropolitical perspective attends to the small-scale, everyday and ongoing interactions, negotiations, collaborations and transactions which aim to manage consensus or conflict. While micropolitical strategies have been seen as being about the "darker side" of self-interested manipulation (Hoyle, 1986), they are also recognized as a daily and inevitable part of the routines of institutional life (Marshall & Scribner, 1991) and of particular importance in reproducing unequal practices of gendering in higher education (Morley, 2000). The posthuman, materialist micropolitics developed here begins with the assumption that power

flows are co-constituted in "material moments" (Taylor, 2013, 2018) in/with the intra-activities of bodies, things and spaces in particular instances, events and encounters. Ontologically, posthuman bodies, things and spaces are not separable entities which continue to exist as such during any encounter. They are, rather, an intra-active materialization of differences that matter (Barad, 2007) which give insights into how capacities to affect and be affected differ depending on the particularities of each event's unfolding (Bissell, 2016).

In addition to milk labels, participants in all research forays generated images and text of a startling number of kitchen signs. Stuck onto fridges, cupboard doors and kitchen walls, these signs were often headed with the phrase "Polite Notice" but are often anything but. They are ubiquitous in their anonymity, they appear suddenly and without trace, they are instructional in tone although sometimes sarcastic or ironic ("the cleaning fairy is on strike"). They sometimes pose as "official" signs bearing the university logo. Look around your institutional kitchen: do you see such signs there? Paying attention to what is at stake in such signs reinscribes binaries (as I mention above) but are also designed to produce shame, recognition and action in the signs' readers. As injunctions to 'standards', the institutional micropolitical work they do is deeply normative and not, as most feminist materialists desire, 'resistant or subversive or oppositional' (Anderson, 2017, 593-594).

Concluding

This article has attended to higher education institutional workspace kitchens using a posthuman, post-methodological and post-disciplinary analytical framework. I end the paper by commenting on two examples which help to draw together the article's original insights.

The first is a memory story – an unbidden spinning off into time and memory as a fragment of my own cultural biography popped up from nowhere and demanded to be written down.

> Thinking about the workspace kitchen brings another kitchen to mind. I see it now. The yellow laminate top table, jammed up against the side of the sink and the back wall, square yellow-topped stools underneath it, which would be brought out and assembled in a semicircle around the kitchen as more visitors arrived. There always seemed to be enough stools for everyone. The two yellow-topped chairs were for my Nan and my Mum. It was in this small kitchen that Nan would serve endless cups of tea in china cups. Frail, light, almost see-through, pink, rose, blue flower-patterned cups. Cups not mugs. We had mugs at home, here we drank from cups. Cups with matching saucers. The tea was strong and tasty and always hot. As soon as one pot was finished another one would be made. We all sat in the kitchen, children, aunts, uncles, parents, cousins. A place made home and warm by the meeting of bodies. Outside the kitchen the rest of the house seemed cold and forlorn, the hallway an empty space, the upstairs only traversed to go to the bathroom. The front room was my granddad's domain. When he came in from work he would pass through the kitchen, go upstairs, get washed and changed into his evening clothes, then go into the front room, where my Nan would take his tea on a tray. He would sit alone, undisturbed, to eat, then smoke and listen to the radio. He was not to be disturbed. I was taken in to give him a kiss on his bristly chin, he would grab me around the waist and give me a hug, then I was taken back into the kitchen. I never knew him. In contrast to that cold front room with the silent man, the kitchen was lively, steamy, warm, boisterous, full of cooking smells and talk. Talk, talk, talk. It was the place

where Nan admonished me for smoking when I was fourteen and I squirmed and weakly explained I'd only tried it once (my parents must have told on me). It was the place where I saw my Nan's hand become increasingly shaky as she poured cups of tea and I got older. It was the place where, according to my Dad, I took my first steps: she held me up and I walked out of her arms across the kitchen to his waiting arms only to trip just before I reached him and I started crying.

Later, through radical feminist texts, I dis/covered kitchens as spaces of servitude, where women were confined, defined and deformed by patriarchy. Cooking, washing, cleaning, caring for others first and herself last. At the same time, they were places for radical quilting, where women conglomerated to talk revolution while making beautiful objects. I have known shared student kitchens, damp kitchens in rented houses, kitchens in my own houses which I've stripped to the plaster to reveal traces of previous inhabitants. And my own kitchen now, where tools jostle with plants and kitchen stuff and which is home to Frankie our dog, with his crate, his toys, his food and water bowls, his fur, and his little delicate paws marking and tracing his ins and outs on the floor.

(*memory story*)

This kitchen is viscerally felt: a catch in the throat, a hitch in the chest, a sob in the heart. Memory helps make sense of place in the present and 'creatively reshapes any efforts to freeze time in place' (Kitson & McHugh, 2015, 488). The humdrum freight of memory in this small story summons up how kitchen matterings travel intergenerationally to materialise the doing (and doing differently) of gender. Haraway (2004, 328-29) notes that "gender is a verb, not a noun". In the particular home kitchen I write about here, each cup of tea, each moving of chairs, each chink of china cup against china saucer (I hear it now!), each meal on its tray taken through to the front room, was a daily doing of traditional gender roles that shaped the formation of an (my) extended family. In the humdrum human-nonhuman space-time-matterings of that memoried kitchen I learned what women were worth—that their role was to serve men and to do so promptly and silently and without the asking. This knowledge was unvoiced but keenly felt in the affective tension that traversed the bodies of those present. As the air shifted when grandad entered the kitchen, my small girl's body felt and came to know how patriarchal power did its work in an ineluctable and unquestioned way. Many years later, as an academic, a woman and a feminist posthumanist hailed by work that centred the desire to make a fuss (Stengers & Despret, 2014), I came to notice how human bodies are bound into agentic nonhuman assemblages that emerge in and through the vital force of their material instances (Bennett, 2010). Attending to the vital life of kitchens enables us to reckon with gender as more than an ideology, a social construction. Nan's kitchen was a place in which the posthuman performativity of gender was a distributed affair of human-nonhuman agencies, doings and matterings which coincided to produce a historically specific sets of material conditions (Barad, 2007) whose force remains within our family's bodies today. The broader theoretical point is that a posthuman stance requires the displacement of gender as a practice of patriarchal power which has held colonialist "Man" in place and damaged the private spaces of the home and the intimate space of the heart. The broader substantive point is that gender regimes continue to flourish and damage many who work within contemporary higher education.

The second is a mobile phone snap of a whiteboard next to a cupboard that materializes how anonymous practices of humour spread tendrils out to involve other (anonymous) kitchen inhabitants (Figure 9).

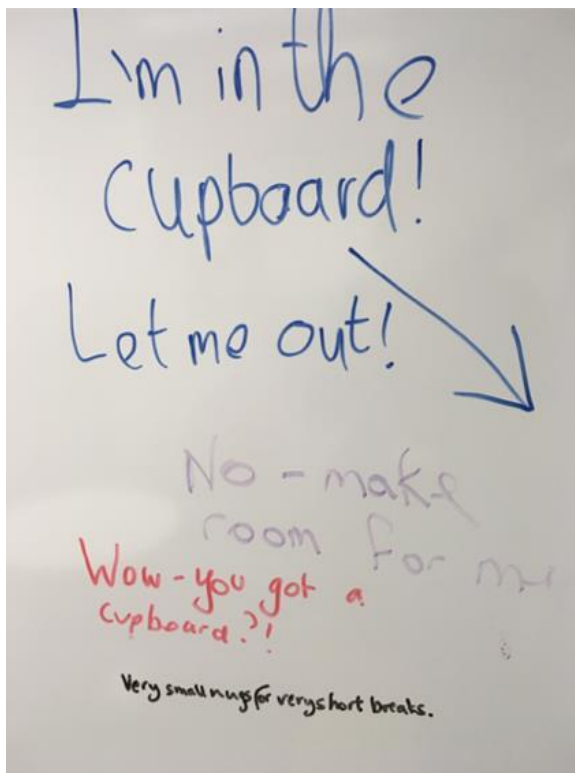**Figure 9.** I'm in the cupboard (*mobile phone snap*)

Image: Workspace kitchen project (C A Taylor)

The material moment condensed in this particular kitchen mattering speaks out to Turner's (1974, 13) point about liminal space as that in which "anything may happen". In this instance, a kitchen cupboard works as a "betwixt and between" space that offers some liminal and momentary refuge from the performative exigences that constrain higher education as a whole. These latter are well known: the accelerated academy is characterised by systems of competition, individualism and accountability which mangle bodies, careers and relationships and enable inequalities to flourish (Taylor, 2020). I am not suggestion that a small story of cupboard humour can counteract these large and damaging forces. I *am* suggesting that such affective practices can puncture their daily, insidious effects. Who, seeing that whiteboard, does not smile? Humour's positive affects take hold and produce a temporary site for a collective "we" to come into being. Humour makes connections and relations possible (Cooper, 2008); it works within circuits of power as a move to destabilise and contest dominant formations. This material mattering, then, speaks to Turner's point about liminality's anarchic potential. Humour is vital energy in the life of institutional kitchens: it summons the 'and yet' and the 'not yet' into existence and expands possibilities, albeit momentarily, for existing and doing our higher education lives differently.

Kitchen matterings entail resonances produced by "little things" which are palpably felt, which traverse multiple human-nonhuman bodies, and which hold a "simple but profound promise of contact' between 'disparate forms and realms of life" (Stewart, 2007, 21). This article's novel contribution works with Eisner's (2008, 5) view, that "not only does knowledge come in different forms, the forms of its creation differ". Its development of a posthuman, post-methodological and post-disciplinary analytical framework, and its attention to data fragments, illuminate how and why HEI kitchens matter. However, the analytical insights it proposes are likely to be relevant more generally. Institutional kitchens in all sorts of organisations are also shaped by the posthuman relations of human-nonhuman matterings. The article's insights make a methodological appeal for specificity regarding the particular patterns and habits of institutional life. In its consideration of institutional kitchens as places in continual flux, as spaces of emergent and ongoing nonhuman-human spacetimematterings of relations, networks and associational encounters (Thrift, 1996), the article has brought to the fore kitchens as space-places of multiple porosities and micropolitical boundary-makings. It has demonstrated that the institutional kitchen is "the very sphere of the political" (Massey, 2005, 9).

Acknowledgements

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