# Witnessing the Ruins: Speculative Stories of Caring for the Particular and the Peculiar

### John Drew and Kelly-Ann MacAlpine

John Drew is a PhD candidate in education studies at Western University. His research is situated at the intersection of curriculum and animal studies, and he is particularly interested in the potential for literature and popular culture to help foster multispecies empathy. He was awarded the 2018 Animals and Us: Research, Policy, and Practice Outstanding Graduate Student Paper Prize. Before returning for doctoral studies, he was a secondary English teacher. Email: jwdrew@uwo.ca

Kelly-Ann MacAlpine is a PhD candidate in curriculum studies at Western University. With particular attention to early childhood environmental education, she is curious about posthumanist perspectives that shift ontological and epistemological conversations about child-nature relations in environmentally precarious times. Her current research and scholarly publications focus on the pedagogical significance of storying the peculiar relations that emerge with and between children and more-than-human others. Email: kmacalp2@uwo.ca

*Educational scholars and practitioners are confronting long-held anthropocentric pedagogical practices as well as notions of care. To trouble the notion of care, this article draws from the collaborative research that stories the collective experiences of children, educators, and researchers at an early years learning centre located in an emerging suburban enclave of a mid-sized city in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Our work is guided by the question of how we as educators and scholars reclaim and augment the politics of care. Through the practice of storying everyday encounters, we explore how emerging and precarious relations with more-than-human others, both real and imaginary, challenge anthropocentric notions of care.*

*Key words: pedagogies; children and animals; care; early childhood education; more-than-human relations*

To witness is also to participate in the world in its relational becoming.

*Thom van Dooren & Deborah Bird Rose, "Lively Ethnography: Storying Animist Worlds"*

In this fraught moment of history, our world is characterized by ecological and economic precarities, and educational actors respond differently to these instabilities. At the early childhood educational level, pedagogical practices typically emphasize carefully structured routines punctuated by a narrow range of activities that emphasize regulation of the child's time rather than engaging critically in a moral and political ethic of care acknowledging the "complex life sustaining web" that connects us precariously to each other and the natural world around us (Tronto, 1993, p. 103). That is to say, the regulatory-focused ethic of care often takes priority over the actual education of the child. Education requires the child to be challenged with experiences of the other beyond their own and to reflect on these experiences, a process which can be perceived as a "violent" intervention into the otherwise pure domain of childhood (Todd, 2001). Moreover, in Canada, many parents must purchase child care services, which means the effectiveness of the care is at least in part determined by the consumer's satisfaction with the quality of care (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Care is thus situated within individualist, consumer-oriented, and human(child)-centered priorities rather than outward engagement and reflection.

In this context, early childhood educational approaches to care are often decontextualized from ecological and more-than-human precarities, as well as from the economic influences contributing to such precarities.

A concept of care modelled on insulation, rather than exposure to precarity, emphasizes a neoliberal ethic of decontextualized consumption as opposed to one focusing on ethics of reflection and relationality. Given this context, how do we as educators and scholars resituate and augment the politics of care within early childhood? How can we expand our webs of concern to foster a coconstitutive, more-than-human relationality? How can we confront inequities and recognize the ways that we are implicated and interconnected on social, institutional, economic, and ecological levels? To grapple with these challenging questions, in this paper we draw from collaborative research that stories the collective experiences of children, educators, and ourselves as researchers at an early years learning centre located in an emerging suburban enclave of a mid-sized city in southwestern Ontario, Canada. Drawing from Donna Haraway's (2016) notion of speculative fabulation, our pedagogical work embraces the "the practice and process of tracing; [of] becoming with each other in surprising relays" (p. 3). Accordingly, our work takes up Haraway's example of tracing to pursue the patterns observed during our forest encounters. We encourage the children to engage actively and imaginatively during these encounters, not simply to appeal to the authority of the adults. Pedagogically, we seek to position ourselves, and the children, relationally to the entanglements and processes occurring around us rather than containing these worlds from all-knowing pedagogical positions of mastery. In troubling these tensions that emerge in the becoming-with other, we wonder, as Haraway does, "what kind of caring and response-ability could unexpected collaboration evoke" (p. 22) in precarious and troubling times?

## The ruins

Situated in a new elementary school, the centre provides child care and educational services to the young families that have only recently taken up residence in the newly built homes that surround the school. Not far beyond the horizon, and well within the children's view from the school yard, are numerous unfinished homes and embedded foundations surrounded by barren, clear-cut landscapes, a testament to the continued growth and development of this nascent community. Market ideologies, ever more pervasive in their influence, promote progressive perceptions of development despite increasing cultural awareness of the clear ecological costs (including animal displacement and destruction) of urban sprawl. This dissonant affinity toward development, despite its clear environmental consequences, is connected to the more voracious tenets of neoliberalism. Along with amplifying tensions between socioeconomic classes, such antagonisms also position human welfare (typically associated with productivist expansion) against the well-being of the more-than-human world.

At the same time, ongoing pedagogical models have become increasingly outcome driven and data based, emphasizing the values of competitiveness and distinction supported by documentable evidence of success, even for the very young. This occurs despite research indicating the limitations and counterproductiveness of such audit-driven educational philosophies (Dahlberg et al., 2013). These productivist values serve to entrench individualist, competitive values which children are encouraged to adopt if they are to successfully navigate these pedagogical frames. In the neoliberal context, care becomes increasingly inward focused and contingent on an atomized relationship to the world(s) around us (Han, 2017). In this way, pedagogical models and values come to mirror the prescribed linearity of the technoscientific and neoliberal goals they seek to emulate, thereby helping to shift our conceptions of care, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues, "from a co-constructed interdependent relation into a mere control of the object of care" (p. 186). This productivist, instrumentalist reduction of care to the status of transactional object correspondingly erodes empathetic human relations. This codification of care in early learning contexts influences the subjectivities of the children being constituted within the early learning environment. When care is reduced to a transactional object, rather than a coconstituted relation, it discourages meaningful engagement with worlds beyond their own. In this way, objectification and commodification of care narrow relational and experiential possibilities in ways that reinforce

the nature/culture and species divides. The implications for the more-than-human realm are especially dire as animals become increasingly "othered," reconstituted as objects to be manipulated and mastered or to be surrendered to the care-less mechanics of the neoliberal growth machine.

We seek to challenge these onto-pedagogical norms. We are committed to rendering child-animal relations visible, audible, comprehensible, even tangible for the children of the centre. Drawing from the work of Affrica Taylor and Miriam Giugni (2012), we also frame our pedagogical work within the guiding question of "How might we live together in a heterogeneous common world, a world that allows difference to flourish?" (p. 112). In doing so, we promote a collective, multitudinous engagement with, and appreciation of, the precarious complexity that characterizes the delicate balance of our ecosystems. We begin by positioning our work within a common worlds onto-epistemological framework (Taylor, 2013). Accordingly, we emphasize the connectivity between ourselves, the children, and their more-than-human surroundings (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor 2015; Taylor & Giugni, 2012). Our research acknowledges that in sharing a common world, we therefore share similar, yet also distinct, precarities and vulnerabilities (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo, 2015). In this way, we are committed to pursuing a relations-of-care modelled on an ethic of more-than-human intersectionality.

However, part of this positioning requires us to acknowledge that we as researchers, the educators, and even the children attending the centre are not entirely innocent in these processes (Haraway, 2003; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In the case of the specific centre of this study, we recognize that the land now occupied by the school and surrounding neighbourhood had only a decade previously been a combination of farm fields and forest. Far earlier, of course, before settler colonial expropriation, it was inhabited by the Indigenous people, and we, the authors, acknowledge that our work is situated on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Attawandaran (Neutral), and Wendat peoples. Our presence, the school's presence, and the expansive urban sprawl all detrimentally affect these places and spaces. Indeed, it is the productivist processes of neoliberal expansion that has made our presence in the education centre possible for the very reason that the centre, and the school that holds it, could not exist without such demographic and developmental growth. And, of course, these particular forms of growth remain anything but innocent, because they cannot emerge without inflicting grievous harm on worlds beyond our own. We must acknowledge, as Rautio, Hohti, Leinonen, and Tammi (2017) remind us, that the mutual vulnerabilities between humans (large and small alike) and animals are not equally distributed, and indeed, we must be careful not to lose sight of the tensions and potentially harmful encounters that exist between the human and more-than-human world(s).

## Pedagogies of process

Our pedagogical and research praxis attempts to bring these more-than-human precarities to the surface so they may be reflected on meaningfully by the preschoolers and toddlers that populate the centre. Our experiences at the centre are characterized by regular encounters with a small forest behind the school and the many disparate species and materials contained within it. Here, over the last two years, we have witnessed a continuously shifting landscape of developmental encroachment and the resulting effects on the animals inhabiting the enclosed, ever-shrinking forest. And so, week after week, we venture out into the forest to not only bear witness to these (often quite ruinous) transformations, but to be "in the world" experiencing the "finite and dirty" immanence of nature-culture entanglements beyond the "transcendent and clean" domains (Haraway, 1997, p. 36) of the carefully contained classroom infrastructure. In these encounters, we are then attempting to extend the Latourian project of shifting matters of fact to those of concern by "learning with" the more-than-human worlds rather than "about" them (Latour, 2004; Taylor, 2017). In doing so, we hope to contribute to the ethico-political shift advanced by Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, 2017) to challenge the productivist/instrumentalist values

of Western neoliberalism by "staging" attentive, care-full, immanent worldly encounters (2017, p. 53). We are committed to an aspiration, as opposed to a tangible goal or outcome, because it signals our willingness to engage with the only true constants our world offers us: uncertainty and mutability.

Guided by a commitment to the aspiration of noticing and the active and ever shifting process of slowing down, our pedagogies are guided by the practice of paying attention to the particular and, at times, peculiar. Accordingly, our pedagogical emphasis on processes of noticing and paying attention requires a complementary methodological commitment. Foremost, our pedagogical aspiration is deeply invested in illuminating the hidden processes around us. As educators, we seek to guide the children's learning by intensifying and concentrating their focus by engaging deeply with the experiential dimension of process. Through guided engagement with meaningful and intentional forms of process, children may begin to perceive the broader dimensions of external processes reflected within their own practice. The educational emphasis on process is informed by a commitment to fostering qualities of creativity, reflexivity, collectivity, and resiliency.

The foundation of our process-based pedagogy is comprised of the intersecting emphases on relations, intentions, and materials. The relations between the human and the more-than-human worlds are all too often obscured in educational contexts. Such engagement requires an immersive and reflective involvement with the materials that comprise our world. Linking our social relations with materials (natural and otherwise) offers context to an otherwise decontextualized society, while helping children see through nature-culture divisions. In doing so, we must actively resist the cult of individuality undergirding child-centered pedagogies and with it, the neoliberal cultivation of consumer subjectivity. Children should be guided into process through shared, collective experience so that their interpersonal interdependency comes to reflect our wider ecological interconnectedness. This requires clear, meaningful intentions. The children must engage in processes that move beyond neoliberal goals of productivity and consumption by formulating intentions that will allow them to pursue their curiosity in ways that will not always yield productive outcomes but will ultimately allow them to build their competence while pursuing their curiosity in purposeful ways.

David Orr (1992) has argued that "all education is environmental education" in that our choices to include or exclude ecological concerns in our curriculum informs children of the value we ascribe to the natural and more-than-human domain. By thinking with a common worlds framework (Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Giugni, 2012), children, researchers, and educators grapple with tensions that arise while trying to understand place within the context of environmental and socio-political realities of life in the Anthropocene. The concept of place in early childhood settings is frequently culturally constructed as a neutral domain or "mute backdrop" (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017) that transcends social, political, and historical tensions within which it is rooted. Yet, by circumventing human exceptionalism and attending to "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 2016) inherent in a coconstitutive multispecies world, common worlds pedagogies invite us to move away from abstract mastery by providing connectivity with hidden human and more-than-human dimensions that are always already present and informing place(s). Similarly, Teresa Lloro-Bidart (2017) emphasizes "emotional, embodied and affective ways of knowing" for environmental educators when approaching nature and non-human animals (p. 125). Such an approach encourages us to "study up" with the more-than-human realm rather than "study down" in ways that promote human mastery over animals and nature (Plumwood, 2002). When we attempt to define nature in purely scientific/rationalist frames, we too often draw distinctions between our human perspectives and nature. The scientific/rationalist frame often obscures how culturally constructed such distinctions are. In addition to reinforcing the nature/culture divide, such pedagogical framing casts nature and animals passively, further positioning nature and animals as objects to be mastered within the cultural imaginary. As Karen Barad reminds us, "nature is neither a passive surface awaiting the mark of culture nor the end product of cultural

performances" (Barad, 2007, p. 183). By shifting from thinking about to thinking with, place thus becomes understood as an embodied assemblage (Barad, 2007). In storying place, our project seeks to draw pedagogical attention to the visible tensions inherent to place, including settler colonial appropriation of unceded Indigenous lands, displacement of more-than-human others, and ecological devastation.

## Witnessing the ruins

The child care centre occupants bear witness to the ruins within the expansionist project of (settler/colonial) communal development. In the service of this urban expansionist project, the land is figuratively flattened (that is, drained of its historical as well as contemporaneous entanglements). Simultaneously, the land is literally flattened by the ploughs pressing out the inconvenient mounds and contours decorating the land now zoned for roads, houses, and condos. This narrative compels us to see these spaces merely as exploitable backdrops. By internalizing this narrative (that is, by leaving it unexamined), we as educators would unwittingly reproduce it in our everyday practice, perhaps by drawing children's attention to and labelling "mighty machines" or describing "community workers" in theme-based activities in ways that would normalize, even sanctify, these expansionist processes. Such onto-pedagogical narratives become further ossified when educators attempt to counterbalance the perceived "unsightliness" of our capitalist machinations with exposure to the increasingly rarified splendour of the "natural" world. Thus, often, such pursuits require elaborate pilgrimages to carefully manicured parks to observe the animals contained within (indeed animals are sometimes imported to) these artificial sites by human hands (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018). When we approach nature in this way, we are merely mollifying the effects/affects of ravenous capitalism with "infernal alternatives" (Stengers, 2018, p. 54) that ultimately serve to reproduce its larger instrumentalist, productivist goals. According to such logic, some select representatives of the more-than-human world are privileged for the aesthetic (and consumerist) value they hold. The images, experiences, and stories we privilege with visibility are therefore propped up by the surplus multitudinous stories consigned to invisibility, and often disposability. As Kathryn Yussof (2018) argues—those more-than-human elements which resist integration into the broader capitalist narrative are typically erased from representation or dismissed as being surplus to requirements.

We are mindful of these processes of visibility (and invisibility) in our forest encounters as the children and educators cannot arrive at and leave the centre without constant reminders of the ever-emerging enterprise of expansionist development set against the shrinking forest and field backdrop. The signs of construction vehicles that pass by on the road, the men in orange vests and hard hats passing back and forth along the nearby construction sites pushing overloaded wheel barrows, the adjacent housing lots containing finished but as yet empty homes, and the outerlying land cleared for immediate development. Every day, children are exposed to any, or all, of these processes that have become a naturalized backdrop to their daily experiences. This teeming space of "development" is punctuated by the unavoidable vertical contours of two rapidly escalating condominium towers looming on the horizon behind the centre. The sight and sounds of this frenetically emergent landscape ambiently saturate the children's daily experiences. We must attend to the spaces of erasure and erosion to counter this all-too-clean narrative of progress.

The liveliness of the forest thus becomes overshadowed, choked by the feverish pace of neoliberal progress. Every time we encounter the forest with the children, we are living these broader political-economic tensions on a direct, immanent level. The forest is a "blasted" space that consistently reveals evidence of precarity (Kirksey et al., 2013; Tsing 2015). The children are paying attention to the spaces and corresponding entanglements that characterize the forest-scape. On the forest's extreme end, the educators and children have noticed the forest's erosion, both visually and aurally. During the everyday encounters, we notice how caring relations emerge within

the particular and the sometimes-peculiar entanglements of children and their more-than-human companions. The children's stories of the real, the shadowy, and the mythical matter as they navigate their position within this precarity.

## Forest liveliness: Storying the particular

Inside the ever-eroding forest, the children, educators, and we found rabbit tracks, and on previous encounters we spotted deer and turkey vultures taking refuge in what appears to be the final wooded domain remaining in the area. These are all signs of life persisting among the peripheral ruins of capitalist advancement and encroachment. Abandoned wagon wheels and farm implements found in our excursions into the forest remind us of farm fields that once existed, created and tended to for generations by settler-colonials after replacing the Indigenous people who lived on the same land. The forest then looms for us as a perpetual marker of the constant volatility, vulnerability, and interdependency characterizing naturecultures. Anna Tsing (2015) challenges us to acknowledge these kinds of repressed "capitalist ruins" that increasingly pervade our experience. Tsing wants us to see that within these hostile spaces, there are lives and worlds that somehow persevere within the precarity of these spaces and whose stories need to be heard. Our pedagogical approach focuses on "reframing" our aesthetic attention as a means of "restorying" the world to encourage children to "attend to" rather than escape the ruinous aesthetic of late capitalism.

## Fallen trees, fallen comrades

In early winter, the educators and I took a group of preschool children (ages 3–5) on a walk to the surrounding forest. As we stood at the forest's outer edges, one of the preschool children pointed to a weather-damaged tree. The tree was partially blown over from a recent windstorm. As she pointed to the tree, I noticed her furrowed brow and sensed she was trying to imagine the cause for the tree's partial collapse. "I feel sorry for the tree," she announced somberly. I asked her why she felt sorry. She responded that someone cut the tree down. I asked her why someone would do that. She told me in a very matter of fact way, "it is because THEY don't need it anymore!"

I am struck, not only by the child's words, but also by the unflinching way she explains the tree's destruction. Without speculating too much, we must acknowledge the activity pervading the neighbourhood and consider how it might influence this child's sympathy for the tree and the story she imagines. The space that she walks through every day tells a story: the cycle of land clearance for continuous development. What does this story mean in the eyes of a 4-year-old? It is difficult to say, but her storying of the tree's demise reflects the deeper truth of her surroundings: that is, a world governed by a ruthless instrumentalist logic where that which is extraneous, surplus to our instrumentalist goals, is devoid of exploitable value and rendered disposable—indeed killable. The child's sympathetic response to the tree's fate suggests "empathetic engagement" (Gruen, 2015) with a fellow living being that has, within her interpretive narrative, been killed by a human being for the simple reason that it held no commodifiable value.

During the transitory space between winter and spring, we (two educators and myself), wandered toward the forest with a small group of seven children, only to realize that the forest had been disconcertingly diminished, seemingly overnight. Slowly the realization of the destruction of a patch of trees dawned on the children as they starred quizzically at the barren space filled with only jagged stumps where the tall trees once stood. Many of the children moved around to examine the tree stumps, seemingly awestruck by this radical transformation of a once-familiar space. There were questions of where the trees went and what happened to them. It was quickly

understood that the trees were cut down. Although most of the trees had been removed, a few of the children noticed the "remains" of formerly standing trees piled a little farther off in the distance, seemingly awaiting retrieval and ultimate disposal. One child resisted the collective movement to peruse the altered landscape. Instead, she sat impassively at the edge of the former tree line. Noticing this silent but clearly affective response to the environment, I sat down beside her and asked what she was thinking. Looking at me with barely suppressed tears, she declared, "I don't like what happened to the forest!" After acknowledging this understandably mournful response, I asked what she thought happened to it. She responded disapprovingly, "They cut it!" Another child came over to share in this sense of grief for the trees that had once stood here. She looked around and asked me, "Where will the birds go?"

## Unsettling the birds

Matters of care require an attentiveness, not only to what is present, but to what is absent. Although the trees were no longer seen, their absence deeply resonated with the group. Birds regularly populated this section of the forest, and with spring arriving, their presence was becoming noticeably more robust. Just the previous week, many of the children had noticed the audible signs of their presence. Now this besieged section of the forest seemed eerily silent. The conspicuous absence of the earlier aural avian vibrancy seemed to be informing the children's concern. The children see beyond the clear-cutting, seemingly well aware of the consequences to their more-than-human comrades.

One of the most noticeable signs of ruins has been the gradual silencing of a familiar avian animal whose rhythmic pecking seems to announce the return of spring and the renewal that attends it. This spring, the sounds of home construction (the clackity-clack of hammers pounding nails) are much more pervasive than they were the previous year. Last year, these building sounds had been muted—morphing, almost musically, with the similar staccato rhythms of the woodpeckers, constituting a near symphonic natureculture aural assemblage and the processes of "ecosocial reproduction" as animals engage in their own forms of care work and reproduce both their own communities and the larger ecosystem (Coulter, 2016). Now, the sounds of these industrious birds are washed out and the children have difficulty locating actual pecking sounds amid the ever more ubiquitous human construction sounds.

The preschoolers, educators, and I continue to venture deep into the forest. Because the weather is still too cold for the clamorous enterprise of home construction, the first pecking sounds of woodpeckers from deeper inside the as-yet-untouched confines of the forest can be heard. These sounds break the spell of the silent forest ruins. One child asks what the clackety sound he hears is and another child blurts out that it is a gun, pantomiming a machine gun pose and providing the appropriate sound effect. Another, perhaps remembering our springtime forest encounters from the previous year, declares it to be a woodpecker. One or two others ask what a woodpecker is. "What do you think it is?" one of the educators asks, redirecting the inquiry. "It's a bird!" one of the children triumphantly declares. "See, the birds are farther inside the forest," the educator affirms. After exposure to such stark precarity, it is important for the children to see that the birds persist within the shrinking edges of the forest, but a new appreciation of the birds' precarity is increasingly evident amid the children's queries and suppositions. As we venture farther in, other birds become visible and audible, and some of the children spot the first robins of the season. Overhead, we spy two birds' nests we hadn't noticed before. A child says the nests are the birds' homes and where the mother and father birds protect their babies. It is not lost on me that the children are highlighting place and animals' own forms of care.

For now, the birds are able to endure precariously within the ravenous development and capitalist ruins (Tsing,

2015). There are consequences to thoughtless actions of capitalism. To flip the narrative of careless acts to thoughtful acts of care, the educator and I wonder how we might trouble the children's connection to birds' homes in the trees and the violent act of clearcutting trees. This line of thinking is further complicated when we also learn that the trees were cut down to make room for a proposed "nature park" complete with foot paths leading to an adjacent playground for the children and their families to frolic in. Noninnocent acts of remediation further trouble human response(ability) within the ruins.

## Speculation and wonder: Storying the peculiar

Massumi (2011) tells us that sometimes "opening up data to its edginess means resisting traditional modes of representation, modes of representation that 'capture' an event either through attention to detail or through a totalizing perspective that encapsulates a story" (Springgay & Zaliwska, 2015, p. 140). And so, the educators and researchers begin this process of inquiry and opening. We shift our thinking: Instead of asking "What am I looking at?" we begin to wonder who/what are we entangled with, and how might these encounters inform/ transform our ways of knowing and being in the world. The following encounters illustrate some of the questions and tensions that arose during the commingling of forest bodies and human bodies, and how the presencing of the animate and inanimate, and of real and imaginary, inform and transform our ways of thinking with and being with the more-than-human other.

## The shadowy

The educator and I are taking seriously the pedagogies of noticing in our work what it might mean to live ethically alongside more-than-human others. We work from the edges, both the physical and the metaphorical, as we stay within what Stephanie Springgay and Zofia Zaliwska (2015) refer to as the "intra-active surfaces" (p. 139). We take our collaborative research with a group of five toddlers (ages 1–2) very seriously. We wonder what it means for us and the toddlers to be part of the forest's liveliness amid the ruins, to enter into caring relations with the seen and unseen critters of the forest.

One winter morning while walking through the forest, the educator, the group of toddlers, and I stop to notice the many different tracks in the snow. In previous walks we became aware of how our feet left imprints in the snow. A new layer of snow provides us the opportunity to see that our footprints are not the only prints we see, as there are many more different indents and markings. Rather than labelling the markings as bunny tracks or deer tracks, we begin instead to follow them to see where they might lead. As curious trackers we speculate where we are going. One of the children states, "We are going to their house." Another asks, "Are we going to find rabbit poop?" What is interesting to the educator and me is that none of the children questions whether other beings are present in the forest. The children do not need to see critters to understand their presence. How might traces of passing animals provoke our understanding of complex and emerging child-animal relations? How do sites of animal-child track mashups inform matters of care?

I use poetry as a form of reflection, of storying the past/present/future of places of commingling. Valerie Janesick (2016) reminds us that "poetry shuts out the excess and noise ... it inspires respect and awareness of their [in/ non/human] stories (p. 32). The poem below is meant to narrate the staccato thoughts that swirled around my wonderings of the deer tracks the educator, the toddlers, and I noticed during our many winter ventures into the forest. As we followed tracks we tried to (re)trace the movements of the unseen.

SHADOWY TRACINGS

snow reveals tracks
tracks reveal possibilities
possibilities reveal stories
shadowy stories crossing time and space

walking, crawling, slithering, running, leaping
away from and towards
paths converging and pulling apart
snow reveals tracks

remembering and forgetting
snow melts and shadows fade
rooting stories; erasing stories
shadowy tracings of stories untold

whose presence remains unseen
waiting watching listening

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) reminds us that speculative inquiry "pushes the boundary of acceptable" (p. 73), while Val Plumwood (2002) writes that "openness and attentiveness give us sensitivity to the world ... allow[ing] us to be receptive to unanticipated possibilities" (p. 195). In reflecting on the tracks encounter, the educator and I resist (mis)representing the stories of "what else." Rather, the tracks become provocative shadowy stories of animals living in liminal and precarious spaces. While tracks and tracings remind us of the movements of the critters that traverse the forest spaces, we are left to speculate what it might mean to care for more-than-human others who go unseen.

## The mythical

The winter visits to the forest have led to unique and unexpected encounters. On one particular walk the morning after a snowstorm, we (the educator and I and the five toddlers) are met by different sounds such as howling winds and creaking tree branches. But as we venture deeper into the treed area, another unexpected sound emerges. One of the toddlers is making a very loud "EeeeeeOooooEeeeee" sound. As the educator and I exchange a look of confusion, I ask him what he is doing. In what is best described as a nonchalant response, he tells me he is calling the "snow monkey." I counter with a quizzical "Snow monkey?" The toddler does not offer any further explanation, he merely looks up and points. As the group of toddlers look up toward an unidentifiable space where the unidentifiable creature sits, they all chime in, calling to the snow monkeys with their boisterous "EeeeeeOooooEeeeees." The educator and I wonder how the intra-actions of snow, wind, vines, and bodily movements emerge as snow monkeys.

Of course, we can never be fully sure, but we speculate that the mythical snow monkey emerged from the complex entanglement of the real and the imaginary. Perhaps the birth of the mythical snow monkey began with the vines that are intertwined throughout the forest space, tangled around and across the trees (both the living and the dead). The educator often refers to the vines as monkey vines. But on one particular walk there was a lot of snow that clung to the trees and vines, and when we shook them the snow fell and hit our faces, bodies, and the ground. Perhaps the movements of hands, limbs (human and nonhuman) and snow together storied the mythical snow monkey. Perhaps thinking with snow monkeys, the mythical story of unlikely and peculiar kinship, illustrates the complexity of caring relations with the more-than-human other.

As the educator and I continue to reflect on the child–snow-monkey encounter, we wonder what it means to be in relation with a being that is not. How do we think with and be with the mythical or the shadowy? As Barad (2012) notes, "all bodies, not merely 'human' bodies come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity— its performativity" (p. 152). Barad's notion of intra-activity is essential to this process, because it emphasizes onto-epistemological continuity and relationality as opposed to dialectical or hierarchical separation and divergence. This emphasis on the continuity of human and more-than-human material interactions is critical to our care-full work. Accordingly, our pedagogies of lingering allow us to sit with our wonderings of how the story of emerging relations with "snow monkeys" might offer a glimpse into how mattering and caring are linked. As we continue to struggle to understand what it means to be in a caring relation with the more-than-human other, the snow monkeys push us to be thoughtful.

It is early spring, and the melting snow exposes a "new" forest. We (the educator, the five toddlers, and I) walk through the forest differently in the winter and the spring. The warming spring sun melts the snow, exposing many of the unnoticed and forgotten things that are always already occupying forest spaces. Today we are not greeted with the shadow tracks or snow monkeys but rather the newly exposed moss, construction debris, fungi, fallen and rusted barbed wire fencing, food wrappers, plastic water bottles, and one lone skull of a dead animal. The skull is all that remains of the once-lively raccoon. Although the educator and I are drawn toward the skull, it goes seemingly unnoticed by the toddlers. We are curious about why such an unfamiliar sight might go unnoticed. While the educator and I speculate about why, the group of us becomes refocused on the noises. We hear a distant "chicka-dee-dee-dee-dee-dee" filtering through the sounds of construction. The educator points toward four chickadees frolicking in the trees above. As she and I try to mimic the chickadee call, the toddlers all look up to see where the birds might be. After one of the toddlers tries to make the same bird call, he adds "Where did the snow monkeys go?" He waits for a brief moment, perhaps hoping the chickadee will respond to his concern over the whereabouts of the missing snow monkeys.

Engaging with a pedagogy of lingering through slow acts of noticing provides us with the time to be curious. Tsing (2015) argues that curiosity is "the first requirement of collaborative survival in precarious times" (p. 2). The educator and I consider how the care the children demonstrate toward the imagined animals might be extended farther to the disappearing and already disappeared animals within the forest. Our pedagogies are guided by Tsing's contention that the world is populated by the ghosts of vanquished spaces, lives, and experiences (both figuratively and literally), and so we ask ourselves: Where are these tracks coming from or going to? We struggle to understand what it might mean to care for the ghostly presence of the forest creatures we cannot see. The children search for these elusive "ghosts" within an increasingly vanquished space, but for now many of the vanishing animals seem consigned to the realm of the imaginary. In our pedagogical work we remain open to staying with the precarious relations of the real, the shadowy, and the mythical as we think with the complex, knotted, and entangled politics of care.

## Final thoughts

In witnessing and navigating the ruins and those who endure therein, we see glimpses of a nascent ethic of care. However, in troubling matters of care we remember that our presence (researchers/educators and students alike) is dependent on these productivist/consumerist dynamics. By acknowledging our own ethically entangled relationship to these fraught and contradictory processes, we hope to better reframe and restory the world around us.

Through the practice and process of speculative fabulation, stories of relational complexity emerge and push

us to think otherwise. Haraway (2016) reminds us that "perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories and functions that serious worldliness and recuperations become possible" (pp. 23–24). Accordingly, we resist pedagogies of containment that present children with world-closing answers and explanations that all too often stymy, rather than engage, curiosity. Similarly, we challenge the managerial models that prioritize the regulation and structure of children's time and experience. We seek to offer the space and freedom for children to follow the traces, and to imaginatively engage and speculate about all the possibilities and tensions, that exist in the world(s) around them. As such, we are committed to bringing this essential instability of our surroundings to the surface of educational encounters with the children. In doing so, we (the children, educators, and researchers alike) become more aware and sensitized to the entanglements comprising our world. Such a world ceases to conform to the prescribed flatness of linearity, predictability, and monotony. We instead become alive to the possibility, vibrancy, precarity, and care of/for/within a dynamic world that is ever in flux. This goal must always remain an aspiration, however, one guided by the humble awareness that we can never hope to fully know or understand everything our world offers. Humility, not mastery, guides our inquiries.

*Although no children or educators are specifically identified in this article, all have given consent to have their stories told.

# References

Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2012). On touching—the inhuman that therefore i am. *differences, 23*(3), 206–223. https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-1892943

Coulter, K. (2016). Beyond human to humane: A multispecies analysis of care work, its repression, and its potential. *Studies in Social Justice, 10*(2), 199–219. https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v10i2.1350

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2013). B*eyond quality in early childhood education and care*. Routledge.

Gruen, L. (2015). *Entangled empathy: An alternative ethic for our relationships with animals*. Lantern Books.

Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*. Verso.

Haraway, D. (1997). *Modest witness@second_millenium.femaleman™_meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and technoscience*. Routledge.

Haraway, D. (2003). *The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble; Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Janesick, V. (2016). Poetic inquiry: Using found poetry and identity poetry to transform qualitative data. In A. Reinertsen (Ed.), *Becoming earth: A post human turn in educational discourse collapsing nature/culture divides* (Ch. 4). Sense.

Kirksey, S. E., Shapiro, N., & Brodine, M. Hope in blasted landscapes. *Social Science Information, 52*(2), 228–256. http://multispecies-salon.org/publications/Kirksey-et-al_Hope-in-Blasted-Landscapes.pdf

Latour, B. (2004). *Politics of nature: How to bring the sciences into democracy*. (C. Porter, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

Lloro-Bidart, T. (2017). A feminist posthumanist political ecology of education for theorizing human-animal relations/relationships. *Environmental Education Research, 23*(1), 111–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2015.1135419

Massumi, B. (2011). *Semblance and event: Activist philosophy and the occurrent arts*. The MIT Press.

Nxumalo, F., & Cedillo, S. (2017). Decolonizing place in early childhood studies: Thinking with Indigenous onto-epistemologies and Black feminist geographies. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 7(2), 99–112. https://doi.org/10.11772043610617703831

Orr, D. W. (1992). *Ecological literacy: Education and the transition to a postmodern world*. SUNY Press.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Nxumalo, F. (2015). Unruly raccoons and troubled educators: Nature/culture divides in a childcare centre. *Environmental Humanities*, 7, 151–168. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616380

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Taylor, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Unsettling the colonial places and spaces of early childhood education*. Routledge.

Plumwood, V. (2002). *Environmental culture: The ecological crisis of reason*. Routledge.

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2012). "Nothing comes without its world": Thinking with care. *The Sociological Review, 60*(2), 199–216. https://doi.org/10.1111j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). *Matters of care: Speculative ethics in more than human worlds*. University of Minnesota Press.

Rautio, P., Hohti, R., Leinonen, R., & Tammi, T. (2017). Reconfiguring urban environmental education with "shitgull" and "shop." *Environmental Education Research, 23*(10), 1373–1390. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2017.1325446

Springgay, S., & Zaliwska, Z. (2015). Diagrams and cuts: A materialist approach to research-creation. *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies, 15*(2), 136–144. https://doi.org/10.11771532708614562881

Stengers, I. (2018). *Another science is possible: A manifesto for slow science*. Polity Press.

Taylor, A. (2013). *Reconfiguring the natures of childhood*. Routledge.

Taylor, A. (2017). Beyond stewardship: Common world pedagogies for the Anthropocene. *Environmental Education Research, 23*(10), 1448–1461. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2017.1325452

Taylor, A., & Giugni, M. (2012). Common worlds: Reconceptualising inclusion in early childhood communities. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 13*(2), 108–119. https://doi.org/10.2304ciec.2012.13.2.108

Taylor, A., & Pacini-Ketchabaw, V. (2018). *The common worlds of children and animals: Relational ethics for entangled lives*. Routledge.

Todd, S. (2001). "Bringing more than I contain": Ethics, curriculum and the pedagogical demand for altered egos. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 33*(4), 431–450. https://doi.org/10.1080/002202701300200911

Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.

Tsing, A. (2015). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton University Press.

van Dooren, T., & Rose, D. B. (2016). Lively ethnography: Storying animist worlds. *Environmental Humanities, 8*(1), 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527731

Yusoff, K. (2018). Politics of the Anthropocene: Formation of the commons as a geologic process. *Antipode, 50*(1), 255–276. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12334