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Decentring the Human in Multispecies Ethnographies

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Bridging the divide

Much has been written about the need to bridge the theory/practice divide by bringing them together in the 'praxis' of teaching. For researchers inspired by posthumanist theorizations, the task of bridging the theory/practice divide is particularly challenging because it is accompanied by the additional need to resist the nature/culture divide that keeps our human species 'hyper-separated' from all 'earth others' in the name of 'human exceptionalism' (Plumwood, 2002). The foundational nature/culture divide of Western humanism provides the structuring logic for our human-centric practices, and the challenge of decentring the human within the decidedly humanist practice of social science research cannot be underestimated. The challenge is compounded when this research is 'applied' in 'the field' – or, to put it another way, when it is enacted in the world beyond the academy. It seems much easier to theorize about decentring the human than to walk the walk and find congruent, innovative ways to 'put new concepts to the test' (Lorimer, 2010, p. 238).

Within a social science discipline like education, where it is axiomatic that our core business is to investigate human learning or the discursive practices and/or materials that guide and enable this learning, more-than-human research practice seems like an anathema. Nevertheless, one of our central research goals is to explore the possibilities of learning with other species in a more-than-human world. In this chapter, we first discuss the conceptual and methodological frameworks within which we work, namely common world and multispecies ethnography. Second, we illustrate and reflect on our attempts to shift focus away from the researcher and child as the central becoming-knowable subjects about animals and refocus on complex, entangled, mutually affecting and co-shaping child-animal relations.

This shift is easier said than done. Since embarking on our multispecies ethnographies in Hong Kong, Australia and Canada, we have experienced a disjuncture between articulating the need for research that decentres the human in theoretically coherent and compelling ways and fully realizing it in practice. While posthumanist conceptualizations are now firmly established, the doings of them are fraught with impasses. Resisting the tendency to default back to observing children in their interactions with animals feels more like an 'ontological struggle' than an epistemological one (Hinchliffe et al., 2005, p. 649) because moving beyond anthropocentric descriptions of animal behaviours requires continually reorienting from individual human to collective more-than-human subjectivities and agencies. In short, such a move entails relearning how to do research 'without the tools of human exceptionalism' (Haraway, cited in van Dooren, 2014, back cover).

While the practice of multispecies research has required us to push beyond our limits, the research itself pushes at the limits of intelligibility within the field of early childhood education, where we are situated. This is because of early childhood education's deeply sedimented commitment to pursuing child-centred pedagogies and addressing the developmental needs of the (becoming autonomous) individual child within the child's (exclusively human) sociocultural context. Discussions about our seemingly offbeat multispecies research inevitably lead back to human-centric questions such as: What are your findings about these children's relations with animals? What do the children in your research learn from their relations with animals? How does following the animal help us to better understand the child?

Common worlding

Our way of resisting the force field of child-centredness is to refocus on the 'common worlds' that we (children, teachers, educators and researchers) co-inhabit with multitudes of other species (Common World Childhoods Research Collective, 2014). 'Common worlds' is a term we borrow from Latour (2005), who speaks about the necessity to reassemble all of the constituents of our worlds – including nonhuman life forms, forces and entities – within a radically expanded conceptualization of the social. The insistence that we live in not just exclusively human societies but in common worlds with other species runs counter to the human-centric impulse to divide ourselves off from the rest of the world and re-enact the self-perpetuating nature/culture divide (Latour, 2004).

Moving away from research practices that separate the human off from the rest, we work hard at putting the notion of common worlds to work in an active, reconnecting and generative sense. In our

multispecies research, we do this by tracing how our lives, children's lives and the lives of other animals in our common worlds are entangled, interconnected, mutually dependent, and therefore mutually 'response-able' (Haraway, 2008) for the commons (Pacini-Ketchabaw and Taylor, 2015; Taylor et al., 2013; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). We approach our research practice, then, as a political act of 'common worlding' (Taylor, 2013), as a collective and compositional practice that not only accounts for the other species with whom we live but acknowledges that these dynamic, entangled multispecies relations gestate our common worlds and bring them into being (Taylor and Blaise, 2014).

Multispecies ethnography

In line with our common worlds framework, multispecies ethnography is characterized by an attempt to move beyond research practices that confine themselves to exclusively human (or social) concerns and interests. It is a relatively new experimental and hybrid methodology associated with the 'animal turn' in the social sciences (Buller, 2014; Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2014; Weil, 2010); and assumes that human being and becoming and even sociality itself (Tsing, 2013) are entangled in complex, often asymmetrical, ways with the being and becoming of other species (Hamilton and Taylor, 2012; Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Lorimer, 2014; Rose et al., 2012; Whatmore, 2006). It is the lively connections among species (often, but not always, including humans), their collective effects and their ethical implications that provide the research focus.

Much has been written about the difficulties of resisting an anthropocentric frame of reference when conducting multispecies ethnographies and about the potential limits of human perception and communication (Hamilton and Taylor, 2012; Hinchliffe et al., 2005; Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2014; Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Lorimer, 2010; Moore and Kosut, 2013). To counter these difficulties, more-than-human scholars from anthropology and human geography speak of the need for taking risks (and being allowed to take risks) to experiment with new methods that stay open to multispecies interdeterminacies and resist human control (Tsing, 2011, p. 19), extend 'the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject' (Whatmore, 2006, p. 605) and rethink 'what forms of intelligence, truth and expertise count' (Lorimer, 2010, p. 239). Tsing (2013) puts a particularly positive spin on the inescapable fact of simply being human in a more-than-human research project. She recasts our humanness, not as a limiting factor, but as the starting point for entering into more-than-human relations. She reminds us that it is important to be present in our work, to be part of the interconnected multispecies worlds we are seeking to explore. As she puts it, 'we are participants as well as observers;

we recreate interspecies sensibilities in what we do … [We learn other species] and ourselves *in action*, through common activities' (p. 24).

Shifting focus in our Hong Kong, Canadian and Australian multispecies projects

In what follows, we outline how we are putting our more-than-human common worlds' conceptual framework to work *on the grounds* of these worlds. This has required us to try out the slow and attentive kind of applied research that Stengers (2005a, p. 1002) refers to as 'collective thinking in the presence of [nonhuman] others'. To do this we have had to immerse ourselves in multispecies worlds and to pay attention to what they tell us. We have been tested not to foreclose on thinking as an exclusively human activity, and to remain open to how our thoughts might be reshaped through our encounters with nonhuman life forms.

As a way of engaging with the challenges posed by conducting multispecies research, we describe sets of experimental shifts that we have been using to decentre the human in our work. Each description is followed by a reflection, in italics, which addresses the challenges and possibilities that the shift enables. Through these shifts we attempt to reorient our research from strongly held early childhood research practices (following the child, representing others as the objects of study, making meaning, focusing on innocent encounters, safety of thinking as an individual researcher) towards research practices within common worlds of human and nonhuman constituents, all exercising agency (following multispecies relations, engaging with more-than-human others as active research subjects, learning to being affected as researcher, attending to awkward encounters, risking thinking collectively). We draw from our multispecies ethnographic field notes to illustrate the shifts.

Veronica's project has unfolded in university childcare centres located in wet temperate urban forests on Canada's west coast. Participants include two groups of up to 16 children, eight early childhood educators, three graduate students, deer, earthworms, raccoons, stick bugs, lichen, fungi, mosses, chickadees, brown bears, crows, ravens, owls, ferns, douglas fir, arbutus, maples, blackberry, holly, English ivy and a myriad of other species. Affrica's research takes place in a dry urban bushland setting on a university campus in the Australian Capital Territory. Participants include groups of up to 15 children and two early childhood educators from the university early childhood education centre, occasional parents and teacher education students, innumerable ants, mosquito larvae, a large mob of

eastern grey kangaroos, groves of eucalyptus and casurina trees, cicadas, mushrooms, grasslands and wild brambles. Mindy's three-and-one-half-year-long multispecies ethnography of dog and human entanglements took place across Hong Kong dog parks, *dai pai dongs* (outdoor restaurants), shopping malls and outdoor markets. Participants include individual dogs, their apparel and their human companions, significant material objects and her own body.

Shifting from following the child to following multispecies relations

Child-earthworm relations in Victoria

It rains a lot in Victoria, British Columbia, and with the rain, unexpected kinds of interspecies encounters take place in the course of everyday life. Earthworms, humans and other animals co-navigate the surface of their wet common routes of travel in this urban Pacific Northwest place. After every rain, the sidewalks are full of surfacing earthworms. The worms slither across the paths seeking puddles, taking advantage of the wet surfaces because they can travel more easily across them than they can through soil. Surfacing, however, brings risks – the earthworms are in constant danger of being squashed by passersby or being eaten by birds. We (a group of children, educators and researchers) often encounter these slithering sidewalk earthworms on our regular rainy-day walks. Their presence draws our attention to where we place our feet and heightens our awareness of the life and death responsibilities entailed in our relations with other small and vulnerable species. Attracted by the same puddles as the earthworms, but also encumbered by slippery and unwieldy muddy rubber boots, the children often come perilously close to squashing their wet sidewalk companions. They have to concentrate hard on what their feet are doing to avert potentially lethal encounters. Most of the time however, children's bodily encounters with worms are quite gentle and convivial, as curious small hands reach out to touch slimy earthworm bodies. The worms wiggle; the hands gently hold. Every embodied encounter changes both.

'Child-centredness' is axiomatic to most early childhood pedagogies and research projects. Attempting to do anything else feels very counter-intuitive. As this descriptive vignette shows, although we start off with the best intentions to follow the relations that emerge when children and earthworms meet on slippery pathways, we are only partially successful. By the end of the story we have relapsed into following what the children are doing to the worms, and of affirming their care for these small

vulnerable beings. For educators and researchers alike, it is much easier to slip back into the familiar territory of casting these child-worm encounters as 'teacheable moments' in which 'naturally curious' children can learn about other creatures.

To stay with the relations themselves means becoming differently attuned to exactly what is emerging anew or being 'remade' in every 'dance of relating' that occurs 'when species meet' (Haraway, 2008, p. 25). We are only just beginning to cultivate the new modes of attention we need in order to be able to stay focused on all the moves of all the dancers, and to prevent ourselves from defaulting to observations that would limit the significance of the nonhuman partners to the pedagogical opportunities they afford the children. We have to keep reminding ourselves that the children are not the only ones choreographing this dance and we (the educators and researchers) are not the only ones fostering their curiosity. The worms are on their own travels, regardless of us (Abrahamsson and Bertoni, 2014). *Through their very presence on the surface they are acting on the children and moving them to touch and be curious.*

Tsing's insistence that we 'are made in entangling relations with significant others' (2013, p. 27) and her encouragement for multispecies ethnographers to pay attention to 'how humans and other species come into ways of life through webs of social relations' (Tsing, 2013, p. 28) reminds us that our task is to remember that there are innumerable threads that knit our common worlds together, including these small chance encounters of children and worms on the slippery pathways of everyday life.

Shifting from representing other animals as objects of study to engaging with other animals as active research subjects

Sensing dog worlds in Sheung Wan

It is a typical hot and humid afternoon in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong, and I (Mindy) am sitting on a bench at a dog park with my eyes closed. I smell urine. It is impossible to ignore. Instead of dissipating, the smell only seems to become stronger and more intense. I have learned that urine marking is a method of communication among dogs, but I wonder if these dogs might be telling me something? The urine-infused air is sticky and hot. It touches and sticks to my skin, rising up from the concrete and co-

mingling with my researching human body. While I can hear dogs barking and voices speaking Cantonese in the background, something strange and weird is happening to me. I am not sure that I belong here or what today's visit might entail. I have never noticed the urine before and I wonder, 'Whose territory have I entered?' Although I am tempted to open my eyes and see what kinds of dogs are barking, I keep them closed and wait.

Something brushes against my leg. Startled, I open my eyes and look down towards the ground. A small, brown poodle is looking up at me. She has dark brown eyes and she moves her tiny head slightly to the left and then the right. We have met before. She jumps up and puts her two front paws on my legs. Today her toenails are painted bright pink. For a moment, I am distracted and vaguely pleasured by this queer vision, and I let out a soft laugh. I hesitate and look around for the dog's minder. The poodle moves her paws against my legs and then drops to the ground. She bends her head down towards the floor, with her bottom sticking up in the air, with her tail raised. Moving her body up, she is standing on all four legs, and bends her head down and sniffs my feet. While sniffing, she licks my toes and then my ankle. Her nose is slightly wet and the licking tickles my skin. Her tail wags quickly as she looks up at me. I smile at her, bend down and ask: 'Are you Cola? Haven't we met on Ladder Street?' I gently scratch her neck and pat her small, fluffy head. She moves her nose towards my hand and licks the back of it. She now moves under the bench and I am unsure where she is or what she is doing. I scoot back and bend my body down to look under the bench. Cola is now sitting with her head down on top of her pink-painted front paws.

Making the shift from representing animals as objects of study to engaging with animals as active research subjects requires a different set of habits, skills and dispositions. Shifting my research practices involves relearning traditional ethnographic observational methods in ways that do not rely exclusively on visual and textual representations (Blaise, 2013). I make this shift by leaving my pen, paper and camera behind. This practice might seem insignificant, but it challenges me to engage differently with the dogs as research subjects. Sensory ethnographic principles, such as emplacement, the interconnection of senses, and knowing in practice (Pink, 2009) have been instructive. They remind me that mind-body-place practices are relational and that separating out these practices, as well as the senses, is impossible. I am figuring out ways that challenge me to go beyond watching, listening and writing. Closing my eyes helps me privilege smelling, listening and feeling within a multisensory encounter. I am hoping that this multilayered and interconnected sensorial way of experiencing the dog and even being moved by the dog might help me to engage with dogs as subjects of their own worlds

rather than as objects of my study. As I focus on sensing the dog, I am also waiting to be invited into a relationship. These practices are not about producing better representations and more accurate understandings of Hong Kong dogs. Rather, they are ways of shifting standard forms of research subject/object relationships, or doing what Hinchliffe and his colleagues (2005, p. 651) refer to as deliberately changing engagements. I am changing how my researching body engages with dogs as I smell, listen and feel while waiting to be approached. I am learning how not to be in charge (Tsing, 2013) of these research moments and more-than-human research relationships. Through sensory engagements on doggy terms, I am figuring out new ways that allow 'nonhuman knowledgeabilities to emerge' (Hinchliffe et al., 2005, p. 653). I have no idea what dog knowledgeabilities might be or how they will emerge because I am not a dog, but I do know that they involve experimenting with methods, taking a risk that I won't always be approached by a dog, and suspending my pull towards meaning making for long enough to sense dog worlds and dog agencies on dog terms.

Appropriating Sarah Pink's (2009) sensory apprentice methods, I am tuning into the dog's world of smell. For Pink, a sensory apprenticeship requires an emplaced engagement with the activities, practices and environments that one is exploring. For me, this involves a reflexivity about the learning process for Cola and myself, how I am establishing connections between Cola's and my own sensory practices, and how I am understanding the power relations within the dog park between Cola and other dogs and humans. I find out that unlike humans, who have a weak olfactory sense and mostly see the world, dogs interpret the world predominantly by smell. Depending on the breed, a dog's sense of smell is about 1,000 to 10,000 times more sensitive than a human's. Researchers using specialized photographic methods that detect how air flows when a dog sniffs are able to show that dog sniffing is neither a single nor a simple inhalation (Horowitz, 2009). As a sensory apprentice, I am learning that when Cola smells and licks me, she is taking in layers of complex odours and investigating me. This multisensory event between my human researching body and the pet dog researching body is significant because it is here where a new kind of researcher relationship emerges. I am no longer 'studying' and 'representing' the dog as my object of study: I am following Cola as my smelling mentor and research subject.

Shifting from meaning making about to learning to be affected by the world

Mindy's restrained experimental research practices, which saw her holding back, sensing and following Hong Kong dog worlds rather than rushing in to interpret and represent them, is in line with the broader more-than-human methodological shift that Sarah Whatmore (2006, p. 604) describes as moving 'from an onus on *meaning* to an onus on *affect'*. By affect, Whatmore is referring to the ways in which sentient beings, despite and often because of their incommensurable differences, are affected and moved by each other within the very fabrication of ' "livingness" in a more-than-world' (p. 604). Affect is an embodied and relational exchange that alerts us to being alive and mutually vulnerable to other living creatures. It occurs at the threshold of encounters. Being open to being affected and moved by other species is a risky business. For our species, it entails risking the temporary suspension of a sense of sovereignty and rationality (Latimer and Miele, 2013).

Child-stick-ant dances in Canberra

It's striking just how much children, plants and animals affect and move each other during our weekly walks through Canberra's dry sclerophyll eucalyptus forests. Crunching through brittle forest litter and tripping over the carpet of fallen sticks and strips of bark, the children literally kick and trample their stumbling ways through the bush. They are marking trails with their bodies, even as the bush reciprocally scratches their legs and arms and marks them. There are large, gravelly ant nests in almost every clearing. The children find them endlessly fascinating. At least one child always has a stick in hand, collected on the walk. The sticks make great poking implements and also offer children a safe distance from their curious troublemaking. Tapping the nests with the sticks, the children provocatively goad the ants, triggering a pheromone of hyperactive response. Myriads of ants suddenly rush out of their tiny holes and swarm in all directions. They are biting angry. Beating a hasty retreat, the children scream and scatter. Some of the children slap at their legs to squash the invading ants that are now secreted in their clothing. It's an escalating dance of mutual affect. Abetted by sticks, the enlivened ants' and children's bodies are rapidly inciting, exciting, reacting to and moving each other while stimulating heightened 'new modes of body attention and awareness' in both species (Moore and Kosut, 2013, p. 5). Affected by the plights of ants and children alike, the alerted adults watch with anxious apprehension.

Witnessing this scene unfold affects us, as the 'responsible' teachers and researchers. We feel compelled to warn the children of the risks they take by upsetting the ants and getting too close to the nests. We don't want them to get bitten and we don't want them to disturb and hurt the ants. We want

to support their curiosities about these teeming micro-worlds, and we also feel ourselves drawn by the ants to see exactly what these amazing, tiny animals are doing. We experience the pull of rational and affective forces within this contact zone of energizing multispecies encounters, experimental research practices, and competing human and more-than-human interests and concerns. 'Learning to be affected' (Latour, 2004) is one of our primary goals in this multispecies research project. To do this, we must risk sensing the world differently, as the children are doing, through attuning to our own and other bodies (Lorimer, 2010), not just studying the world through the safety of detached mental processes. Discomfiting as it can sometimes be, 'learning to be affected' requires us to viscerally experience the 'response-ability' (Haraway, 2008) of these other bodies – such as sticks and ants – to feel their capacities to act on and affect us, even as we act on and affect them. We cannot decentre the human without learning to be affected by the world that we also affect.

Shifting from innocent encounters to awkward encounters of mixed affect

Raccoon-child cohabitations on Burnaby Mountain

Not all multispecies events in early childhood spaces and places are innocent or unproblematic. Encounters are often awkward and marked by inconvenience, risk, confrontation and strange curiosities (Instone, 2014; Lorimer, 2014). Consider, for example, the cohabitations of raccoons and children in a childcare playground on Burnaby Mountain in Vancouver. Widely regarded as pests, a resident family of raccoons transgresses all manner of human boundaries at the childcare centre. They not only evoke the abject through dropping their infectious faeces in the playground, but they transgress notions of domestic/wild by knocking on windows to be let inside the building. Allow me to elaborate.

The resident raccoons spend more time in this playground than the children do. The children have become attentive to these unruly inhabitants and are beginning to know the place differently through the raccoons' movements. The sand in the sandbox is not just sand to play in, for example. It's where raccoons leave their signature paw prints. The tree in the playground has also been marked by the raccoons' 'handprints' and the children notice them. Accessing the toys in the outside shed is no simple matter. Raccoons may have their den there, so the children are not allowed to go into the shed. And it's not just the children who relate to the playground differently. So too do the educators who dutifully remove the raccoons' faeces from the playground every day. Raccoons are the primary host of

Baylisascaris procyonis, a roundworm that exists in their faeces. The roundworm eggs stay in the soil and contaminate objects that, when put in human mouths, can cause infection. Putting objects into their mouths is something children do a lot, so the educators take seriously the task of picking up and removing raccoon droppings. Other forces are at play that intensify these risky encounters: the roundworm eggs become infectious only after two to four weeks. Thus, adult humans diligently remove raccoon dung daily before the children go outside. The raccoons watch curiously from high in a tree, while the cautious educators watch the raccoons' movements from below – a truly awkward zone of multispecies engagement (Tsing, cited in Lorimer, 2014, p. 203).

Awkwardness also emerges through the oblique connections between the raccoons and humans. Every day the raccoon family comes a bit closer to the childcare centre building. The raccoons might be observing us, getting to know us, trying to enter the building, looking for food, or perhaps even offering their 'charms'. They may be curious or trying to get our attention. It is certain, though, that their behaviours stimulate a range of negative and positive attachments for us humans. We are continually undone and redone, alternately at ease, uncomfortable, disconcerted, and surprised by the raccoons' charms. Is it the disarming tension between their 'nonhuman charisma' (Lorimer, 2007), on the one hand, that attracts us to affectionately recognize our own kind in their playful antics, and their well-held reputation as a risky 'infectious pest', on the other hand, which 'drives and configures [our] "ethical sensibilities" '(Lorimer, 2007, p. 928) through mixed affect? As the increasingly unruly raccoons knock on the building's glass windows, our carefully constructed binaries of human/nonhuman, domesticated/wild and nature/culture, among many others, are unsettled, confounded and threatened. These awkward moments that threaten human boundary making and control have been generative in prompting 'thought, practice and politics' among the children and educators (Lorimer, 2014, p. 196). They have moved us to discuss *how we are going to respond* to the simultaneously charming, infectious and cheeky raccoons in ways that allow cohabitation in which all can flourish (Haraway, 2008). Our encounters with this raccoon family have produced both pleasure (especially for the children, who find them very entertaining, but also for us adults, who are amused by the raccoons' insistence on staying in this place) and huge disconcertment, raising the question of how we might coexist in this urban mountain forest environment. The raccoons in the childcare playground unsettle normalized understandings of the innocence of children's spaces. Moreover, the mixed affects engendered by these provocative animals intensify our reflections upon the ethics and politics of multispecies coexistence, particularly in such a proximal zone of awkward engagement.

These awkward multispecies encounters pose ethical dilemmas for the educators in the childcare centre, but they also pose dilemmas for the research. We aim to create openings in highly contested spaces. In other words, we hint at what might be possible in, or what might emerge from these encounters, without necessarily seeking a final truth or a 'research finding' (Haraway, 2008; Tsing, 2013). We pay close attention to how we might undo, reposition and make strange the taken-for-granted notion of humans within these unconventional encounters. Ultimately, it is in these awkward relations that we are moved to care differently, to see our entanglements with other species, and to acknowledge our vulnerabilities. The ethics of how to respond to the raccoons as both infectious and charming animals is complicated. How do we care for them? How do we respond to them? Could we love these raccoons? Might distaste be easier than love? Or even fear? Is a generalizable response the most appropriate?

Embodied child and kangaroo encounters in the Australian bush

Large mobs of eastern grey kangaroos graze on open grasslands around the Canberra early childhood centre where we conduct our multispecies research. They are 'environmental refugees' who moved into the city precincts during the recent drought and are now permanent residents on this tract of land, which is ringed by major motorways. A recent geo-tagging study of Canberra's urban kangaroos showed that the vast majority of these canny animals avoid crossing major roads, indicating they are quite aware of the threat that speeding motor vehicles pose to them (Westh, 2011). Children and kangaroos, on the other hand, have a much more convivial relationship. They also have a keen awareness of each other, in a benignly curious and yet respectfully wary kind of way. From the children's side, at least, this is a relationship of affection and attachment. They care for the kangaroos. In particular, they care for the joeys, whom they love to spot in their mothers' pouches and often draw and name as their close friends. The children are learning from the kangaroos how to pay close attention to where they are and who and what is there with them. They have learned this by paying close attention to the kangaroos' bodies. For instance, the children have noticed how the kangaroos often stand bolt upright on their haunches, balancing on their enormous tails while attentively looking around. Kangaroos are hypervigilant of anything and anyone that approaches them. The children have seen how the kangaroos use their rotating ears to monitor the sounds of these approaches, and how quickly they can turn and hop away when their proximity zones are breached. They spend lots of time imagining and enacting what it would be like to live in a kangaroo's body – hopping with a big, heavy tail, listening carefully with swivelling ears, scratching furry chests and feeling tucked up in a furry

pouch. The children are clearly stimulated and corporeally affected by their relations with these large animals.

The ways in which we are all affected, humans and kangaroos alike, are never entirely predictable, however, nor are they necessarily innocent. On a recent walk, we had an unexpected and disturbing encounter with a dead kangaroo. It had been killed on the adjacent highway and its body thrown back into the paddock to rot. The children were speechless and transfixed. The body they had affectionately come to know so well was now reduced to a lifeless, stinking, decomposing form. The fur was coming off the pelt and crows had pecked open the stomach cavity. Blowflies buzzed around the corpse and the stench of death was overpowering. The children screwed up their faces in disgust and held their noses, but they kept edging forward to get an even closer look. The kangaroo's neck was broken and its head thrown back. They could see its large teeth and exposed skull, the maggoty remains of its intestines coming out of an enlarged hole that was once its anus. Shock, fear, repulsion, morbid fascination, sadness, grief, curiosity – the mixed affects of an awkwardly compelling encounter were all present in that disconcerting and extended moment. Not long afterwards, the children returned to their own imaginary and embodied kangaroo play. With much laughter and release, this time they were listening for and fleeing cars, being knocked over and lying dead on the grass.

One of the decentring aspects of learning to be affected through paying close attention to our embodied multispecies relations is that we cannot presume to control the myriad ways in which we are and will be affected by these worldly relations. Once affected, however, we stand a better chance of appreciating the precariousness of life and recognizing the vulnerabilities we share with other living beings with whom our lives are entangled. This is particularly so when we are affected in difficult ways that are not of our choosing. After this first encounter with the dead kangaroo, the children asked to revisit its body three more times. At each of these rewitnessing events, they came away reflecting on their own stories of losing family pets and of nearly running over kangaroos on Canberra's roads. It seemed the children were registering a much deeper, amplified and sober sense of their own entanglement in the living and dying relations that make up their common worlds. Perhaps these various ways of sensing their own implication in common world relations of living and dying – smelling it, witnessing it, reflecting on it – indicate that they were beginning to grapple with the likelihood of ongoing awkward human-animal relations (Ginn et al., 2014). As disconcerting as these awkward relations might be, they nevertheless have the potential to prompt a new kind of multispecies 'affective and thus ethical logics' (Lorimer, 2014, p. 196). The acceptance of awkward relations is akin

to the relational multispecies ethics that Haraway (2010) often refers to as 'staying with the trouble', not for the promise of an ultimate solution or a final peace, but because cohabiting in our common worlds in ways that allow all to flourish requires us to grapple with the difficulties of living with incommensurable differences – and to respond (2008, p. 141, 41).

Shifting from exclusively human thinking to risking thinking collectively with other species

Thinking with an urban forest in Victoria

A group of children, educators and researchers comes together weekly in an art studio to think with the urban forest located next to the childcare centre. The studio is located in the middle of a forest of tall spruce and cedar trees choked by English ivy. A creek runs through it. In this studio, we are inspired by Tsing's (2011) invitation to slow down: 'Next time you walk through a forest, look down. A city lies under your feet. If you were somehow to descend into the earth, you would find yourself surrounded by the city's architecture of webs and filaments' (para. 1). As in any studio, I suppose, there is potential here for new constraints, requirements and possibilities. But unlike other early childhood art studios, here the forest is alive, the forest thinks (Kohn, 2013).[1] All species (including us humans) generate their own systems of values, constraints and obligations, and we are in the midst of these multiple relatings of the webs and filaments of ground, trees, water, plants, animals, insects, deer, cougars, clay and one another. As we think with the forest, we notice care-fully the deer watching us, the distinctly shaped trees that surround us, the sticks that the children pick up, the spider that lives in the hollow tree, the water that runs through the creek bed, the leaves that fall on the forest floor, the decomposing fallen trees, the thousands of pine needles that lie on the ground, the woodpecker eating bugs on a cedar tree high above our heads. New kinds of noticing emerge as the children become yet another forest species. The ways in which we relate to the forest and to one another – our actions, movements, words and the forest's own actions and movements – shift our ways of knowing and being. At some point, we stopped being observers in this forest. We are part of it. We converge in the act of accompanying and intra-acting with the many species that flourish and fail in these woods.

This studio is not just any studio. It is intimately known for its specificities. The children can remember every stump and hollow through the species they once encountered there and the clay they left behind. They return to the same tree over and over. This tree kept all of the pieces of clay that the

children once stuck on its trunk. The wind, of course, helped dried the clay, changed its colour and its form. Everyone and everything participates in the studio. Clay helps us see connections to pine needles, sticks, rocks, soil, leaves, small branches and bits of garbage as all of these things and our fingers stick to it. These objects and the clay continually transform themselves as they come into friction. Clay never stays the same and nor do the objects it collects. The clay is transformed and transforms us. We never stay the same. The children notice this as they ask for more 'clean' clay. With us in it, the forest is creating new histories, just as we create new histories when we are in the forest.

How do we intersect with the histories this forest already knows? For example, violent movements of colonialism and commercialism forever altered the forests' architectures and ecological patterns of multispecies cohabitation when European settlers arrived on Canada's west coast. How do these histories and stories matter in our forest studio? Whose stories are visible here, and whose become invisible? How can we pay attention to what is already here? How do we see ourselves in relation to what's here? What do our ongoing visits do to the forest? How do our visits forever change the forest? These questions of what the forest knows and how the forest emerges are tangled up with our forest studio presences and our movements through the forest. The forest is in the midst of complicated relationships, in economic, cultural and ecological terms. Artist Gina Badger (2009) assists us in trying to acknowledge the multifaceted disruptions that have occurred and continue to occur through colonization. She believes we need to think about 'an ecology of colonisation that considers colonisation as a holistic process, one whose violence can be complicated and subtle, messed up somewhere between cultural and environmental' lines (p. 2).

Frictions like these are part of our collective thinking and doing in the forest studio. It is friction, Tsing (2005) says, that produces movement, action and effect. When we pay attention to friction, she observes, we see relationships as transformative and are 'not sure of the outcome' (2012, p. 510). Attending to friction opens our eyes to 'historical contingency, unexpected conjuncture, and the ways that contact across difference can produce new agendas' (p. 510). Friction encompasses problems, dangers and risks. Yet, friction also opens up to transformation. Being, thinking and doing through friction helps us avoid our tendency to separate, to know, to generalize. With friction, everything moves. Everything and everyone becomes something else all the time. Friction gives us a way to consider, for instance, how the forest might respond and object to colonialism and loss. Species such as raccoons, bears and cougars that once lived exclusively in these forests are responding and objecting to the loss of their habitat by adapting and learning to live – quite successfully – in urban

environments. Their objections may threaten and inconvenience us, but perhaps if we learn to think collectively we might see these encounters differently.

Through our multispecies ethnographies, we practice 'slow science' – opening ourselves up to thinking collectively (with humans and more-than-humans), to attending to 'others' preoccupations, to their knowledge, to their objections' (Stengers, in Métral*, para. 16). We constantly ask the question, how might we cultivate new relations? There are always risks in this process of fostering collective thought. The risks for us have been to not know where we are going, to open our thoughts and bodies too much or too little, to not pay close enough attention, to be bewildered. Yet, Stengers (2005a, 2005b) reminds us that if we don't open ourselves to risk, research will never become more than we are. The trick is not to represent a unified world but to risk creating new worlds – not perfect worlds, but worlds that might change what the world might become. We are risking common worlding with this multispecies forest rather than trying to control it by 'knowing' it.*

Conclusion

Attempting to de-centre the human in research is disconcerting as it literally displaces the certitudes of humanist intellectual work. The shifts we have illustrated in this chapter gesture not only towards the conscious moves we have been making to decentre the human, but towards the myriad challenges we continue to face in this experimental research. Not only are we continually challenged by the ingrained 'tendency to view human subjects as the appropriate focus of (social) research'; but also by the risk of anthropomorphizing the more-than-human when seeking to account for their agency (Buller, 2014, Hodgetts and Lorimer, 2014, p. 291). Conducting multispecies ethnographies with children and the species we/they meet in their common worlds remains a radically open methodological experiment. By that we mean the engagement in open-ended and speculative 'practices likely to generate surprising results' (Lorimer, 2015, p. 10). These practices require us to persevere with risk taking, with trying to notice differently, with the potential of curiosity, with 'learning how to be affected' (Latour, 2004) even when this means feeling anxious and uncomfortable.

There are no grandiose research findings from our multispecies experimentations, nothing to prescribe, nothing to apply universally. Our situated studies are small, local, relational and decidedly non-heroic research events. There is, however, much to learn in the doing of such grounded relational research, in entering into these productively unsettling, everyday common world spaces. Within these spaces we learn how to work in an active, reconnecting, generative way *in* and *with* the world we

research. We learn how to be present in a world that is not just about us and to recognize that there is much about this world that we never understand. We learn how to inhabit the disconcerting space of more-than-human research 'without the luxury of any perfect solutions or easy fixes' (van Dooren, 2014, p. 116). As Haraway (2010) reminds us, perhaps our greatest lessons are to be learned by 'staying with the trouble' in the contact zone of more-than-human relations. This is how we can become more 'worldly', more attuned to our place in the world.

Doing multispecies research has allowed us to notice that the world is far more curious than we first assumed, and that curiosity can draw us into new kinds of relationships and new obligations and responsibilities (Tsing, 2013). We hope these obligations and responsibilities are not just new ethical forms of research practices. We hope they 'might provide an avenue to more sustaining possibilities of life' (van Dooren, 2014, p. 85) in our common worlds – regardless of whether the lives are those of children, kangaroos, forests, dogs, ants, earthworms, or racoons.

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[1] In his book *How Forests Think,* Kohn (2013) challenges us to open our understanding of representation beyond human linguistic and symbolic practices and to recognise that all life forms live with and through signs. He claims that it is the semiosis of multispecies relations that 'permeates and constitutes the living world' (p. 9).