"I Don't Know What's Gotten into Me, but I'm Guessing It's Snake Germs": Becoming Beasts in the Early Years Classroom

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Abstract

Within the United States, taken-for-granted curricular priorities and practices sanction child-animal relations within specific cognitive and socio-developmental perspectives. This chapter presents an onto-epistemological departure, drawing upon a yearlong post-qualitative classroom inquiry with 4- to 6-year-old children in order to map the various ways in which children were entangled within the process of becoming more-than-human animals. Adopting a materialist perspective on relationships, this work specifically highlights the ways in which children and everyday acts of becoming animal were mobilized within what the children referred to as "the beast" – an imbroglio of physical transformations,

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environmental limitations, adult expectations, material affordances, and children's conceptions of and relationships to various animal actors. Through narrative and visual data (re)constructed with children, the chapter argues that (1) young child-animal hybrids (i.e., beasts) emerge within and through highly particular and dependent material-discursive circumstances and (2) attending to and honoring these "beasts" present opportunities for generative departures from the ways in which animals are typically conceptualized, valued, or otherwise recognized within early years curriculum.

Keywords
Post-qualitative · Posthuman · Child-animal relations · Early years · Entanglement

Introduction

Within the early years context of the United States, taken-for-granted curricular priorities and practices generally wed the child-animal classroom relations to specific social and cognitive constructivist perspectives. For example, classroom pets have a long and favorable history within US education – to the point where they have become a commonsense avenue for supporting children's socio-emotional competencies, such as compassion and responsibility, as well as improving children's abilities to cope and reducing the occurrence of unwanted behaviors (see, e.g., Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). Beyond the use of classroom pets to support children's socio-emotional growth, animals also serve a variety of more traditionally "academic" roles within young children's classrooms. Both living and deceased/preserved animals are commonly utilized within early years science curricula as engaging physical specimens that can support "children's progressively more complex approaches to understanding the world" (Hamlin & Wisneski, 2012) by facilitating scientific skills, like questioning, observing, predicting, categorizing, and classifying, as well as the development of conceptual understandings of habitats, life cycles, and health (see, e.g., Cohen & Tunick, 1997; Harlan & Rivkin, 2012; Seefeldt, Galper, & Jones, 2012).

This chapter presents an onto-epistemological departure from these perspectives that position the presence of animals within classrooms as "objects for human utility, onto which humans project meaning or symbolic value" (Tipper, 2011, p. 149). Adopting a new materialist perspective on relationships, this work specifically highlights the ways in which children and their everyday acts of becoming animal were mobilized within what the children came to call "the beast" – an imbroglio of physical transformations, environmental limitations, adult expectations, material affordances, and children's conceptions of and relationships to various animal actors. It is worth noting that this research does partially align with Jane Bone's (2010) work on children's acts of becoming animal through play. Bone theorizes that a spiritual kind of intersubjectivity drives the metamorphoses of children into other animals.

That is, she interprets children's animal play as collapsing the human/nonhuman animal binary through children's spiritual, ethical, and emotional attunement to animals – what she calls "deep empathy" (Bone, 2010, p. 411). Her work and the relational becomings explored in this cartography are similar, as both give shape to the ways in which children were entangled in acts of becoming "more than one but less than two" (Haraway, 2008, p. 244). However, the chapter differs in that it attends to how "matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers" (Barad, in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 59) and how the children themselves articulate the material-discursive particulars of becoming (with) animals within everyday acts of classroom living.

Through narrative and visual data (re)constructed by and with young children, this chapter argues that (1) young child-animal hybrids (i.e., "beasts") emerge within and through highly particular and dependent material-discursive circumstances and (2) attending to and honoring these beasts present opportunities for generative departures from the ways in which animals are typically conceptualized, valued, or otherwise recognized within early years curriculum.

Methodological Context

From September 2013 to May 2014, I spent 3 days per week researching the material-discursive entanglements (Barad, 2003, 2007) of 16 kindergarten children, aged 4–6 years, at a university-affiliated laboratory early childcare and education center in the United States. I explicitly undertook this inquiry from/with a new materialist perspective, which seeks to highlight the ways in which humans and nonhumans engage each other and emerge differently from those engagements (Barad, 2003, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Lenz Taguchi, 2010, 2013). With relational intra-dependency, complexity, and nonlinearity as theoretical framings, my main focus throughout the inquiry was to recognize and map the ways in which the children, myself, and the multiple non-elements/actors of the classroom were bound together in the everyday events of classroom life and how these events were perceived, articulated, and re-presented by the children.

In keeping with my focus on the complexity of relationships, I employed a post-qualitative approach, attempting to reconfigure what Lather (2013, p. 642) calls the "settled places in our work." Not unlike many researchers who work with young children, this inquiry entailed a revision of adult researcher-child roles and data collection methods (e.g., Albon & Rosen, 2014; Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2008). However, the ways in which the children and I "did" research focused less on finding out and representing what children already "knew" and more on mapping what emerged from our being together in the material-discursive flows of the classroom (see also Myers, 2014, 2017). To this end, I worked with the children to (re)shape the execution of more traditional visual ethnographic methods of observing, interviewing, and photographing. Within our *method assemblage*, "a tentative and hesitant unfolding, that is at most only very partially under any deliberate form of control" (Law, 2004, p. 41), we developed three interrelated processes – "being

with," "doing photos," and "becoming cameras." Within these movements of *being*, *doing*, and *becoming*, the children and I would spend our time together discussing, writing, drawing, and making photographs about the "important things" in their classroom. Within these processes, illustrations and photos were not treated as simply symbolic artifacts that might aid discussion. Instead, these assemblages of talking, writing, and imaging functioned as sites of productive entanglement (Lenz Taguchi, 2010), creating new layers of material-discursive action through which we attempted to re-present the complex relationships between children, adults, objects, things, materials, and animals.

Classroom Context

Like many early childhood classrooms, nonhuman animals populated this particular classroom landscape and were intended by adults to be subjects of study or tools for discovery (Bone, 2010). For example, live spiders or worms were temporarily held in glass and examined with magnifiers, several dried specimens (e.g., a mummified toad, a mouse carcass, a cicada shell) resided in small plastic jars in the "science area," and animals that were encountered on field trips or walks outdoors often became the subject of journal entries or classroom discussions. More abstractly, nonhuman animals were often present as plastic figurines meant for children to use as dramatic play props; in the illustrated pages of picture books, as line drawings on worksheets; or in photographs in the reference books in the science area.

In the data mappings the children and I constructed, however, the adult-sanctioned roles of classroom animals did not figure as "important things" of classroom life. What the children did highlight were the ways in which different more-than-human animals emerged *between* children and these more "official" nonhuman elements of curriculum. What follows are cartographies – presented in no particular order – in which I and several children attempt to visualize and narrate the complexities of the (im)proper classroom animal, the more-than-human *beast*, as it emerged within and through particular material-discursive circumstances of this classroom.

Child-Crab-as-Beast

The Crab Story originated when Paige meticulously chewed two pretzels into the shape of a turtle and a crab, respectively, one morning during snack time. As we sat in a small conference room – talking, drawing, and examining the photos we had taken in the classroom – Paige would tell the final version of the Crab Story, articulating what it meant to become a *beast* and how these beastly, more-than-human ways of knowing and being might emerge and retreat:

> Paige: *I think everyone should know the Crab Story. Put that in (the research). Once there was a turtle named Shelby. And he found a big island and he had it all to himself. But there*

was also a crab. And they fighted. And the crab said, "This is my island!" and Shelby said, "This is my island! I saw it with my own huge eyes before you were even a crab." Paige came and said, "I'm going to stop this argument right now!" So she chomped the crab and he went right into

her tummy. But then she had a spell on her and she turned into a little crab and walked all around the sand. And then a giant wave came and BOOM. . .washed away.

Casey: *Did you. . .I mean, the crab. . .get washed away?*

Paige: *I did, but. . .I'm not a real crab, like for real.*

Casey: *You were a crab in the story or. . .?*

Paige: *Because I just know. . .you can't turn into a whole animal. Like, when I was a crab, I was just being a crab with a spell. Not all the way.*

Casey: *So, just walking like a crab?*

Paige: *Well. . .you know Beauty and the Beast? Beast is a man inside and it's a spell.*

Casey: *Didn't a witch cast a spell on him or something?*

Paige: *Something. . . so he is a man and then a beast and then a man. But he was still a man while he was the Beast. . .because he would talk and wear clothes.*

Casey: *So he just looked like a beast?*

Paige: *I don't know. . .he did beast stuff. He was mean and I think he ate people. . .because he had really sharp teeth. He did some beast stuff and some man stuff at*

the same time because he remembered being a man. But he had to turn back into a whole man because the spell was broken. That's a beast.

Casey: *So. . .were you. . .a beast?*

Paige: *I'm pretty sure I was because I was still a girl, but I was moving like a crab after I ate him up. I was like a crab but not a WHOLE crab. Like. . .I knew how to be a crab and how to be a human. At the same time.*

When we returned to the classroom, the rest of the children were outside on the playground. With the classroom to herself, Paige took the opportunity to show me how she could become a beast – part crab, part girl. She sat down on the carpet and lifted herself off the ground with her hands and feet. As she "crab-walked" around the carpet, I took her photo and she asked me to come closer. As I approached her, she raised one arm like a pincer and reached for my ankle, grasping at me with her "claw" and making a chomping sound with her mouth. I let out a yelp and I jumped back; Paige giggled, collapsed out of her crab posture onto her back, and called to me. "Case-Case! Get over here!" She crawled over to me on all fours and pinched me playfully on my leg. At that moment two children arrived in the classroom and invited her outside to play chase. She got up quickly and followed them outside (on two legs).

Paige's explanation and demonstration of becoming crab indeed mirrored Disney's animated version of *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) – the French fairytale in which an arrogant young man transformed into a human-animal hybrid until the spell is broken by true love. In Paige-Crab's case, when the specific material-discursive conditions are right for a *spell* – be it ingesting a crab-shaped pretzel or having an empty classroom in order to play rough on the

carpet – she was able to become a *beast*, doing both Paige stuff and crab stuff. As all of the children has some familiarity with the animated tale, the beast became the way in which we conceptualized the many lines of connection that emerged throughout children's animal becomings – the material-discursive entanglements from which these beastly spells emerge, what child and animal "stuff" makes itself known therein, and the conditions under which these hybrid beasts retreat.

Child-Butterfly-as-Beast

Rosa closely examined several series of photos I had taken of her engaged with plastic insect figures. I noticed she frequently chose to play with the basket of plastic insects during morning exploration time; I had taken several photos that (re)constructed her engagement with a particular blue and purple butterfly.

While examining these photos closely, she gave the following account:

Rosa: *That's my butterfly. . .my favorite one. There is another purple and blue (butterfly) that looks like mine, but it has little spots on it. I don't like that one as much.*

Casey: *Why not?*

Rosa: *Um. . .I just like this one better. I think I actually rubbed the spots off because I like to hold it and rub it. Purple and blue are my favorite colors. Do you know why? My blanket that I've had since I was a baby is purple and white and it smells like cotton candy. It is made with holes in every spot. Do you know that kind?*

Casey: Crochet? Is it made of yarn?

Rosa: Yes, I think. But it smells so good! I rub, rub, rub and then wait a little bit.

Casey: *What are you waiting for?*

Rosa: *I'm just thinking. . .about cotton candy, actually, and my blanket and my mom and dad. Then I jump! And fly over to the next thing I'm going to do. You didn't take a picture of that part. See how. . .I land in the plant for a while and rest. I put my butterfly in the branches and get inside. And do like. . .a butterfly rest*. [Zooming in to examine the leaves of the plant more closely in the photo] *I can't see my butterfly in there. . .I did put her in there though. Butterflies are really fragile so they need to rest*. [Laughing] *I look just like a butterfly in that plant! That's funny to me.*

Casey: *I remember that you asked me to take that photo.*

Rosa: *I wanted to see if I really looked like a butterfly.*

Casey*: Because you're resting?*

Rosa*: Yes, but. . .you know what? You didn't even notice me flying! I can flap really fast and go pretty far, actually.*

Casey: *I need to watch more carefully. Are you going to fly again sometime soon?*

Rosa: [Spreading her arms wide] *This is how butterflies say, "yes."*

After our first discussion about becoming a butterfly, I did notice instances of Rosa "flying" around the classroom, usually during the morning exploration period. Becoming butterfly began with a search for "her" purple and blue butterfly. If her butterfly was used for "decoration" on another child's structure, as many insect

figures often were, she would broker a trade or switch her butterfly out without notice. Once she had her butterfly in hand, she held it tight for a few minutes and then allowed it to rest in one of the sturdier leaves of the classroom plant. Next, she would step onto the building platform and launch herself into the air.

In an effort to document her flight patterns, Rosa-as-butterfly would tug gently on my shirt or tap my shoulder to let me know she was about to fly. I'd feel the familiar tap or tug and turn around to just in time to snap a photo of her in flight. When viewing these photographs, she delighted in the blurred image she imparted upon the screen and narrated the ways in which her flight patterns were influenced.

Rosa: *I'm so fast! I'm flying. . .you can barely see!*

Casey: *You're blurry. . .The camera has a hard time making a clear photo when you fly that fast.*

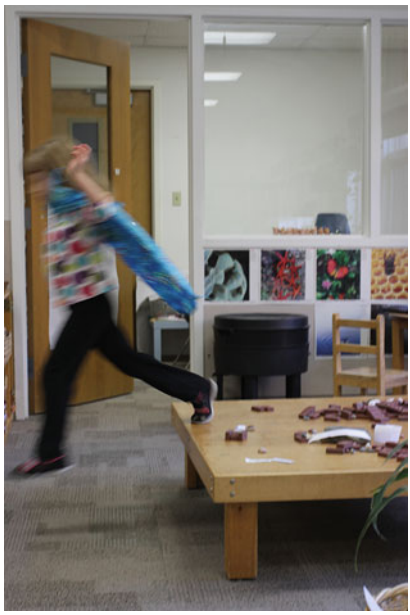
Rosa: *Well, the platform is the best spot. I like to take off from the platform mostly because it is just the right size. It's my. . .a butterfly surface. If I tried to fly from on top of the table or something it wouldn't be. . .you could get in trouble.*

Casey: *Why?*

Rosa: *I just try to fly really fast so no one sees me. You aren't allowed to run around the classroom, but I know how to fly so I won't get hurt. And I don't really want to touch the actual ground, so I fly from surface to surface if I can, but some blocks you can't land on or they will break. But I don't even think [other people] can see me. . .I'm so blurry.*

Rosa-as-butterfly's flight was entangled, not only with the plastic butterfly figure, the sense memories it imparted, and her knowledge of butterflies and the classroom plants but also with classroom spaces and materials, the rules for their use, and my camera's ability to reconstruct the flight visually. Her patterns of flight

were further complicated when a basket of fabrics was introduced to the classroom. These fabrics, particularly ones with blue and purple patterns, allowed Rosa to become more butterfly than before, thus presenting challenges to the human classroom space.



Rosa: *I like this one because I have butterfly wings on.*

Casey*: What do those do?*

Rosa: *Well, I usually try to get this blue one. . .or one with blue and purple when I am ready to do butterfly, um, flying.*

Casey*: And then what?*

Rosa: *I tie it around like this [motions around her neck with her hands] and, well, sometimes I need a teacher to help with that part and then I flutter. . .and that means move like. . .the wing part. It makes it like a fan almost. Like. . .*[fanning me with her hands]

Casey: *Oh, right. I can feel a little breeze from you right now. That's how your wings work?*

Rosa: *The wings make a breeze and that helps you to fly. My mom even told me.*

Casey: *So fabrics make your wings and that helps with your flying.*

Rosa: *It makes me faster, but sometimes I have to wait if someone else is using it. Or if someone wants what you have. . .your fabric. . .then it can be a disagreement because I just want these ones for the butterfly.*

Casey*: What happens if there is a disagreement?*

Rosa: *The fabrics get put away in the office and then no one gets to use them. Or if someone says, "You can jump off of there!" then I have to stop. . .just take off the fabric and make a good choice.*

Casey: *Being a butterfly isn't a good choice? Or flying isn't. . .*

Rosa: *Not really. It's fine for me, but that's why I have to be really fast. So no one can say, "stop!"*

The fabric wings not only allowed her to become more butterfly in color, but also in movement ("flutter") and effect ("breeze"). But there were instances that I observed in which Rosa was told to stop flying, either by other children or adults. As she said, having to stop flying was often the result of either a disagreement between children or when she wasn't fast enough to not be seen by adults who disapproved of her using the wooden platform as a launch pad/butterfly surface. In these instances, removing the fabric and, thus, becoming less butterfly were positioned as the better choice.

Given constraints of space, material resources, and adult idea(l)s about acceptable movement, Rosa would sometimes fly without the plastic figure, her plant resting place, the wooden platform, or the fabric wings. For example, several large boulders were partially buried in a small grassy slope on the playground. Rosa would often ask me watch her while she "flew" from rock to rock during the morning outdoors time. While engaged with these photos later, she commented on what was lost and gained when flying in this different way.

Rosa: *Going from rock to rock is. . .a better choice.*
You don't get in trouble for the flying part. But it's not really. . .it's less good.
Casey: *Why less good?*
Rosa: *I can't go high and land on the wood. See how my hands are wrapped up?*
Casey: *Inside your sleeves.*
Rosa: In case I fall on a rock. And you can't take the [plastic] butterflies outside or the fabrics! And there isn't a tree rest. But there are flowers for butterflies outside, but not for a long time. You can fly, but it's not so real, actually.

Jumping from rock to rock was a more proper way to become butterfly, at least according to adults. But this "better choice" for a human student was "less good" for a beastly butterfly. Rosa was a "less good" version of her butterfly-self without the smell of cotton candy, the press of the plastic figure in her hand, the flutter of fabric around her shoulders, and the wooden platform under her feet.

Child-Snake-as-Beast

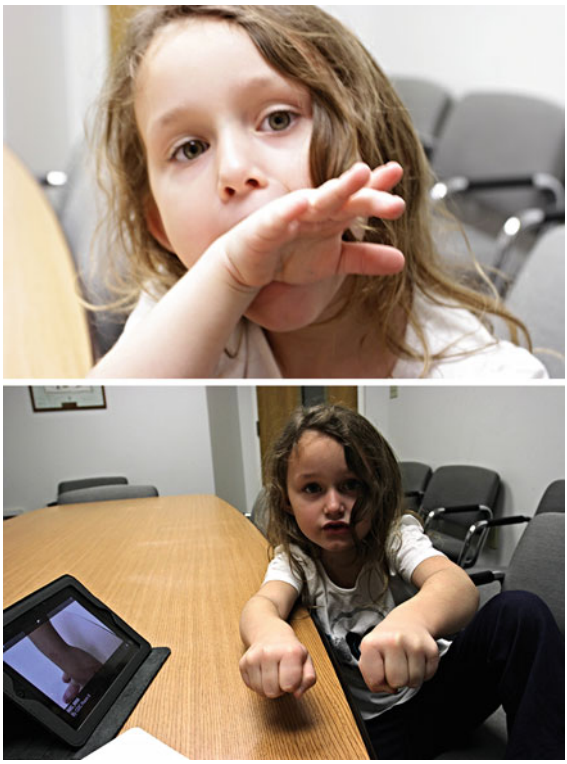
Two distinct ways of becoming snake emerged within the classroom. Although each of these child-snakes emerged through quite different material-discursive events, each would be understood through movements toward and enactments of inhabitation – of something or someone getting *inside*.

Nia Becomes Snake

I arrived in the classroom one morning in mid-September to news that a small snake had bitten Nia while the she played on the playground the day before. Nia was quick

to show me the oval pattern of marks the snake's jaws had left on her skin and allowed me to photograph her wrist with my camera. For several weeks afterward, many children engaged in various retellings of the events leading up to the moment of the snakebite and Nia often corrected their version of the story. Nia offered this retelling of what happened when she engaged with the snake:

> Nia: *This is how the story goes: I was on the Playground and I saw this baby snake. I picked him up and I wasn't even afraid. I've known how to hold a snake since I was three because I've done it before. And then some kids came over. I held the snake out for them to see they all started screaming. And I said, "Stop! Be quiet!" But they didn't stop. The snake put his head up in the air and opened his mouth three times. And then another time. He dove down and put his mouth right onto my wrist. I shook and shook and shook him off and everyone was still screaming and the snake crawled away. I don't know if I cried or not. I washed it and put a Band-Aid on it. And I don't know what's gotten into me, but I'm guessing it's snake germs. That snakebite. . .I am part snake.* Casey: *Part snake? Why?*
>
> Nia: *Because at night, when my parents think I'm sleeping I get down. . .lay one the floor. And then I* [makes a hissing sound] *all around until I'm done. Because, look* [holding out her arms]. . .*those two dots are scar dots. It, like, irritated my veins. See how they are green?*



Nia's transformation into a human-snake hybrid not only urged her to behave in a certain way but also imparted her with a certain fund of expertise – a kind of snake wisdom – that others would call upon for various purposes. For example, she was asked by the outdoor education teacher to talk with children from other classrooms

about "what happened with the snake." The purpose of these meetings was twofold: to give other children advice on keeping their distance from wild animals, both for their own safety and the safety of the animal, and to instruct children on how to properly hold a snake should the opportunity arise. During these meetings, Nia's expertise was framed as the result of her social history (e.g., the *choices* she made that allowed her to be bitten and the *lessons* she had since learned). In less structured human-snake engagements, such as when a small group of children encountered a small lifeless snake during an excursion just outside the playground fence, Nia's peers called upon her to be the *first* one to touch the snake because "she knew about snakes."

However, in our photo-doings, Nia noted that her previous social experiences as a child-among-snakes couldn't be separated from her current beastly self that was inhabited by snake germs. She also didn't simply see her expertise as a consequence of interacting with the snake incorrectly and, thus, learning important lessons about snake handling, nor did she view her familial relationship to snakes as uniformly positive.

> Nia: *You know what? This bite made me remember that when I was three, I found a snake egg on the playground and I carried it all over. And then I put a bunch of, like, sticks and grass on it to keep it warm and then I hid it. I think maybe (the snake that bit me) was that snake just as a grown up. And I think it remembered me. I didn't want him to bite me,*

but he didn't listen to me because I wasn't even a snake then. And he was afraid. And I was afraid because everyone was screaming. So it was both of us. This is making my wrist itch from the inside!

Casey: Where the snake bit you?

Nia: Oh, yeah...like you know when we found the little dead snake? I poked with the stick and flipped it over. And Matar and Petal were scared and I wasn't scared because it was dead and just laying there. But, like...my wrist was itching and itching and that can be a...little problem.

Casey: *The itching is the problem?*

Nia: *It does itch...but, like, I have snake on the inside, so whenever I see snakes, think about snakes, it keeps itching.*

According to Nia, becoming part snake endowed her with abilities, sensations, and memories, and both she and the snake were responsible for these things in various ways. While Nia was seen as some kind of snake expert, the snake continued to make itself known to Nia through physical sensations. To Nia, these sensations meant not that she was simply constructing knowledge from the outside in, but, since she now had "snake on the inside," she was becoming more snake from the inside out.

Elizabeth Becomes Snake

I often photographed the children engaging with baskets of fabrics during morning exploration time. A group of children would typically call me over, not only to allow me photograph their engagements with the fabrics but also to request my help in their efforts to tie fabrics around their waists or shoulders if their play necessitated it. With these particular animal-printed fabrics tied around their shoulders and waists or draped around their heads, Elizabeth, Lauren, Petal, Krissa, Clara, and Paige engaged in various animal enactments, such as growling, crawling on all fours, mooing, meowing, oinking, hissing, etc. Children who wanted to engage in this, but found themselves without a fabric to wear, would often take on roles of humans, specifically the "pet owners" of the various fabric-clad animals.

Elizabeth in particular created elaborate animal plays with these fabrics, often becoming more animal than kindergartener – spending the entire morning exploration period under spell of the fabric. When she examined images of these beastly events later, she remarked on the ways in which she emerged as a snake.

Elizabeth: *See what I'm doing with that fabric? Ssss! That's how they smell. They don't have a nose, so that's how they smell.*

Casey: *By hissing?*

Elizabeth: Yeah. I can do that really good. Really good because of these missing teeth... [She slides her tongue in and out of the space where her primary teeth used to be.]

Casey: *I've seen snakes do that with their tongue.*

Elizabeth: *And they...like, they have a tail that, like, shatters.*

Casey: *What's shatter?*

Elizabeth: *That means when they are scared they shatter their tail to say, "Get away from me!" They have a special shatter tail* [moving hand back and forth to simulate a rattling motion]. *And I could just do that.*

Casey: *Shatter like a snake tail?*

Elizabeth: *Well, we were playing a game and I became the pet with that fabric…* [Laughing] *and I was the worst pet they ever had! I shattered my tail all over…I was very scary. I would not like a pet snake or a pet alligator but being one is okay. I would not like to have a lake house, but I don't even do so it's not really a problem. But anyway, the fabric…it flattens out very easily and silky, so it's a…I love that it feels like a snake on my body. I could actually sleep with it.*

Casey: *Sleep with a snake?*

Elizabeth: *Not a sleep with a snake…be a snake and sleep IN it. Like, when stuff is so soft, I love it so much. And I could curl up, stay asleep…it's so cozy. But if you slept with a snake it would always be "Sss!" and it would be waking me up all the time. But if you were a snake it wouldn't even matter to you. Like, do you have a pet?*

Casey: *I have a dog and a cat.*

Elizabeth: *Well, then sometimes you know if you have a crack in your door your cat will come in, and just bother you? Or, like, scratching at the door?*

Casey: *Oh, yeah! My cat does that a lot at night.*

Elizabeth: *That's how pets can bother you. If you are a snake you don't care because you're just "Ssss!" all night long and you love it!*

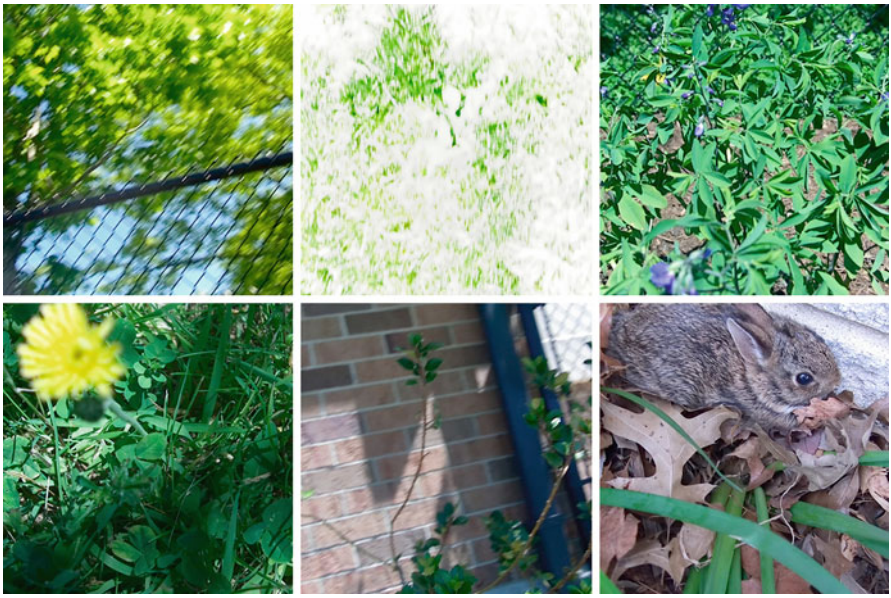
Casey: *You love being a snake…*

Elizabeth: *I do not! Just inside a fabric. A snake fabric is like being a snake inside a snakeskin that's a cozy feeling to a snake. I could shatter my tail and just get really cozy!*

For Elizabeth, becoming more snake than human was the key tolerating snake behavior. Elizabeth didn't particularly want to be in the company of a snake and recognized that Elizabeth-snake was the "worst" kind of pet, but she did enjoy *being* a snake in many ways. Becoming cozy inside the fabric snakeskin afforded a kind of comfort with snake behavior – hissing without feeling annoyed, shattering one's tail – that would otherwise be impossible. Just as Nia had become a snake "from the inside" due to "germs," Elizabeth also became a snake when the introduction of animal-print fabrics to the classroom allowed a kind of *interiority* to materialize. In this case, the properties of the fabric gave Elizabeth the opportunity to "get inside" and feel "cozy," which mobilized her beastly snake becomings.

Child-Bunny-As-Beast

One morning in April, I heard several shrieks and unintelligible, hurried talking coming from the small courtyard just outside the classroom. As Lauren rushed inside to grab the cameras, she told me there were two baby bunnies in the flowers. When I arrived in the courtyard, several children were in crouched positions near the beds, lifting the layers of dead leaves and carefully peeking to see if baby bunnies were hiding underneath, while others were talking loudly, either trying to tell others to come and see the bunnies or warning younger children to stay away. One tan bunny about the size of a teacup darted away through the courtyard, across the grassy area, and under the perimeter fence. A few children chased after, pointing their cameras wildly and clicking the shutters over and over again, trying to "catch" the bunny's image as it disappeared from sight. The other bunny remained – wide-eyed and still in the leaves of the flowerbed.



Teachers calmly convinced most children to keep their distance so as not to stress the animal any further. In spite of these warnings, Matar and Nia returned to the beds several times to take photos of the remaining bunny. Each time, they would squat low to the ground and approach the flowerbed as quietly as possible, shuffling on all fours; it struck me in that moment how much the tiny bunny impacted the girls' motion and how their movements. They had emerged somewhere in-between "child" and "bunny," and this had a dual effect. They were less likely to be noticed by teachers as they defied the orders that the other children had to obey and they were also less likely to scare the bunny into fleeing the flowerbed as the other children had done.

While other children were given warnings and chastised for getting too close or being too loud near the frightened animal, Matar and Nia moved stealthily in

and out of the bunny's territory – taking photos, avoiding adults' verbal corrections. I sketched them quickly in my notebook until the call of the morning bell began the official school day, breaking the spell.

A few days later, while Matar and I were examining the photos that had been taken during the bunny event, I showed her the drawings in my notebook.

Matar: *What? Is that me? Why?*

Casey: *Yes. . .I was really trying to notice how you moved toward the bunny. You're crouching . . .it seemed like that was a good way to move.*

Matar: *Move how?*

Casey: *Like, crouching. . .*

I try to make myself smaller in my seat, ducking my head and pulling my arms and legs to midline.

Matar: *Crouching. . .when you. . . crouching, you are more small to the ground, so the bunny is not so scared because you are not such a scary person to him. Like, so you won't kill him, you won't hurt him, he's not scared.*

Casey: *You were being very careful and quiet.*

Matar: *A bunny is so quiet, so you can be quiet.*

She giggles and pulls her hands up near her face, mimicking the ways bunnies clean their faces and ears with their paws.

Casey: *Ah! A little bunny! I've seen them move just like that.*

She takes a soft lead pencil and adds ears and paws to the drawing in my notebook and holds it up for me to see.

Matar: *You say, "Are you a little bunny now?" and I say* [putting her hands on her head, fingers up, mimicking the small ears of a bunny, laughing]. . .*okay, that's it.*

Just as Matar had done, Lauren and Nia explored this kind of beastly bunny movement as we assembled our data. During one particular event, Nia and Lauren

had created lists of important classroom events and were debating with each other whether or not those events were represented within the many photos that the children had taken with their cameras and how these might be arranged within the cartographies of the research "book." As they began to discuss the morning on the playground that the bunnies appeared and the images that were constructed of that event, they grappled with the ways in which bunny movement was constructed in/as images.

Nia: [Writing] *Okay, now, the most important thing to me lately is the baby bunny. I can't write that so I am just going to. . .*

She stops writing conventionally and draws a tiny bunny as an item on her list.

Casey: *That was important to Matar, too.*

Nia*: It was so cute. I think it was really scared of us, so it was just afraid to move even though we were trying to be quiet.*

Casey: *We talked about that. . .how it was important to stay very quiet around the bunny.*

Nia: *It was like. . .froze.*

Lauren: *But the cool thing is. . .it didn't even move. Bunnies never do that!*

Casey: *Do you think it was because you were moving so slowly and quietly?*

Lauren: *I think that the thing. . .what's important is that it was staying still and not hopping around so I could even take that photo. Because I tried to get a photo of the other one and all I got was like blurry. . .like grass.*

Nia: *Well, look at it now. . .it's going to hop all over our list!*

She draws some jagged lines at the top of the paper. Her hand bounces up and down wildly, mimicking the quick and unpredictable movements of the baby bunny.

Nia: *I'm making you, Lauren, and you're a little. . .little bunny.*

She draws Lauren and then continues the jagged lines into her body and down her legs. Both girls begin to laugh.

Lauren: *Ah! Why did you do that? That's weird!*

Nia: [Crossing her arms, smirking] *Well, if you're going to be a bunny, you are going to hop around on your legs!*

After we finished the list, the girls and I walked back to the classroom and arrived just in time for the daily patterning activity. Each morning, one or two children would assist the teacher in leading the class through a sequence of movements while counting up to the present day of the month. For example, if the date was the 15th, the children might choose a "two pattern" of "clap, jump" and then proceed to see if the pattern could fit evenly into the number 15. On this particular day, the child who was creating the pattern with the teacher was having trouble deciding on which movements to choose. Eager to begin, many children shouted suggestions.

Margaret: *Spin!*

Rosa: *Stomp!*

Nia: *Bunny hop! Bunny hop!*

Some of the children laugh and then join in her request, chanting until "bunny hop" is chosen as the third movement in the pattern. The children count aloud, bunny-hopping in unison.

Nia: [To me] *Make sure you take a picture of this.*

After the morning meeting had ended, Nia asked to view the photos I had taken of the bunny hop. As she viewed them on the camera's screen, we engaged in an

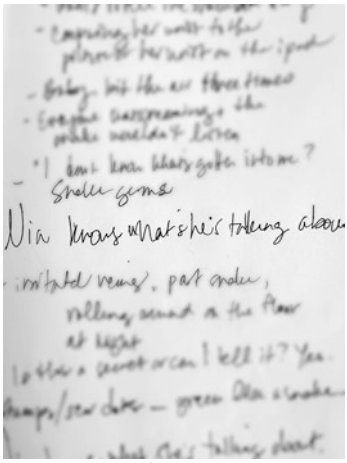
impromptu event of photo-doing, while the other children were busying themselves with transitioning to their morning work choices. While engaging with the images, Nia remarked on the limitations of our methods – the difficulties of constructing and critiquing static images of these kindergarten "beasts" when movement was a crucial way being-becoming – as well as the ways in which these more-than-human animals emerged within a variety of bodily desires, material forces, curricular constraints, and social expectations.

Nia: *It's blurry...this one, not so much.*
Casey: *You were moving pretty fast, so it's hard for the camera to make a clear photo.*
Nia: *I was trying to really hop like a bunny because never had a picture of that part.*
Casey: *Right – you said the bunny being able to hop was important, so...*
Nia: *But actually... if we wanted to really be a bunny, we shouldn't have been up so much*. [She crouches, pulling her arms and legs in] *But you can't crawl around in the classroom because that's not okay to do. That would be too...crazy. But it's more down.*
Casey: *It didn't feel like a bunny to do it that way? Up?*
Nia: [Popping up to a standing position] *It really felt like a bunny to hop like that...but it doesn't look like it. You can't really see it on there.*

Being-becoming bunnies – and all kindergarten beasts – was paradoxical in this way. Our means of rendering beasts visible was never adequate, as the kindergarten beast was always somewhere in-between, never still nor static, as classroom forces and the processes of our research, in various ways, caused beasts to emerge and retreat.

Conclusion (or Taking the Beast Seriously)

Imperative to inquiry grounded in a new materialist onto-epistemology is that children's ideas are not necessarily fantastical misunderstandings or egocentric projections, but articulations of classroom life that are tuned in to material-discursive entanglement. I found that entertaining this possibility required engaging with what children *said* seriously and affirmatively. This posthuman orientation toward their perspectives on relationships, events, bodies, and feelings of significance required an acceptance that children know what they're talking about. Despite positioning myself within a posthuman worldview, this was not a task that came easily, and the pull toward overinterpreting and analyzing what children "actually meant" during these moments was strong; All of these beastly emergences pulled me toward humanist interpretation. As a countermeasure to (and out of frustration with) my humanist interpretive tendencies, I began writing "(child) knows what he's/she's talking about" in my notebook whenever I noticed myself considering that a child's perspective might be borne out of their ignorance and inexperience rather than their expertise and astute awareness.



As simple as this tactic seems, materializing this affirmation on the page was generative in two important ways. First, it caused me to pause and literally do/become something different when I might have otherwise assumed, interrupted, or asked an unnecessary question. This practice pulled me onto the page. Second, it helped me to confront children's ways of knowing that were troubling and alerted me to the complex and confounding nature of their entanglements with animals. These would become touchstone moments of rupture – the very "patterns of differences that make a difference" (Barad, 2012, p. 49 in Dolphijn & van der Tuin). These very becomings ended up being the "important things" that children wanted included in the research. What they needed from me as a researcher was for me "to take seriously the things and actions with which they encounter their worlds. . ." (Rautio, 2013, p. 4).

How might engaging with classroom beasts as a complex, real-life event for young children allow us to consider alternatives to the traditional roles allocated for animals within early years curriculum? I argue that taking children at their word and engaging *seriously* and *affirmatively* with these child-animal hybrids – these *beasts* – may open generative spaces for animals within the early years curriculum. With regard to children's socio-emotional development, there are ways in which animals might be both included and reconsidered. For example, classroom beasts may afford a different perspective on the ways in which children work against, around, and within adult rules and expectations. In beastly events wherein Rosa-butterfly, Nia-bunny, and Matar-bunny emerged, their beastly movements and choices came up against the idea(l)s of teachers, though it was never clear if these adults understood the complex animal forces at work. From adults' perspective, it was the children alone who were either complying with the rules or not. Additionally, the commonsense understandings of the ways in which animals impact the socio-emotional landscape of classrooms might shift, allowing us consider that a uniformly positive view of animals in the classroom is an oversimplification of children's experiences. For both Nia and Elizabeth, the complex emotions, sensations, and identities around snakes were neither uniformly positive nor negative. With regard to

children's intellectual development, the popular use of animals as specimens within this classroom didn't figure into children's discussions, drawings, or photos of "important things." What mattered to children seemed to be the ways in which child-animal relations entered into their everyday academic practices, such as when a bunny upended the use of conventional writing to create a list or when a few children convinced the entire class to hop like bunnies during their patterning exercises. Moreover, just as Nia noted in the final movements of her bunny becomings, what emerges between children and animals in the classroom may not be available for neat capture – neither through taxonomies and hierarchies of scientific thinking nor through the static images of a digital camera.

Beyond animal's supposed utility for social and intellectual growth, children are living classroom lives intimately enmeshed with animals in delightful and disturbing ways. I acknowledge that is an impossible task to "to fully understand, organize or capture the essence of these material-discursive intra-activities" (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 540). Even so, it seems a worthwhile endeavor to allow the things that matter to children to move those of us who engage in early years work toward unthought-of possibilities and potentials. To this end, I can't conclude this beastly work with answers, only questions that might push our thinking-doing with young children in new and multiple directions. Does the notion of "child-animal relations" itself need rethinking, as the beasts that emerged through these research assemblages suggest a hybridity that overruns the stable categories of "child" and "animal"? Furthermore, how might saying "yes" to the complex ways in which children articulate their experiences, relationships, and everyday encounters in their classroom worlds reaffirm the agential force of children, and of all things in their midst – living, nonliving, human, animal, or whatever more-than-human beastly configuration that emerges in between?

Cross-References

- ▶ Challenging Taken-for-Granted Ideas in Early Childhood Education: A Critique of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in the Age of Post-humanism
- ▶ Unearthing Withling(s): Children, Tweezers, and Worms and the Emergence of Joy and Suffering in a Kindergarten Yard

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