

Chapter 11

Ecological Posthumanist Theorising: Grappling with Child-Dog-Bodies

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Introduction

The power of the human/nature divide is that it positions humans as ‘exceptional’ and outside of nature, while at the same time seeking to invite nature in by using its tyrannous colonising domination (Cronon, 1995). Some could argue that it is this very sentiment that has led humanity on such a destructive path with the planet ending up in these precarious and uncertain times. And while research on children’s environments, environmental and sustainability education often addresses some of the contradictions between the needs of humans in relation to the survival of the planet, the theoretical work accompanying much of this research has found it difficult to shift from a form of human exceptionalism and domination. In this chapter I intend to share with the reader my grapplings when applying new approaches of theorising research, namely ecological posthumanism, in my children’s environments research studies. By doing this I am looking to move away from generalisations and assumptions that universalise children’s environmental experiences and provide a glimpse of the complexity of a common world of ecological communities that includes all things. Also through an ecological posthumanist lens I have been considering a re-imagining of the transitional potential for environmental education and education for sustainability by revealing the messiness of these human/nature relations. Taking on the challenge presented by Kalof, Zammit-Lucia, Bell and Granter (2016, p. 204) that a “holistic approach is necessary in responding to the environmental crisis, and since many forms of human, animal, and environmental injustices are interconnected, it is important to consider animals in environmental education”. That is, I am asking myself could there be possibilities for imagining new educational traditions that could be a catalyst for enacting new ecological and

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posthuman pedagogies? Pedagogies that are built on entirely new ontological subjectivities that allow humans to re-think what it means to engage with the more-than-human world as an ecological community. To perform this work I am considering the potential of ecological posthumanist approaches to support a re-thinking of the idea of subjectivities in order to question binaries such as human/nature, subject/object. In particular, I am ruminating on the work of Rosi Braidotti (2013) and specifically her thesis in the book *The Posthuman* where she identifies the vision of posthumanism as having three central elements: the development of new subjectivities; the embracing of a posthuman ethics; and, the construction of an affirmative posthumanist politics. Braidotti argues all three of these elements are required for the construction of a sustainable alternative future. In this chapter, I focus in particular on the first of these elements – the development of new subjectivities as the means for decentring the human.

Anthropocentric Predicament

According to current debates in Earth Sciences, the planet is in a new epoch, a new geological era where humans have become the single most significant global force in determining the future of the planet. They have named this the epoch the ‘Anthropocene’ (Crutzen, 2002). The call of the Anthropocene and its implications challenges us to consider new ways of thinking, knowing, and acting in our everyday lives; how we engage with the world and how the world engages with us. According to Lorimer (2012) “it represents a very public challenge to the modern understanding of Nature as a pure, singular and stable domain removed from and defined in relation to urban, industrial society” and that “[t]his understanding of Nature has been central to western and environmental thought and practice” (p. 593). While considering a new relationship with the more-than-human world is not new, deep ecologist, indigenous philosophies also have presented alternative ways of being with and relating to ‘nature’. There has been recently a lot of interest in theorising through posthumanist approaches across a range of disciplines and fields, and in particular the field of children’s environments.

By engaging with ecological posthumanist approaches I am seeking to navigate “across the stormy waters of the postanthropocentric predicament” (Braidotti, 2013, pp. 86–87). This perspective opens up possibilities for re-thinking the notion of subject-object relations and well established binaries such as the nature/culture binary. I am particularly interested in considering what happens if we decentre the human, if we foreground those elements of the research environment that often just act as a ‘context’ or ‘background’ to understandings of child in relation to nature. I ask of myself and the data in this work: “What if the hierarchical positioning of the human was questioned” where the key strategy or approach to our theorising was to consider “non-separatist and non-purist ways of thinking and conversing about nature?” (Taylor, 2013, p. 66).

In this chapter I argue that rather than continuing to rely on nature/culture binaries when analysing the way children engage with the more-than-human world, if we consider new possibilities maybe there is a chance to think differently about sustainability and sustainability education? And if we are to decentre the human in our research, what new approaches for theorising the human/nature divide could provide ways to live with the planet differently, rather than to continue view ourselves as dominate over it? In particular, in this chapter I am documenting my struggle to do my work differently, to contemplate the difficulties and consequences of retrospectively applying ecological posthumanist approaches to previous studies of children in environments that weren't planned with this analysis in mind. As a researcher and author who advocates the value of children's engagement with the more-than-human world, I believe it is important to revisit my research and consider why binaries such as child/nature and subject/object have been so central to my framing of children experiences and relationship with nature. Therefore, rather than understanding my research as articulated from the modernists divides of human/culture, subject/object, child/nature as my previous work using socio-cultural theory had done, I challenge myself to grapple with the inconsistencies of a complex set of relations that can't be described in neat categories or pre-determined schemas. In this theoretical work I take up the challenge espoused by Taylor (2011) when she writes:

...in encouraging childhood scholars to engage with geography's hybrid nature/culture analytic, I am not seeking to provide an answer to the 'nature' of childhood but to open it up to a new form of political enquiry which attends to the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human world. (p. 432)

The purpose of the initial study and the tools used were focusing on inserting children's voices in the stories of community where they had previously been absent; my re-reading of the data has shifted this focus to one of decentring the human and bringing attention to the entanglement of all entities in these complex ecological communities.

Ecological Posthumanism

In my understanding and applying of a posthumanist perspective I am taking seriously the need to stop the 'anthropological machine' by contesting the production of absolute dividing lines between humans and other worldly matter. I am considering what it means to recognise the fragility and porosity of all matter and objects - not to collapse categories of objects entirely into each other but to bring to attention to the porousness of what has been viewed in the past as distinct boundaries and distinct entities. The purpose of using posthumanist theories is that it allows me to problematise the concept that humans are exempt from the 'ecological world'. An idea that somehow ecology and human are entirely distinct realms with humans being outside and/or exempt from any ecological consideration. Posthumanist

theories also allow me to consider what it means if I problematise the view humans are exceptional. Whether from a religious or humanist perspective, being exceptional allowed human communities to distinguish themselves as having a unique ethics, culture, and politics in which only they could participate. This meant 'being human' was central to, and the only legitimate way of, knowing the world. Both these positions assume what matters to humans is most important, and other species and objects matter less. Some might say, hasn't this been the work of deep ecologists for many years? And while I am sensitive to the theoretical work of deep ecologists who have critiqued human exceptionalism, they have mostly done this by alluding to the indirect knock on and systemic effect of an ecological crisis for humans. If there was, for example, mass extinction, environmental degradation, or climate change due to the impact of humans on the environment, it would indirectly compromise the capacity for humans to continue to exist. Therefore, I agree with Braidotti (2013) when she states deep ecology is potentially a regressive movement reminiscent of the sentimentality of the romantic phases of European culture. Using this framing the Earth is seen as deserving the same or equal ethical and political considerations as humans. When applied, this approach "humanizes the environment" and becomes "a well-meaning form of anthropomorphic normativity being applied to non-human planetary agents" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 85) According to Braidotti and others (Haraway, 2003, 2008; Smith, 2013) this does little to disrupt well-established human/nature, subject/object binaries. "Such difficulties", according to Mick Smith "are compounded by various (predominant) forms of human exemptionalism and exceptionalism that allow little or no space for considering other species as parts of the same community as ourselves at all" (p. 23).

The theory of ecological posthumanism I am wrestling with and exploring in my work, contests the arrogance of anthropocentric approaches – even those found in deep ecology by enabling a shared sense of the world. This enabling of a multiplicity of ecologies/beings defines community as central – the world is, and becomes, a community of beings. I am interested in incorporating the work of Smith (2013) here, who defines an ecological posthumanist perspective as a strategy for supporting his concept of an 'ecological community'.

This posthumanist ecological community emphasises the myriad of ways that beings of all kinds, including human individuals and collectives interact to create, sustain, or dissolve community. Others have also explored these ideas, such as Jean Luc Nancy (1997) stating we are always 'beings in common' (Smith, 2013) – bodies being sensed ecologically. Donna Haraway (2003, 2008), although not calling herself a posthumanist, has also discussed a new way to consider community in her work. She argues subject/object nature/culture divides are linked to patriarchal, familial narratives, and calls for an enlarged sense of community based on empathy, accountability, and recognition extending to the nonhuman as subjects such as cells, plants bacteria and the Earth as a whole. Therefore, to speak of ecological communities – that we are 'beings' objects and subjects in common – means we can't be exempt from the consequences of being in this common world with others. If we are not exempt or exceptional then we are exposed to same consequences of a changing planet and to each other in a variety of ways. This has been going on all the time,

but in my work I have tended to not notice it or be attentive to. This is the work I seek to do.

Therefore, in my theorising by drawing on ecological posthumanistic approaches I believe there is the “potential to contest the arrogance of anthropocentrism and the exceptionalism of the humans” (Braidotti, 2013, p. 66) because it allows me to support a process for redefining children’s entanglement with a shared world, to consider that they are a member of ‘multiple ecologies of belonging’. I hope to engage in this approach in order that the more-than-human ‘things’ and ‘materials’ become more than simply *objects* being directed and responding to children but that everything within the environment can be understood as *subjects* who exercise agency in their own right (Tipper, 2011). With the aim of disrupting the Cartesian divide between children and ‘nature’, I seek to question what in our educational and research work is ‘viewed as nature’, what is ‘valued about nature’, and what happens when children are ‘placed in nature’? In the defiance of a past idealised child/nature relationship I am employing new materialism and posthumanistic approaches, in order to open up the possibilities when agency is no longer the property of humans alone (Barad, 2007), this new materialist ontology “supplies a conception of agency not tied to human action, shifting the focus for social inquiry from an approach predicated upon humans and their bodies, examining instead how relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate affect and are affected” (Fox & Alldred, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, I am now considering if the child body becomes more than a ‘naturalised child’ if they are a product of the assemblages, associations and relationships through which humans are connected to the more-than-human world in diverse and complex ways, then how can I present my research in such a way to illustrate this? I am seeking to find the means to encapsulate the complexity of human and more-than-human world relations in my writing.

In this grappling of a retrospective engagement of ‘ecological posthumanism’, by re-imagining in a materialist manner I want to explore what Braidotti (2013) states as “the intricate web of interrelations that mark the contemporary subjects’ relationship to their multiple ecologies, the natural, the social, the physic” (p. 98). A feature of this new ontological perspective I am taking up is that “it shifts from conceptions of objects and bodies as occupying distinct and delimited spaces, and instead sees human bodies and all other material, social and abstract entities as relational” and that these “...assemblages of relations develop in unpredictable ways” (Fox & Alldred, 2014, p. 3).

To describe this work, I have composed an ecological posthuman narrative of child-dog-bodies as interspecies relations in La Paz. The data I used for the narrative came from research activities conducted with children in their local neighbourhoods, including photographs taken by children in their ‘everyday’ activities in their communities and the conversations they had with us about the images, and the second where mobile methods of data were collected while travelling through the landscape with our human child and more-than-human guides. Data included conversational interviews, photographs, and spatial recording and observations of the spaces.

Child-Dog (Bodies) in La Paz

La Paz is a city of 500 thousand dogs and one million children. The children and dogs I am researching live in the slum communities here, in the upper reaches of the valley. It is 2012, and after 2 days of travelling from Australia the plane comes to land at the El Alto, the plateau above the valley floor. With our final descent we do a sweep over the valley. La Paz city is laid out in front of us. While the question is still being debated as to whether we are in the age of the Anthropocene, where humans have made undeniable irremediable impact on the landscape, the call of Anthropocene feels very real looking across this great expanse of humanity.

My first encounter with a street dog in La Paz was on the first day of my research work. I had just arrived and was touring around the tourist mecca, a place called the Witch's market. The market is where you go to buy white baby llamas and other essential elements to use during the frequent Pachamama offerings. As I was walking around a small street dog started following me – I thought she could probably smell the food in my backpack or maybe she was accustomed to looking sweetly on tourists. I have to say I was smitten both by her familiarity with me and how she looked. I took a photo and sent a message with the photo to my two daughters in Australia: “I found Poppy's South American cousin”(Fig. 11.1).

Unlike my own pampered dog pet, Poppy, this street dog of La Paz experienced a lot of freedom. I was told later in conversations with the local children and adults, this freedom was understood as an ancient and respectful alliance: “she is free to do as she pleases as long as she doesn't get in the way”. She is neither pet, stray or wild; she is probably, loosely connected to a family, coming and going sometimes wandering into the crowded family yard but mainly living on the streets. Because

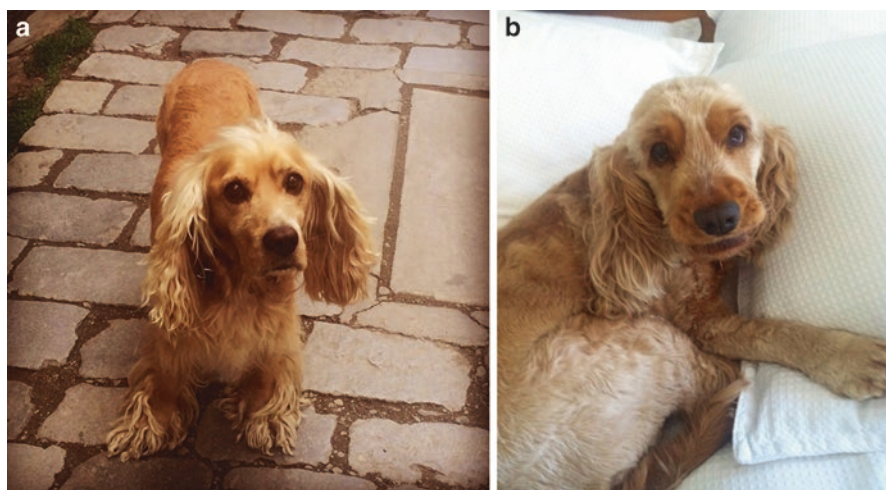


Fig. 11.1 (a) Street dog, La Paz, Bolivia (Author's photograph). (b) Author's dog, Poppy, Sydney, Australia (Author's photograph)

she may or may not have carers, she can go hungry, be abused, or left to die in the streets if she gets sick. Thinking of different ways of thinking about domesticated dogs (working dogs, pets, strays, ferals, community) dogs – she would likely be classified as a *community* dog. I am familiar with this idea of community dogs from my travels in Asia, Africa, and even in our own Indigenous communities. I have come across dogs in communities where, for thousands of years, they have been well regarded as a friend, guardian, and protector of humans. In Australia, for instance, there had been media discussions about the role of community or what is named as camp dogs in Indigenous communities, and how the wellbeing of the dogs was viewed as inextricably connected with the health of the humans. Camp dogs live in such close proximity with children that they both exchange each others diseases. The street dogs of La Paz are urban scavengers, not western-style, house-dwelling, middle class ‘family pets’, who as I came to realise through my research, spend long periods of time on the streets with the children.

Children and dogs relate to each a variety of ways. Unlike a western centric theorising of human-dog relations, which often sees the dog presented as a substitute dependent child, humans finding solace in the seemingly unconditional love from their dogs, the child-dog relations, and ‘being together’ in La Paz is more likened to Donna Haraway’s (2015) notion of ‘making kin’. The purpose of, or to make ‘kin’, according to Haraway, is to recognise the coming together of different entities who may not be tied purely by ancestry or genealogy. She argues the stretch and re-composition of kin represents the understanding that earthlings are all kin in the deepest sense – kin becomes the purest of entities in assemblages of the human, more-than-human, and other than human, and by the fact that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages” (Haraway, 2015, p. 162). Kin relationships emerge in this study as a deep sensitivity by the children when describing the similarities of the child-dog experiences.

During our time Diego showed me his photographs (Fig. 11.2) of stray street dogs, the ones he said often accompanied him while walking around the streets. In one of the photographs he had taken I could see a dog high up on a roof, alone looking down:



Fig. 11.2 (a) Roof: safe place to hide. (b) Dangers of being on the street (Photographs by Diego, age 12, Cotahuma)



Fig. 11.3 (a) Dumped rubbish. (b) Steep valley areas for play (Photographs taken by Juan, age 13, Cotahuma)

This photograph is of a dog that I take care of because it doesn't eat. The dogs are badly treated and the people beat them for no reason [pause] a bit like the children [he giggles as he looks at his photograph] sometimes we hide on the rooftops to be off the streets with the dogs.

“And the other photograph?” I asked him. “That is the dog that sometimes gets beaten, the streets are dangerous”. Children care for and feed street animals. They told me they felt distressed when dogs and children were treated badly by the adults or strangers in the neighbourhood.

Juan's photographs (Fig. 11.3) illustrate a child-dog journey far from neighbourhood streets into the upper reaches of the valley. The land is steep and, due to landslides and floods, dangerous. Rubbish is often dumped here. Coco, his dog, is playing in a large dumping area for household rubbish, rummaging for food: “I don't like rubbish and it makes it look bad and the dogs stop here”.

Describing his relationship with Coco, Juan states:

Coco was my best friend. He was near me, always he was near me. He hear me, he was always with me. He understand the things I want. He always comes with me into the forest to play. He is my play mate. He was the same as a human friend, it was no difference between us as friends.

The child and dog kin relation is a meeting of the other in all its fleshy detail. Their child-dog companion, the story of co-inhabitation, is an entangling of bodies. I start to see the child-dog body as connected.

Dogs take us on a walk—wandering through and between the cobble stone streets, they forage for food, bark at intruders, and humans walk behind watching. “They are our protectors, and our guides” state the children – dogs know the landscape intimately and sense the dangers. Children are closely attuned to the sensory perception of the dogs. It is an ancient alliance of dogs supporting human survival by their capacity to be alerted to, and have sensitivity for, the precarious landscape. The child-dog intra-action and cohabitation provides a space for this mutual reciprocity, care and protection, to be thrown together, living well together. Dog as companion to child, child as companion to dog, child-dog as protector. Karen describes her relationship with Bicho as one where together they assume the reciprocal role of protector and being protected: “I have a dog, his name is Bicho

and he takes care of me a lot, he protects me from other dogs, sometimes I protect him". While much of the myth of why dogs cohabitated with humans was based on the view that it was the human who domesticated the dog – it has become a more compelling argument to say that it was the dog who domesticated the human.

I am now reading biological information about dog species in the Americas on the internet. I find a picture of a 'bush dog' that lives in the Bolivian Amazon region. It is said to be the rarest dog in the world. One of few dogs in history that have never been domesticated, therefore it has no shared DNA with the dogs of the valley of La Paz. The Aymara people, like the bush dog, are an ancient people who have occupied Bolivia for somewhere between 800 and 5000 years ago. They have come to be entangled with the Quechuans and their dogs. As they advanced south from Peru increasing the Inca Empire in the fourteenth Century the Quechuans had with them Peruvian hairless dog. It is believed 15 % of modern Bolivian dogs carry the DNA of this ancient dog, a dog that has links to extinct Asian wolves possibly brought to South America over 12,000 years ago. But the community dogs in the streets of La Paz also tell a story of a postcolonial world, a different time and space frame. Ninety per cent of dogs in La Paz are linked through DNA to the Spanish conquest. Once countries like Bolivia were colonised, the gentry who arrived brought with them their gentry companion dogs – spaniels and poodles – both infamous Spanish water dogs. The study of dog gene diversity provides a history of peopling of the new world. My dog at home in Australia is a cocker spaniel, the dogs of La Paz are her kin; they share a common Spanish ancestry.

These child-dog ecological narratives are complicated, located across three time-space scales. First I am considering the historical spiritual dimensions and speaking to the co-evolution of companion species, and in the case of dogs the longest of evolutionary human and nonhuman animal relations, dating back for at least 15,000 years with the advent of ancient dogs being domesticated. The second is a postcolonial story, the Inca Empire from the North in the fifteenth century and then the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century. The Spanish who brought dogs domesticated within European traditions. The third time-space story is located within the everyday, at the scale of real bodies, where I as a researcher grapple to be attentive to the complexity of co-constituted and co-evolutionary historicity of interspecies relations while I inhabit the everydayness of child-dog relations. Child-dog-bodies a story of companion, kin, guide, and protector.

"Being with the world" is how Rautio (2013b) describes forming a different view of ourselves as human in relation to nonhumans:

[I]t is about realising that the relation is always already there, and as much influenced by behavior and existence of other co-existing species as it is by our actions. (Rautio, 2013b, p. 448)

The complexity of the child-dog relations of La Paz challenges me to consider what 'living well together' with a host of species and histories might contribute to a common world. Living well with animals, inhabiting their/our stories in order to reveal the complexity of cross-intra-species relationships. This work of theorising interspecies relations through an ecological posthumanist lens draws me to consider

a co-habitation of child-dog-bodies as an active history of body connectedness. The story of child-dog relations in La Paz is a cobbling together of ‘cross species’ conversations that take their inherited histories seriously. They are tied together by genealogy, a history of child-dog as bodies entangled on this land. I am reminded here of the studies of Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2015, p. 153) with raccoons and children, when they argue also of this inherited settler history, “The perceived nature/culture divide that the raccoons constantly challenge in the childcare centre is entangled in the inherited settler colonial histories of this mountain forest”. In my re-reading of child-dog relations in La Paz I have reoriented and brought together child-dog-bodies as a single entity, who in the messiness of daily life are located in an ancient knowing of animal kin and a more recent shared postcolonial connectivity.

Conclusion

In this difficult work I have been on a quest to imagine the complexity of a common world of ecological communities that include all things (human and more-than-human). Not by elevating all things to the status of exceptional human or de-elevating human to the status of object or things but by exploring political, ethical, and ontological questions that reveal the complexity of the human/nature, subject/object divide. I do this work in order to pay attention to the subtleties of relations formed as ‘kin’ in a shared ecological community of all beings who have in common a planet we co-habitat. The theorising I am retrospectively applying is played out in the messy, disordered landscapes of La Paz through a lens of ecological post-humanism that recognises the fragility and porosity of all matter and objects. I have tried not to collapse categories of objects entirely into each other but to bring attention to the porousness of what has often been viewed as distinct boundaries and distinct entities. Child-dog-bodies transgress the boundaries of the human/nature divide by challenging what it means to be living well together outside of adult human lives. By shifting away from the child as the central object of my gaze and being attentive to and noticing the nonhuman entities through which their world is being encountered, I am wondering can this theoretical work support a new imagining for sustainability and environmental education? In these precarious times I am considering can an approach of posthumanist ecological communities rather than deep ecology have the potential to be a new configuration for interspecies co-habitation? I am also trying, in recalling this ecological narrative of child-dog encounters, to consider the importance of applying “messy methodologies” (Rautio, 2013a, p. 403) in my reading of the data. That is, to recount data that does not fit into neat categories of certainty with closure; rather to explore possibilities where the “complexity and open-endedness of phenomena” are not sacrificed (Rautio, 2013a, p. 403). As Haraway (2015) insists “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections”, if we are to imagine or embrace “flourishing

rich multi-species assemblages” (p. 160). I am being greedy in my theoretical grappling.

By theorising through a posthumanist lens retrospectively I have been attempting to decentre the human and disrupt the idyllic view of child in nature. Maybe I have done neither of these jobs very well. It is an ongoing process to consider how to take research that has been developed using humanistic/child-centered methods and attempt to accomplish an ecological posthumanist re-reading. Beyond acknowledging the difficulties of the task, I believe even at a surface level what these studies illustrate is that nature/child encounters are difficult and complex, rather than restorative and idealistic, as is often proposed in the nature, environmental, and sustainability education literature. I am challenging the continued support for education that reinforces anthropocentrism and the exceptionalism of humans. A call to the Anthropocene in education for my work entices me to move away from sustainability and environmental education research that focuses directly on ‘getting children back into nature’ as if ‘nature’ exists solely as a restorative ‘resource’ for seemingly un-natured, disconnected children.

In this chapter I have utilised new ways of thinking and re-theorising my research in order to represent the complexity of relations over time and space, where children and the more-than-human world come to encounter one another through shared histories and everyday encounters. It supports the “ways that we might learn with, rather than about, other animals, in small ways and within our immediate and everyday common worlds” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, p. 3). I have explored these common worlding relational and materials aspects of child-animal, relations by decentring the human and embracing strategies of intra-action in new materialism to provide a re-reading of child-animal-earth-bodies that is outside of popular and dominant views that focus on an idealised view of children where children are ‘naturally’ and innately ‘connected’ to pure nature.

By shifting away from the *child* in nature as the only agential body, and focusing on the materiality of child bodies and the bodies of other nonhuman entities (such as dogs) as relational assemblages, I considered how this view of children and their encounters with nature could inform a new imagining for sustainability education that is more open to the complexity of common worlding. And like Gannon (2015, p. 17) I have considered what “(t)hese encounters in particular places and moments and between particular bodies suggest the sorts of ‘prosaic’ but powerful ‘common worlding pedagogies’ we need for these times”.

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