

## Becoming with/beside/in *Feminist Research for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Childhoods*

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*Book Review: Feminist Research for 21st-century Childhoods: Common Worlds Methods*

Edited by: B. Denise Hodgins  
New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019 230 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-350056-57-2

*Feminist Research for 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Childhoods* (2019, Bloomsbury Academic) highlights emerging pedagogical practices pursued throughout Canada, United States, South Africa, and Australia. Situating itself in settler/colonial states, the book, edited by B. Denise Hodgins, aims to provide methods of inquiry into the practice of early childhood. Hodgins introduces the book providing provocations to question anthropocentric and dominant discourses in childhood studies. Using postqualitative frameworks, the collection of chapters seeks to dismantle the often-unquestioned positioning that human-centered thinking has taken within research. The book mobilizes common worlds methods and urges readers to think of the entangled relationships that children, adults, and more-than-human others navigate within childhood studies research, rather than center only the individual child, an approach that has been championed since the Enlightenment.

Canada's history of ongoing colonization, the uninvited presence of research on Indigenous lands, and the resistance and strength of the First Peoples of these lands are acknowledged before setting into the introduction. Hodgins recognizes that this consideration is only a beginning and that it does not tackle how we might return stolen land, which is essential to reconciliation and decolonization. Ongoing settler colonialism is inherited by 21<sup>st</sup>-century children and researchers, and this book acts as a tool to question the future of this legacy. Working with new materialist and posthuman thinking, the chapters of the book look at relationships between species/material/place rather than severed and universal categories. As a reader, I recognize two specific perspectives guiding the way I interact with the ideas of this book. First, as an early childhood educator (ECE) my thoughts are led back to the preschool room as I wonder how I can bring my experience to my reading: How can I think with these ideas when I am working as an educator? Next, as a researcher exploring posthuman thinking in the ways that children and plants relate with each other, I am continually (re)asking myself questions in an ongoing dialogue. As a settler using posthuman thinking, how do I work within this framework without appropriating Indigenous knowledge? And why am I doing the work that I am doing? *Why do this?* was the overarching theme that drew me into each chapter of *Feminist Research*. Throughout the book, a subtle to strong urgency is presented by authors as both current and future environmental conditions are pressed into the work that is being done. From Narda Nelson's tracking of animals with Anna Tsing's (2015) arts of awareness to understand "our shared vulnerabilities with others in this place" (Nelson, p. 101), to Cristina D. Vintimilla and Iris Berger's questioning the concept of collaboration, authors throughout the chapters challenge readers to push the boundaries of dominant thinking about how relationships matter within our common worlds.

The theme of becoming is present throughout the chapters as the question *Why do this?* percolates. This concept of becoming, to create something new that in itself has agency and ripples and refracts into multiple opportunities, sits at the tip of my wonderings. What would happen if our education system valued the more-than-human world? What and who *becomes* then? What do we want to be valued? What do we want education to be? What matters? These are the questions I am working with as I read through *Feminist Research*. My own writing has taken on an aspect of personal narrative, memory, and storying to connect to ideas and jump between time and identity. In exploring *Feminist Research*, I provide this movement to show the way in which I am working with the ideas these chapters. In the writing that follows, these narratives are set apart slightly from my main text by using both spacing and a lighter text colour, creating a visual binary while blurring lines between thoughts. *Feminist Research* interferes in taken-for-granted practices of categorization too, as the book is separated into four distinct categories: relations with materials, relations with other species, relations with place, and relations with retheorizing. What seems to be a gradual and linear progression into these concepts is soon recognized as being as rhizomatic as my own memories. My narratives are therefore not offered as a structured progression through each chapter but are instead presented sporadically as they gained my attention. They work to show my thinking as I activate the provocations the authors offer to resist truth, objectivity, and making final conclusions through messy connections to my educational practice, research, and everyday life. Working with the theories of *Feminist Research* inspires a blurring of material boundaries, and as I read through this work I recognize that within research I do not wish to only create tension between material categories, but also within the identity of who and what I bring into thinking. Memories and emotions are not separate from the knowledge that makes up academia. Thinking posthumanly, my writing resists anthropocentric notions that these memories and emotions are separate or fully developed entities and instead recognizes my narratives within the small pulses of what becomes when I think with them.

Part One of *Feminist Research* explores relations with materials ranging from clay, to muscles, to waves between generations. To begin, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and Kelly Boucher (2019) share a story about the caring agency of Wurundjeri Country clay. Thinking with the ideas of scholars, artists, and scientists, this chapter asks of us to consider how clay relationships might be attended to when clay is positioned as a gift from the earth rather than a commodity or blank canvas for children to utilize. Robin Wall

Kimmerer's (2013) words spill over the page and into my heart as she explains the gift of strawberries in her Indigenous traditions, ripening on the vine "you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it" (p. 24). Meanwhile my research site holds a strawberry plant that I brought into the classroom. The vines reach out at all angles into the space of the room. A green strawberry has started to blush, slowly ripening as the group of preschoolers play around it.

This chapter sets the scene for the book as the authors dig into the history and ethics of clay. Every relationship can be questioned and explored, and the authors invite readers to consider how these small relationships fit and contribute to political and ethical discussions.

Decentering humans, the chapters explore children's movement between materials. Thinking with fabric, Sylvia Kind and Adrienne Argent (2019) share a concept of calling into relation, while Tonya Rooney (2019) explores how children can connect to the world through/with sticks. The ideas coming through *Feminist Research* specifically provoke me to question the dominant discourse of process within early childhood education as the authors explore material agency, history, and the process of making. Shifting away from focusing on how the child controls process and instead opening thinking that considers the agency of material creates room to ethically question relationships and responsibilities. It is no longer a question of whether a child can master the material but instead an exploration of what can be created within this entanglement. I am also overcome with a feeling of joy as I read some of the chapters as they restory different types of relationships. As an ECE I watch as the group of preschoolers

climb a silty hill then slither on their bellies to the bottom. The dirt clings to their clothes, under their clothes, is drawn to their sweat and turned to mud. This mud lines the creases of their faces, fills the lines that form as they smile and laugh and yell. They were strengthening their large and small motor skills, creating play scenarios, communicating with each other and practicing safety. But the joy that erupted as silt met skin—children’s joy, my joy—was not something I had been taught about as an educator.

Candace R. Kuby’s (2019) chapter interacts with the concept of literacy and material entanglements to form an ongoing product of knowledge rather than an end product of knowing. The concept of literacy is reimaged as a notion of becoming, something that resists being measured, tested, completed, or accomplished. This questioning of developmental notions is furthered by Rachel Heydon and Elisabeth Davies (2019) as they think with the understandings of human capital and the minimization of both child and elder in an economy-driven value-oriented market. In working with these ideas, the authors discover the way that death and dying is avoided in intergenerational education programs creating it as an aspect of “null curriculum” (Heydon & Davies, 2019, p. 64). Working with both generational beings and art materials, the authors call for a deeper attention to the value within relations regardless of age while emphasizing that children, elders, and material hold meaningful relationships regardless of “modernist developmental appropriateness” (Heydon & Davies, 2019, p. 68).

As I explain my research I reach the point where I tell this acquaintance that I am working with 2.5–3-year-olds. The conversation stalls as they hold me to that specification and ask whether children that age can even talk. I am still tender in these conversations that remind me society is filled with the idea that children’s experiences are less valuable because of the way they relate to the world. That plant knowledge is less valuable because it does not fit into the normative category of adult knowledge. A deep breath as I stumble to put these thoughts to words.

Nicole Land (2019) works through thinking that shows dominant scientific renderings of the physical body as “knowable as something we are composed of, that we can describe, and is valued for the motion it generates” (p. 74). Land (2019) proposes that even this concept can be unsettled and muscles can become a pedagogy of doing which creates this known aspect of the body into something “ongoing, situated, uncertain” (p. 79).

As I read these words I wonder, even my body parts? I can question the relationship of my body parts? I feel this in the tips of my fingers and toes; tiny bits of discomfort shoot through my limbs. My fingers and toes are in relationship with the text.

In both the relations with other species and relations with place sections, authors continually acknowledge that children are not innocent bystanders in their relationships. Affrica Taylor (2019) explores the complicated relationship that children in Australia’s Ngannawal Country have with settler-introduced rabbits, while Vanessa Clark (2019) thinks critically with Byrd (2011) and acknowledges that when working in the *a/r/tographic* method of *gathering* materials and concepts to create art on colonized land, there is “nowhere innocent ... to stand” (p. 121). This discussion raises the inherently un-innocent legacies that children inherit and relate within. Complementing these ideas, Taylor refers to the need for pedagogical questioning that stays within the discomfort of exploring these complicated relationships. In settler-colonial nations, such as the one where I have made a home, these discussions tie into the ways that early childhood education is positioned within relations to the land and reconciliation with Indigenous people. The authors hold children to be a part of these conversations and urge researchers to explore and expand the ways species can also be held within these discussions. Again, as Heydon and Davies (2019) noted within their discussion of generational practices, the need to rethink what matters within childhood discussions and childhood studies research is highlighted.

In decentering human agency within relationships, Kathleen Kummen’s (2019) chapter explores child-crow encounters and presents a need for activism to champion early childhood education as “matters of concern” (p. 90). The term *evolution* is replaced with *co-evolution* and the entangled relations of crow and child both have

agency within evolution. For Kummen, both children and crows participate in co-evolution and neither species could singularly, masterfully affect the trajectory of life. Mindy Blaise and Catherine Hamm (2019) think with the beautiful Australian Aboriginal term *shimmer*, which is used to describe the life force that “arises in relationship and encounter” (p. 94). This term and traditional knowledge give a different perspective to consider some of the other theoretical lenses that have been used throughout the text. The term shimmer was shared originally through Deborah Bird Rose (2017), who attributes the concept to the “Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of Australia’s Northern Territory” (p. 51). In my reading, shimmer as a knowledge or concept is not attributed to specific people in this area, who are reduced to the umbrella term Aboriginal within the current chapter. In the spirit of *Feminist Research*, I sit with this discomfort and question how academics can better attribute traditional knowledge to the Aboriginal People who are the original knowledge holders of such ways of being within the world.

Nikki Rotas (2019) incorporates Donna Haraway’s (2016) use of the idea of compost to explain the complicated mess that humans contribute to. Rotas (2019) also brings in Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2019) notion of sight being “felt through the body’s sensorial capacity” (p. 133). In this research, elementary students wear on-body cameras and Rotas (2019) questions curriculum goals that privilege “comfort in what is known” (p. 136). It is a reminder that discomfort is not wrong and there is an “endurance” (Rotas, 2019, p. 136) in seeking education that values engagement rather than a finalized end goal. Rotas (2019) asks, “What if student- and community-initiated forms of tangible engagement become committed knowledge practices of worldly transformation?” (p. 136).

It can be somewhat disheartening to work in small ways on big problems. Researching the ways that plants call a 3-year-old into action brings doubt into my mind often. Why? This question is starting to sink in. What matters? It is starting to sink in.

Linda M. Knight (2019) goes on to propose that play, another very dominant discourse in early childhood education, can be questioned as a matter of matter using Karen Barad’s (2007, 2015) work on quantum physics.

My introduction to posthumanism started in high school science as my teacher explained that everything was made up of minuscule, moving particles. As the synapses of my brain shot off I imagined the unseen wave of motion that took place as my thoughts took consciousness. I considered this my spirituality from then on. This was how everything fit together, the universe connected by motion.

Knight (2019) questions how play can be reconsidered not as human, but as movement. Experimenting with mapping that she describes as “inefficient” (Knight, 2019, p. 142), Knight explores play within the human-curated urban context and uses thinking to contest “the humanist approach to urban residential planning that demarcate (*sic*) sites of play via strictly regulated play structures” (Knight, 2019, p. 142).

The presence of GoPros is explored by Susannah Clement (2019), who explains that in her research on family walking practices these “tools” show agency seen through the participants’ action. A little hand reaches towards the white envelope that I have beside me. Inside it is the assent form for the 3-year-old participants, but first I must explain my research to them so they know what they are assenting to. This child has stopped listening, and the white envelope sitting silently beside me has gained every aspect of their attention. I hide it and use a sing-song voice to draw this child back to my gaze, smiling as our eyes meet. I ask if I can tell them more about my project. They reach to where I have put the envelope and I explain that we can open it after we talk about what I am doing in their class. I feel unsure of myself as I present the envelope as a reward. I rethink this material—the presence it played in assent, its context, the relationship between child and envelope. Similar to the way that the themes in *Feminist Research* provoked me to reconsider process in early childhood education, thinking with Clement’s chapter repositions material as a cocreator within research and opens toward how relational questioning takes place within a study.

In Fikile Nxumalo’s (2019) chapter, storying is used to unfold the complicated nature of rethinking Indigenous

Peoples' entanglement with the land early childhood education interacts with and the linear concept of presence we inherit from Euro-Western epistemologies. Nxumalo (2019) recognizes that this storying "does not present a resolution to the messiness of ongoing colonialisms or to Indigenous peoples' displacements from ... places" (p. 165). Nxumalo offers a critical reimagining of the ways that early childhood education interacts with place and with the dominant settler discourses that situate children's and researchers' encounters with land and place as innocent.

The final section of the book frames relationships with (re)theorizing. Karen Barad is again brought in to think of matters of care in B. Denise Hodgins' (2019) chapter on the relationship between continuity and discontinuity, connection and disconnection. For both researchers and practitioners, Hodgins gives questions to think with on the concept of care as ongoing and changing within early childhood. Randa Khattar and Karyn Callaghan (2019) tackle documentation within education, focusing on methods that champion "meaning making" (p. 181) rather than the neoliberal discourse that proposes knowledge that can be categorized and quantified.

As a teacher's assistant I marked the essays of the preservice educators and felt tenseness grow in my body. This was not the only way to show knowledge. It went against everything that we teach early childhood educators, yet hypocritically the system enforces exactly what not to do on these "adults." Using storying, Khattar and Callaghan (2019) bring in the constant and overarching theme of relationships and how this could be a way of understanding within childhood. You the reader, I the writer, these words: in relationship. Rather than these separate entities, what is that relationship? What is becoming? Cristina D. Vintimilla and Iris Berger (2019) question collaboration in its dominant understanding as something that is pursued and achieved. As the authors dig deeper into this term, dissecting the very makeup of the word, they explore how issues of collaboration have trickled into education systems unquestioned. Independence. It was slammed into me hard when I entered the field of ECE. The gold star was my ability to get children to put away their toys, get dressed, zip up their lunch kits. Children attached to materials, to family members, to friends were positioned as being in deficit compared to the independent child. In the final chapter of the book, Karin Murriss and Cara Borchers (2019) address the very category of child. Bringing posthuman thinking into education, a field focused specifically on the human, Murriss and Borchers (2019) dismantle the noun *child* and propose the verb "to child" (*childing*) to refer to "being in time, usually associated with childhood" (p. 204). As I listened to the research session discussing the experiences of first-year university students I could not help but draw parallels to my own peers, ten years older than this participant group. Later at this same research conference a different session is discussing research with four-year-olds and again the similarities emerge. How do age categories bound our understanding of experience, relations, and care between people *and* the more-than-human-world?

As I complete *Feminist Research* I am heading into the analysis process of my own research and it is already clear that I will be referring to these pages often. It is a gradual and at times painful progression to work through the theories *Feminist Research* holds as authors prod and push against the most unquestioned, taken-for-granted understandings of the world that we have inherited in Euro-Western education systems within ongoing settler colonialism. To a researcher who is also an educator, the book provides tools to question the relationships that are so often overlooked. However, in thinking why/how, I also feel a tension between my perspective as an educator and my perspective as a researcher. *Feminist Research* provides many provocations for frontline educators to think with; however, there are few chapters that story the narratives of adults in relation to both the more-than-human world and children within the context of becoming/action/in the moment. At times, it feels that childcare providers have been dismissed from these entangled relationships, despite also having agency within these relational networks. The tensions of the neoliberal discourses

discussed throughout the book do not only affect children's common worlds, but the adults entangled within these childhoods as well. As I read through chapters such as Pacini-Ketchabaw and Boucher's (2019) thoughts on clay and Vintimilla and Berger's (2019) chapter on collaboration I considered the time, resources, and support necessary for frontline educators to work with these ideas within their practice. Such thinking makes me hold to the question of how, or if, these theories are accessible for childhoods within all contexts. How is feminist postqualitative research including the relational aspects of various political barriers that exist for those who are exploring these ideas? As I close the pages of this book, I will admit that I continue to grapple with my original question of *why do this?* It becomes clear to me that this discomfort is an important intuitive guide that can't be tested, measured, or universalized. As soon as I feel too content with my answers I must start asking different questions. I would urge readers to not stop exploring the unanswerable and uncomfortable of what might become from asking why work with the theories, provocations, and stories offered in *Feminist Research*.

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