

## Mapping Child-Animal Care Relations in Shaun Tan's *Tales from Outer Suburbia*

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*This article explores caring relations between child characters and sentient animals in two tales by Australian author-illustrator Shaun Tan. Each of Tan's 15 Tales from Outer Suburbia are set in an "outer" suburban world replete with curious critters. These include a silent and stoic water buffalo, an unmoving dugong (manatee), and other surprising companion species. In this article, the author unpacks the caring relationships between child protagonists and the sentient creatures they encounter in two selected tales by focusing specifically on those processes that bring these characters together in curious encounters: that is, processes of embodied mapping. Emphasis is placed on enchantment and movement, and, in particular, moments given to pausing, lingering, and reflection. The author argues that both the fields of human-animal studies and the social studies of childhood can gain from exploration of the subtleties of these moments.*

**Key words:** Shaun Tan; Outer Suburbia; story; caring relations; companion species

During the past decade, there have increasingly emerged critical spaces for children's perceptions and experiences to be situated and explored within research studies on children's relationships with animals, as the theme of this special issue highlights. I draw together the fields of children's literature and childhood studies to discuss two of Shaun Tan's (2009) *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, centering on the importance of stories for suggesting the complexity and potentials of child-animal caring relations. This article seeks to speculate on what becomes possible for the *child reader* in terms of relating to the more-than-human world beyond normative adultist representations. Indeed, across the *Tales*, Tan introduces readers to a range of sentient animals and fanciful creatures that have a power to draw child characters to them and relate to them as "kin" (Tan, 2002). Tan's choice of language here speaks directly to Donna Haraway's (2003, 2008) thinking about humans being but one "companion species" in a world of many others. As Haraway (2016) posits, "no species ... acts alone" (p. 100). Indeed, Deborah Bird Rose (2011) insists that "humanity is an interspecies collaborative project; *we become who we are* in the company of other beings; we are not alone" (p. 11, emphasis added). As I explore through the article, the concept of companion species is "less a category than a pointer to an ongoing 'becoming with'" (Haraway, 2008, p. 16), which is to say

that the children in these tales are not separate from their companion species but rather they "become with" each other through kin relations. In exploring how these relationships are articulated, I take a relational approach, looking to affective and felt dimensions *beyond* the literal for significance to explore how animal protagonists wordlessly inspire in child subjects alternative forms of directedness—what I term "alternative directedness." These somewhat surreal processes are enacted through various mapping moments that take place through situated and strange "contact zone" encounters (Haraway, 2008, p. 7). These encounters see child protagonists both astonished

by and drawn into relationships with animals which, although initially characterized by displacement, resultantly develop through enchantment (Merewether, 2019), more-than-human knowing, and relatedly, care (Tipper, 2011).

These relationships carry consequences. That is to say, the animals discussed in this article are *more-than* “natural bridging links” toward children developing caring relationships with a “natural world”—a reading that arguably reduces them to being mere “objects” of human care (Myers & Saunders, 2002). Rather, the relational and social aspects of the child-animal connections within Shaun Tan’s *Tales from Outer Suburbia* are permeated by a subtle, crepuscular kind of surreality effected through the author’s careful interplay of text and image. This surreality is compelling in its own right—much like nature itself—but it can also be taken as a lens through which normative, culturally constructed and assumed discourses and orientations toward child-animal caring relationships are queered (Haraway, 2008). This queering in turn enriches our understandings of how interspecies caring connections can be realized as uniquely dynamic—being active, reciprocal, embodied, affective, and sometimes uneasily felt (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017). And more: they are generative of new subjectivities, images, and spatialities that bring about potential for a reanimation of the child characters’ worlds. I thereby argue that Tan’s work is far from “simply” playful or amusing; rather, *Tales From Outer Suburbia* presents to us an enchanted storied realm in which the child characters’ everyday relationships with animals are articulated, not in terms of “adult” discourses “where animals encourage healthy development, teach empathy and children have a ‘natural’ affinity with them” (Tipper, 2011, p. 160) but rather, as Becky Tipper (2011) suggests, “in terms which make sense to them [children] and resonate with their social lives” (p. 160). Processes of alternative directedness and attendant estrangement and displacement discussed in this article emerge in continuum with mixed affects and nuanced sense making. I suggest that these in turn might animate the *child reader’s* thinking and encourage enchanted ways of seeing their own worlds that might foster other ways of living with/in their swiftly changing planet, which, as Jane Merewether (2019) contends, “needs to be supported, not belittled or dismissed” (p. 234). I begin by providing a theoretical context that informs my critical framework around “care” before moving sequentially through a reading of the two tales, starting with “The Water Buffalo.”

## Reconceptualizing caring relations: A theoretical background

Influenced by the “animal turn” within the social sciences over the past decade (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010), Tipper (2011, p. 149) critiques existing “adultist,” chiefly Western discourses around issues of matters of child-animal relations, which she explains as twofold: regarding “nature/development/becoming” on one hand and “nature/innocence/evil” on the other. She explains that, historically, animals have been regarded as “helpful” from psycho-developmental perspectives, that is, helping children to learn about living, dying, and so on, thus helpfully supporting the development of children’s interpersonal skills. In addition to this concern with children’s development, a second view challenged in this article is that of the Western Romantic idealized (at times even fetishized) childhood-nature relationship. Affrica Taylor’s (2011, 2013) writings specifically problematize the “child-in-nature” Romantic discourses, as well as the subject/object Cartesian divide promulgated by post-Enlightenment Western epistemologies. Taylor, like many feminist researchers invested in posthuman and poststructural theories and pedagogy, advocates instead an expanded view of sociality to include nonhuman others (Common Worlds Research Collective, <http://commonworlds.net/>). This standpoint is expressly concerned with questions of living together well in a world that is *more than peopled*. Relatedly, Taylor and Miriam Giugni (2012) state that “children’s worlds do not begin and end with exclusively human entities and concerns” (p. 111). This understanding of the necessity of “coexistence with difference” underpins the conceptual framework that Taylor and Giugni explain as the “generative and entangled notion of common worlds” (p. 111)—a theorization that builds on Haraway’s (2003, 2008, 2016) posthuman, relational account of the “worlding” effects of human and more-than-human relations: a networked understanding of “interdependent existence” that would seek to do away with dualist thinking (Hohti

& Tammi, 2019, p. 171) like nature/culture, animate/inanimate, and human/nonhuman, for example.

Increasingly, scholarship is committed to tracing “common world relations” between human childhoods and animals, that is, the diverse ways in which the lives of children and animals are complexly, noninnocently, and obliquely interwoven across different sites commingling the personal, social, cultural, political, and environmental (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015). As Riikka Hohti and Tuure Tammi (2019) put it, “these viewpoints neither group children and animals in a shared category nor place them in opposite ones. Rather, they see them always already in relation” (p. 171). Issues of matters of care that co-implicate both children and animals are further linked with environmental concerns and challenges (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019). Indeed, human-animal relations are understood to be at the centre of these global environmental challenges (Godfray et al., 2018).

As I understand it, *care matters* from relational perspectives (Koggel, 1998), that is, “entangled” understandings of care that resist tendencies toward “feminization” (Ailwood, 2017, p. 306), as well as paternalism, “in which care givers assume that they know better than care receivers what those care receivers need, and parochialism, in which care givers develop preferences for care receivers who are closer to them” (Tronto, 2010, p. 161). Correspondingly, understandings of care taken up in this article follow from Joanne Ailwood’s (2017) theorizations of entangled caring exchanges, comprising models *beyond* that of the “traditional” dyadic (of mother-child relations, for example), which typically occurs within family settings. Ailwood outlines feminist care ethics such as those put forward by Joan Tronto (2010) that recognize “the physical needs of human and nonhuman bodies, the environment and the ways in which our worlds need to be maintained so that we may continue living within them” (Ailwood, 2017, p. 306). Likewise, I think about care within human and more-than-human areas that can be “messy,” occurring in other-than-family and other-than-institutional settings. Ailwood explains this “messiness” in terms of “ranging from positive to negative and as sometimes oppressive and stressful” (p. 307)—an inherent messiness that is also noted by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017).

Going beyond emphases on physical needs, and thinking pluralistically about care as both a purposive and more-than-human activity, the kinds of child-animal caring processes discussed in this article can be characterized as follows: nonverbal and affective, practically addressing more-than-physical needs, occurring in other-than-family and noninstitutional settings, and inspiring ongoing reflection. These exchanges of care can be further typified as being crucially open to *curiosity* in the relating together of different species (van Dooren, 2014). To offer some context about this story world, I first want to explore the idea of what Outer Suburbia can be, focusing on Tan’s reflections from his own childhood in Western Australia.

### Locating Outer Suburbia: Thinking and imagining at the margins

The child-animal contact zone encounters discussed in the two selected *Tales* occur at pavement/street level: in front lawns and abandoned parking lots in otherwise grey, excessively classified and structured suburban spaces. These associated subaltern spatial imaginaries sit askance to notional Romantic projects of introspection concerning childhood, nature, and the “green imagination”—that is, where the “ideal child” coexists in an intense, isolated, and intimately devoted relationship with nature (Taylor, 2013). Poster children for this essentializing relationship include Rousseau’s Emile and the Wordsworthian child: children depicted as being set apart from culture, being “innocently” aligned on the side of the animals of nature—a relationship that communicates happiness and freedom on one hand but also sets those children up as being vulnerable to corruption, becoming mired in “adult” culture and society as they mature (Hohti & Tammi, 2019). This notion of the natural child is understood to be invented and has been problematized from social constructivist viewpoints, as Taylor (2011) explains. Importantly, Tan’s *Tales from Outer Suburbia* effect a movement away from narrow, anthropocentric framings that emphasize

dualistic understandings of nature-culture. Outer Suburbia is rather a blueprint for posthumanist, new materialist, and more-than-human understandings of childhood nature assemblages (e.g., Somerville, 2018)—those that take animism seriously, and the vitality of “vibrant” matter (Bennett, 2010), as I now explain.

Tan empathizes with lived, material experiences of alienation, displacement, and indifference he experienced as a child (Tan, n.d.1), an experience shared by many children and young people globally today. This stems partly from his upbringing: Tan grew up in Perth, Australia, the son of Chinese immigrants. He describes Perth as “the most isolated capital city in the world ... our family home was built at a northern periphery, which at the time was in a semi-developed condition” (n.d.2, para. 1). He further recounts, “my parents pegged a spot in a freshly minted northern suburb that was quite devoid of any clear cultural identity or history” (n.d. 2, para. 1). Tan was greatly influenced by the “geophilosophy” of this “universe of bulldozed ‘tabula rasa coastal dunes, and fast-tracked, walled-in housing estates” (n.d. 2, para. 1) and as an (adult) author, he self-identifies as an emigrant thinker, wondering and wandering, as he puts it, “at the edge of consciousness” (n.d.1, para. 1):

“Outer Suburbia” might refer to both a state of mind as well as a place: somewhere close and familiar but also on the edge of consciousness (and not unlike “outer space”). Suburbia is often represented as a banal, quotidian, even boring place that escapes much notice. Yet I also think it is a fine substitute for the medieval forests of fairytale lore, a place of subconscious imaginings. (Tan, n.d.1, para. 1)

Beyond the banality and quotidian normalcy of suburban Perth’s “empty footpaths, shady parks, rows of blank-faced houses, deeply shadowed windows and wide roads,” Tan intuits latent possibilities within the suburbs as “medieval forests of fairy-tale lore, a place of subconscious imaginings” (n.d.1, para. 6). His romanticizing of the northern suburbia of his childhood is without irony, as he emphasizes the sheer sense of liberation experienced where he intuited this “edgeland” as a place of mystery and beauty: “Northern suburbia did feel at that time like the edge of the world, relentlessly ordinary, yet also liberating in being so quiet and uncluttered, and not without a strange beauty” (n.d.1, para. 6). Tan’s emigrant thinker/dreamer status is reflected in the carefully selected title. The term “outer” implies not a demarcation of limits, but rather a going beyond. Tan effects a double remove from the city centre: a realm beyond the city, *and, and* ... Outer Suburbia thus connotes something of an elliptical existence: now here and yet nowhere—“in posse” (potential) but not “in esse” (being there). Indeed, nowhere in this collection of tales do we “see” Outer Suburbia “all at once”: the very name implies the impossibility of achieving a totalizing “world view”—which is indeed a very liberating thought in many ways. In thinking of Outer Suburbia as a corollary of what is not at the centre but rather that which is always *beyond*, it is useful to draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the rhizome. This conceptual model promotes nonlinear and nonhierarchical thinking and arguably helps us to cast off the vestiges of the (colonial) “green imagination”—which certainly chimes with common worlds scholarship, as outlined by Affrica Taylor (2013) and others.

To briefly explain: the rhizome has no beginning or end, “but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and overflows” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). I take this definition of “milieu” from James Corner’s essay on “The Agency of Mapping”:

Milieu is the French term that means “surroundings,” “medium” and “middle.” Milieu has neither beginning nor end, but is surrounded by other middles, in a field of connections, relationships, extensions and potentials. In this sense ... a grounded site, locally situated, invokes a host of “other” places, including all the maps, drawings, ideas, references, other worlds and places that are invoked during the making of a project. (Corner, 1999, p. 224)

I posit that Outer Suburbia and its actors, both human and animal, are folded into this open-ended, rhizomatic realm augmented by relational onto-epistemologies (Barad, 2007), that is, where children and animals within the

tales can be read as relational beings “emerging from naturecultures” (Hohti & Tammi, 2019, p. 172). Within this realm, child-animal encounters throw into relief heterogenous assemblages that are more than human (Hohti & Tammi, 2019, p. 172). Issues of mattering and care therein occur *beyond* narrow, anthropocentric framings, as I now go on to discuss, beginning with “The Water Buffalo.”

### Wandering and wondering: “The Water Buffalo”

“The Water Buffalo” presents an interesting exercise in orientation for both child reader and the child character, but it should be noted that this process is actuated even before we encounter this first tale. Opening the book, we discover that the inside cover is densely planted with tiny and seemingly unrelated pencil sketches suggestive of an artist’s notebook crammed full of subconscious and conscious scribbles. But they are sown with care nonetheless, each doodle enjoying its own uninterrupted spacing, evidence of a creative starting point that *matters enough* to be included. The materialities of journeying are explicitly evidenced by stamps and related paraphernalia that form the peritextual material, following on from the title page. Less explicit but no less significant is the sense of interpersonal intimacy these affective details connote. They are quietly evocative of both the materialities and temporalities of communication and handwritten interactions that are important caring practices in themselves, often overlooked in a digitized era. Hence, the first tale is already prefigured by subtle caring overtones from an artistic point of view.



Figure 1. “The Water Buffalo,” Shaun Tan, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, p. 7.

“The Water Buffalo” marks a setting forth into Outer Suburbia. As the very first tale, it marks a starting point, and importantly, it is the site whereupon we are introduced to a notional oracle (Figure 1), that is, the silent and sage water buffalo that lives “in the vacant lot at the end of our street” (Tan, 2009, p. 6).

The surprising emergence of the large creature provides the first impetus of a transformation from the isolation of the empty street toward something *other*: that is, a more companionable spacing. Caring relations between child and water buffalo are established through her approaching him to ask for advice. The young narrator explains how, from its grounded site in the overlooked grassy plot, the buffalo would “come up slowly, raise his left hoof and literally point us in the right direction” (Tan, 2009, p. 6). In mapping terms, the pointed hoof plays a crucial iconographic function: from the child’s experience we learn that, with a bit of patience, “whenever we had followed his pointy hoof we’d always been surprised, relieved and delighted at what we’d found” (p. 6). The only form of communication the buffalo offers is that of movement, using his hoof as a means to effectuate this “unknown” realm to explore:

But he never said what he was pointing at, or how far we had to go, or what we were supposed to do once we got there. In fact, he never said anything because water buffalos are like that; they hate talking. (Tan, 2009, p. 6)

Not only is the presence of the water buffalo intriguing in itself (how it arrived in the vacant lot is never explained), the fact that he *can* talk but chooses not to imbues him with agency—as does the designation of the personal pronoun “he,” which suggests a familiarity between the child and the creature, a form of relationship building, and further underscores the “enchanted animism” at play here (Merewether, 2019). Elizabeth Merewether (2019) presents enchanted animism as a concept by which we can think through how children’s intimate engagements with nonhuman things (e.g., stones, clouds, and trees) reanimate the world. Following Jane Bennett (2001, 2010), she explains that nonhuman things have a “power to draw children to them; to *enchant* them” (2019, p. 234, emphasis added). Enchantment occurs where one is “struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and everyday” (2001, p. 4), and further, it “entails a state of wonder ... a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound” (2001, p. 5). Enchanted animism explains in part how children can see themselves as “intimately connected with, and part of, elements such as trees, rocks and cloud,” which follows a broader “onto-epistemological framework” that draws humans and other/more-than-human *things* together (2001, p. 5). Indeed, the buffalo’s silence speaks to a lack of predetermination and proscribed meanings regarding how we should or could read and indeed relate to the earth with all its “lively interconnections” (Merewether, 2019, p. 247).

But why this animal? There is a kind of double displacement being effectuated here. The species was originally imported to Australia from Asia and farmed on plains. In the 1950s, vast herds were released from the plains at a time that incidentally coincided with the growth of suburbia, which developed as a “bulwark against communism and class conflict,” upheld by strict societal norms and values (May, 1988, p. 20). The mobility of this doubly displaced animal disrupts the supposed human “ordering” of suburbia and invokes a sense of alterity associated with movement, as Pile and Thrift (1995) outline:

Ideas of movement and travel are bound up with a sense of something other around the corner, a new image-concept that will produce a new subject position or a new subjectivity. In particular, forging such an image-concept requires the recognition of new spatialities. (p. 21)

“Image-concept” can be thought of in terms of the shift experienced by, for example, the first travellers who climbed Everest, or the generation who viewed the first photograph of the earth from the moon. Our image of a “pale blue dot” (to borrow physicist Carl Sagan’s term) gave us a new understanding of our place in the universe and a renewed subjectivity, for the moment we saw our planet from the moon, not only were the concepts of

countries, borders, and nations eradicated, but it seemed silly they had existed in the first place (Sagan, 1994). This subjectivity could not have been achieved without that movement upward and outward in space. Unpacking the notion of the explorer, historian Paul Carter (1992) adds an important perspective, stressing that space explorers were different from travel writers because “they travelled without records” (p. 23). “Their task,” he says, “is to draw the ‘we’ for the first time, to give space a narrative form and hence the possibility of a future history” (p. 23). Using the example of the astronaut again, it could be argued that for the very first time in the history of humankind, we existed as a “we” rather than “us and them.” This realization carries with it ethical responsibilities for planetary care that necessitates “staying with the trouble” of interspecies connectedness (Haraway, 2016). As Merewether (2019) points out, “in times of unprecedented changes to the Earth, loving only humans is what brought us to the trouble in the first place” (p. 247). She explains that in order to heed Haraway’s clarion call, receptiveness and responsiveness to enchantment are critical; that is: “an enchanted and lively world is one in which astonishment is part of everyday experience; a lively world *which tells us what we care about*, what is happening and what can be done” (p. 247, emphasis added).

“The Water Buffalo” offers a crucial orientation toward precisely this kind of enchanted animism and surreality that leads characters to discover *things that they come to care about* with their suburban realm: “whenever we had followed his pointy hoof we’d always been *surprised, relieved and delighted* at what we’d found. And every time we’d say exactly the same thing—“How did he know?” (Tan, 2009, p. 6, emphasis added). We do not discover what the children’s findings are: They are not objectively quantifiable in any familiar or rational terms, but they are nonetheless affective—if at times unsettling, for these encounters bring “surprise,” “delight,” and “relief”—all words that coalesce in the concept of enchantment as defined by Bennett (2001, 2010). In this respect, Tan does not foreclose possibilities for the reader’s imagining as to what may become, which is in keeping with an ethic of responsive modes of learning—one that upholds the centrality of more-than-human others and their ability to enchant human animals (Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015).

Moreover, this question the children repeatedly return to—“How did he know?”—is key, for it can be mapped onto that broader question regarding “knowing” and “being.” Drawing on Karen Barad’s (2007) feminist materialist onto-epistemology, Pauliina Rautio (2013) explains knowing and being as inseparable: “there is no knowing without being, nor being without knowing” (p. 399). The buffalo’s embodied being there reminds us that knowing is a more-than-human issue (Pyyry, 2017). Paying attention *with* the water buffalo is thus a more-than-rational act of responding *to* and noticing: It foregrounds *wandering* as a form of *wondering*. Where they move forward with curiosity, immersing themselves sensuously and intimately with the “liveliness of matter” in Outer Suburbia, the children in this tale enter into a closer relationship with their material surroundings (Merewether, 2019, p. 238). This is a rhizomatic realm that abounds in “lines of flight” as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) knew them: that is, surprising paths of escape and changefulness enacted through unexpected, everyday encounters.

Gilles Deleuze (1994) posits encounter as “something in the world [that] forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of fundamental encounter” (p. 139). Life itself continually evolves through these encounters, which crucially encompass emotion, affect, the unexpected and/or the conflictual. I suggest that the child characters’ initial encounters with the water buffalo in the vacant lot can be read through Haraway’s (2008, 2016) uptake of the “contact zone,” which offers a posthuman perspective on encounters that messily entangle humans and nonhumans, the material and the social, the familiar and the other, and that further common world understandings of child-place and child-animal relations. As Taylor et al. (2013) explain,

Contact zones can be thought of as *times and spaces of strange encounters* that require us to “grapple-with”—they can be transformational. Contact zones require active engagement with the other: *mutual co-shaping involving someones and somethings; and entanglements across borders and cultures.* (p.

54, emphasis added)

The situated and somewhat tentative buffalo-child relations make very clear how contact zones are “shaped through the giving and receiving, the reciprocity and mutual vulnerability, that cohere together within any contact zone” (Land et al., 2020, p. 39). Encounters with this less-than-familiar suburban companion frequently lead to unexpected directions of travel and discovery for the children: a reorientation that is generative of new subjectivities and spatialities. As Haraway (2008) writes, “the point is that contact zones are where the action is, and current interactions change interactions to follow ... Contact zones change the subject—all the subjects—in surprising ways” (p. 219). Although this tale is short (just two pages long), we are told that the water buffalo repeatedly revealed to child characters in this tale that Outer Suburbia is replete with wonders, much like our own world. His wordless direction giving is very much a foil to notions of “instrumental instruction and educator expertise,” which Land et al. (2020, p. 37) note are contingent on “anthropocentric Euro-Western ontologies.” Conversely, he encourages responsive noticing and attending to place and things therein differently (Rautio, 2017), animating in them what Val Plumwood (2002, p. 175) would call “place sensitivity.” This is a key thread in common worlds thinking concerning the potential for “kin making” (Haraway, 2016, p. 103) as becoming with and “*learning with others*” as a mode of inhabiting our interconnected common worlds (Land et al., 2020, p. 32, emphasis in original; Rooney, 2016).

However, we learn that, for most children, the buffalo’s cryptic guidance was not sufficiently immediate:

This was *too frustrating for most of us*. By the time anyone thought to “consult the buffalo,” our problem was usually urgent and required a straightforward and immediate solution. Eventually we stopped visiting him altogether, and *I think he went away some time after that*: all we could see was long grass. (Tan, 2009, p. 6)

During a capital-driven era of fast food, faster transport, and instant modes of communication, time is a commodity of which, like many of us, *most* of the children in this tale apparently do not have enough. This crisis of time and its acceleration, and the attendant panic felt by those who need “straightforward and immediate” solutions to problems, maps more broadly onto very real ecological crises facing our planet today. Plumwood (2007) writes:

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively. We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all. (p. 1)

Thinking *with* the water buffalo requires a reworking of how the child characters come to know and go. It requires an active “grappling with strangeness” as Taylor et al. (2013, p. 54) put it, at the point of the contact zone and a reciprocity that takes place in acts of asking for advice and careful listening. Going onward from that point, as Plumwood (2007) suggests, necessitates an alternative directedness that involves further careful noticing and attending to the complexification of the world beyond assumption of a concrete human social reality, which are forms of valuing and, by extension, *caring about* the multiplicities of places and spaces around us, as well as the things that coexist in dynamic assemblage therein. Given the high-speed nature of our increasingly mobile lives, the buffalo’s pointing toward slowness and the particular—to what is there, and to “what takes place in the moment” (Rautio, 2013, p. 399)—is, I argue, a political act: one that displaces the centeredness of human-centric understanding. Yet he can only remain “companion” as long as he is consulted. A break occurs where the children fail to reciprocate: when they fail to take time to think and to “consult,” and eventually the buffalo leaves of his own volition (we think).

The attentiveness apparent in “The Water Buffalo” is somewhat less playful in “Undertow.” This tale of domestic disquiet foregrounds a relationship in the present. The mapping of bodies in this tale shows how a boy and a dugong are brought together in an other-than-common familiarity. Not only does this shared human-animal responsiveness eschew sentimentality, it troubles existing “caring” relations in the child character’s everyday life, where adults display ambivalence toward the child in the tale.

### “Undertow”

In “Undertow,” we discover a situation that confounds residents who are used to living within hyperindividualized picket-fenced suburban boundaries. The tale begins with a short background on “the house at number seventeen,” which is referred to by its specific number several times within the tale. Suburbia is numbered, quantified, structured, and controlled by external boundaries. A strange breach of these boundaries occurs in this tale, however, when residents are presented with a less-than-familiar visitor. The unexpected arrival of the dugong on the front lawn at the house at number 17 is alien to the inhabitants of suburbia. A watery “other” encroaches upon their territory: “By midmorning, all the neighbours had spotted this mysterious, gently breathing creature. Naturally, they gathered around for a better look” (Tan, 2009, p. 37, see Figure 2, below).

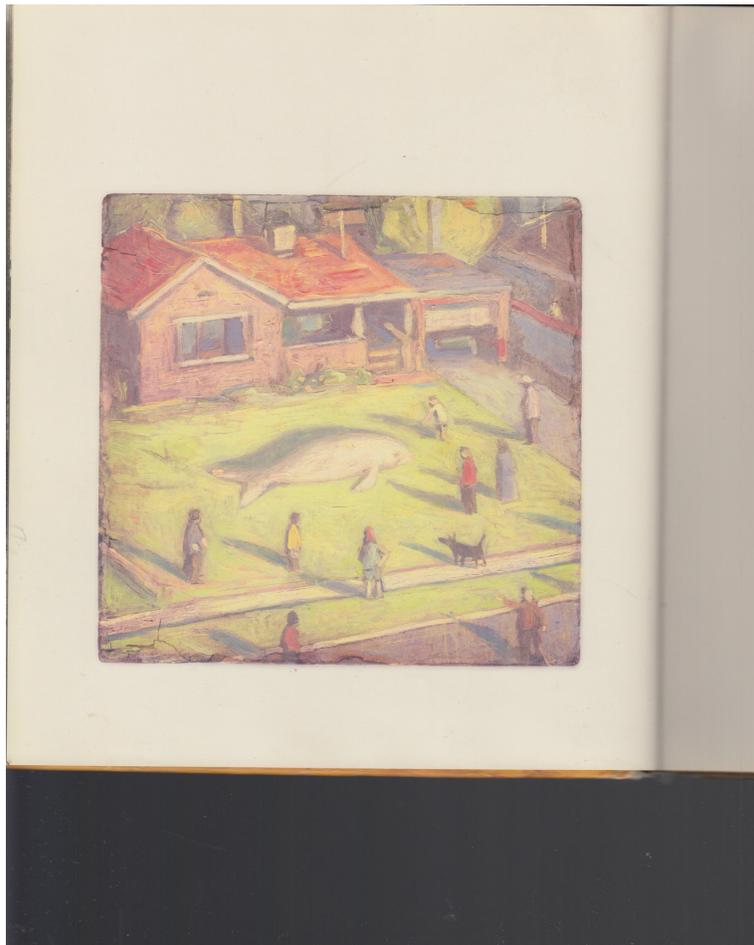


Figure 2. “Dugong on the front lawn at number seventeen,” Shaun Tan, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, p. 36.

The dugong is sited on hostile, uncaring ground just outside the house at number 17. We infer this from Tan's description of the house at number 17, which "was only ever mentioned with lowered voices by the neighbours. They knew well the frequent sounds of shouting, slamming doors and crashing objects" (2009, p. 37). The home is presented as a complicated, adult-dominated environment driven by heated parental power-play. Yet in the midst of this, the dugong's presence on the contact zone of the front lawn sets off a chain of events that effect a transformation from the dispute within the domestic sphere toward relations of responsiveness and connection.

Whereas the landscape in "The Water Buffalo" is characterized by an untamed grassiness and overgrowth, in "Undertow" we discover a kind of darkness as our attention is drawn from the outset to the sounding of a volatile relationship of the couple at number 17. Breaking through their angry discourse, however, a child proclaims the surprising arrival of a most unusual creature on the lawn of the warring couple: "It's a dugong," said a small boy. "The dugong is a rare and endangered plant-eating mammal that lives in the Indian Ocean, of the order Sirenia, family Dugongidae, genus *dugong*, species *D. dugong*" (Tan, 2009, p. 37). The boy articulates quite an extensive knowledge as he details the animal's typical location. However, we are not told how this nameless child has come to know the dugong's identity—we can only *assume* this formalized description derives from an encyclopedia. Furthermore, the child provides this encyclopedic definition without any indication of surprise or expression of delight akin to those children who followed the water buffalo's direction. Indeed, we only have to look to the reactions of the neighbours after the "problem" of the wayward dugong has been resolved to realize the stultifying symptoms of suburban lifestyle: After the creature has gone, we are told that the neighbours "switched impatiently through news channels to see if there was any mention of the dugong, and when there wasn't, concluded that the whole event was probably not as remarkable as they had originally thought" (p. 38). The neighbours' impressions are mediated by external discourses that determine that which is significant. And more: Despite the strange and unexpected events of the day, the screams and shouts of the quarrelling parents resurface as the "major" or dominant discourse. This family home can hardly be regarded as neutral, much less considerate of the effect such constant sparring may have on the child. The child's subsequent actions indicate his desire to be free from the domestic disquiet—just as the dugong was freed from his suburban displacement. The unseen narrator describes how:

Nobody saw the small boy clutching an encyclopaedia of marine zoology leave the front door of that house, creep towards the dugong-shaped patch and lie down in the middle of it, arms by his sides, looking at the clouds and stars, hoping it would be a long time before his parents noticed that he wasn't in his room and came out angry and yelling. (Tan, 2009, p. 38, emphasis added)

In this (very long) sentence, the irregular pace measured out by commas is suggestive of the boy's uneven breathing as he steals across the lawn through the nighttime air. His silent, creeping movement and subsequent lingering under the stars is further reminiscent of the soundless processes of wayfinding in "The Water Buffalo," where the child characters are animated in thinking with the buffalo to consider their suburban surrounds anew. And, as with the specific siting of the water buffalo, located in an empty building lot, in "Undertow," the dugong's legacy is enacted by a very distinct impression on the contact zone front lawn at number 17, which would seem to shift the temporal framing: "the grass that had been underneath the dugong was now unaccountably yellow and dead, as if the creature had been there for years rather than hours" (Tan, 2009, p. 38). The significance of this scene is not apparent at first: The parents quickly forget their quarrelling over the state of the lawn and "the discussion became about something else entirely and an object, maybe a plate, crashed against a wall" (p. 38). It is at this point that the son they ignore escapes out to the lawn to lie in the grassy imprint left behind by the dugong. The second and last illustration on the recto (Figure 3) is of the child lying on the dugong's imprint, with no accompanying text, indicative of the inchoate nature of the encounter.

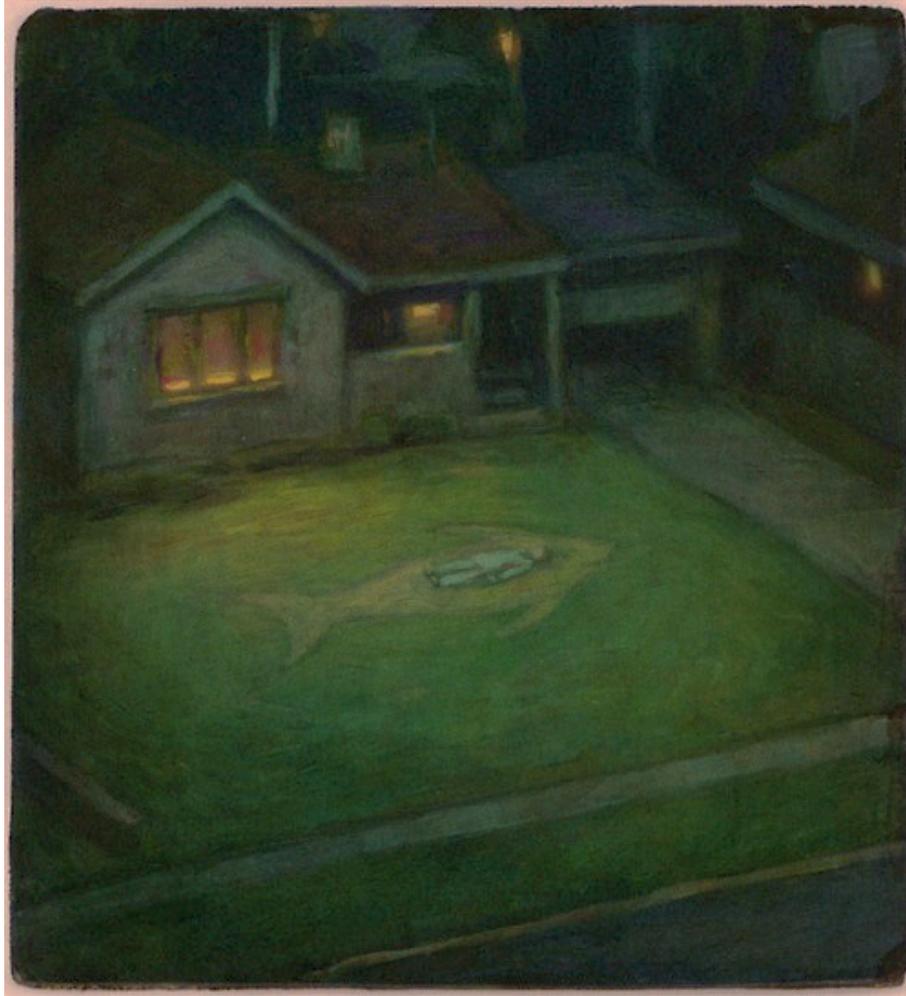


Figure 3. "Boy and dugong," Shaun Tan, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, p. 39.

The soft brushwork portrays the small boy in striking simplicity. Only we as readers are onlookers to this most intimate scene. There are no others: human animals or otherwise. This is the child who previously used his encyclopedic knowledge to recognize and label, leaning on a received knowledge that provides him with a way to address the unknown as it appears on his doorstep, to try to make sense of this unsettling situation. However, the encyclopedic taxonomy appears to be insufficient for the child, who seeks a closer encounter. By choosing to linger on the ground as he does, the child engages with a sense of proximity to the animal who had suffered too, being so displaced from its habitat. The child's experience of suffering occurs not because he is physically displaced but because he feels emotionally unsafe in the less-than-stable and strained domestic environment, an environment from which he feels estranged but in which he feels nonetheless trapped. Tan (n.d.3) describes a childhood memory that provided a source for the story, that of

a boy who lived near our home and seemed to spend almost all of his time hitting a tennis ball against the wall of a brick shed in our local park. It was a bleak and melancholy sight that remained unchanged for years, as if the boy was trapped in a kind of suburban purgatory. (para. 1)

The expression on the boy's face is unreadable. Tan leaves us with ambiguities that resonate with the soundlessness and inscrutability of the water buffalo encountered previously—perhaps as an expression of the child's feelings of

separateness and unresolved longing . But is this really the case? Is his experience so unchanged?

The mapping of the child's body on the impression left behind by the dugong enacts a compelling meeting with alterity within the enduring contact zone, that is, between two species that rarely meet, as with the first tale. Eagle-eyed readers may notice a slight change in the form of the dugong from the live creature depicted in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows that, now that the child is resting there, its fins seem to have moved into a slightly more marked position of movement. The nose is turned upward, and where the actual body looked limp and lifeless—a creature stranded, removed from its habitat—the imprint looks alive and swimming, as if it were an imprint, not of the stranded creature as it was, but of the rehabilitated creature as it now is (Figure 4, below). Even subtler is the patch of darker grass just above the boy's resting head. Is the imprint of the dugong's face smiling at us?



Figure 4. Close-up, "Boy and Dugong," Shaun Tan, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*.

On the contact zone of the neatly manicured lawn, both boy and creature are presented as being still together. Tan makes visible a silent drifting away from the familiar, where bodies map into mutual emergence with each other through what we can describe as an "autotelic practice" of the kind described by Rautio (2013) in her research on spaces of informal education. That is to say, autotelic practices are those which children (and adults) repeatedly engage in for no extrinsic reward or end goal *beyond the act itself*—like making snow angels, or watching clouds morph into animals. Rautio further notes that it is not just humans but also other agential entities that shape and direct these autotelic activities. That is to say, where the boy leaves the home to carefully and deliberately spread his body on the dugong's imprint on the front lawn, he is drawn by a lively "thing-power" (Bennett, 2010), that is, an affective force that brings him into interconnection with the materiality and spatiality of the flattened grass—a lasting imprint that disrupts and contradicts the supposed normalcy of suburban "nature" as contained and controlled. Where the boy compellingly reciprocates by laying his body down, the front lawn becomes a site of companionable connection that further effects an enchanted metamorphosis, that is, the change of the imprinted form that is more than literal, more than rational.

As the child seeks solace and contemplation under the stars on the imprint on the lawn—a quiet reminder of the dugong's presence—mapping his form on the creature's imprint, readers may intuit a soundless movement from disorder toward coherence, harmony, and balance through the shifting expression of the animal's face. Indeed, the very act of lying down horizontally echoes the horizontality of a calm sea, where we as readers hope the dugong will

have reached by this stage. Rather than being simply a record of the past, I suggest that this metamorphosis reflects a reflexive relationship between boy and dugong ongoing in the present. His embodied and affective mapping effects a new spacing for the boy that connects with the possibilities of living earth, that is, the possibility to feel and breathe a living relationship in the present, his body cohabiting the form of an “other,” his head on its head, unmoving beyond this grassy boundary.

The Merriam Webster (2020) definition tells us that an undertow is a law imposed by nature: an “underlying current or force” that is created after waves have broken on the shore (or in this case, after the arrival of a dugong four kilometres inland!). Alternatively, it is a “tendency in opposition to what is apparent,” which is something altogether more subtle. The obliqueness of Tan’s title seems to offer several resonances, the most obvious of which may be the undertow of a wave that drags back from shore toward the sea anything that may be stranded on the sand. Further unpacking the second meaning of “undertow”—that is, a “tendency in opposition to what is apparent”—we might read this as a tendency against human (adult) domination, for example, of animals, or indeed children. By moving outdoors to carefully share the space with the dugong, the boy resists the confinement and control of the adult home environment—his assumed “natural habitat.” To this end, I propose that the underlying force in this tale is a troubling one, for it prompts us to question the care the child receives. In the end, both his parents “eventually appeared without a sound, without suddenness . . . all he felt were gentle hands lifting him up and carrying him back to bed” (Tan, 2009, p. 38). Both the child and the dugong are subsequently lifted and carried to where they are ostensibly better placed: The dugong should certainly not be on a family lawn four kilometres from sea, nor should the child be lying on a lawn deep in the middle of the night, alone. Or should he?

Through this tale, Tan suggests that sometimes adults fail in this duty of care insofar as the child character struggles with the familiar familial forces within his discordant home. This is why the element of surrealism and strangeness made animate by animals is so crucial in Outer Suburbia: both the inscrutable water buffalo and dugong grant the fictional children freedom *within* the suburban strangeness to slow down and linger, to attend carefully, to question and reflect. Neither tale is about finding “ultimate resolution” or a “final peace” as it were, for life is messy, and ongoing encounters with people and other animals can be awkward, unruly, and conflictual (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2017, p. 143). The thematic of strangeness within these tales correspondingly troubles categories of childhood/nature/culture (Duhn et al., 2017), as I now seek to highlight by way of conclusion.

### **Conclusion: Staying with the trouble *beyond* suburbia**

Through my analysis of “The Water Buffalo” and “Undertow,” I have outlined how Tan suggests an alternative to rationalized space as being the only way to “see” and “know” suburbia as a general concept. Childhood, as he presents it, is neither innocent nor timeless. Likewise, he troubles and reimagines that fertile, sticky, and underexplored concept of sub-urban nature as children’s places for learning about self, other, and their interconnected worlds, resisting nostalgia and encouraging thinking *beyond* humanist ontologies. He presents childhood natures that are shifting, unstable, and necessarily entangled. The concept of care in both tales is, by extension, not aligned to *human* meaning making, morals, and mattering; rather, Tan presents the agency of characters within the tales as interrelated (Bartos, 2012; Hohti & Tammi, 2019). Moreover, he points to a *diversity* of species that can be regarded as “kin.” This is crucial given the current ecological crisis that sees the erasure of species on a global scale (Williams, 2009, p. 45).

Central to both tales discussed in this article is the theme of finding a space of/for displacement, strangeness, and surreality within suburbia and childhood, and to this end Tan helps readers think in new ways about child-animal relationships that make nuanced the caring relations that emerge between child and creature within each tale.

Differing elements of displacement link “Undertow” and “The Water Buffalo.” In both, the unexpectedness of the animals’ presence bewilders and beguiles us as readers: Tan (2012) explains that this suffusion of surrealism works by “waking us up from the complacency of ordinary recognition” (n.p.). He adds, “it is that through strangeness we arrive at a kind of clarity, like looking at things from a distance” (n.p.). This can only happen, however, when child characters stop trying to make *sense* of the strangeness, the dislocation, and instead *become-with* animal, as Haraway (2016) suggests. In his role as silent cartographer, the water buffalo bestows alternative directedness on child characters that they otherwise would not have discovered had they adhered to exclusively human ways of knowing and going. Importantly, the buffalo’s silence, his refusal to say toward *where* he was pointing, and his subsequent departure firmly contradict acts of locating and defining as humancentric forms of knowing. Indeed, to locate is to survey and define limits, a “process of negation” in the sense that “you know where you are not” (Bulson, 2009, p. 24). This concept of location rests purely on spatial relationships, and as Bulson (2009) explains, when mapping is restricted to this sense, it is reduced to an “act of translation,” or rather, a mode of “spatial representation” that fails to account for its inherent potential (p. 24). At issue here is the notion of containment, which, considered in relation to the “space” of children’s literature, connotes Kimberley Reynolds’ (2010) anxieties regarding “a space that is simultaneously highly regulated and overlooked” (p. 3). This space translates to children’s and young people’s everyday lived experiences and often unnecessarily restricted mobilities (Cresswell, 1996; Tuan, 2001).

By contrast, a special kind of movement is animated through child-animal encounters in Tan’s first tale, one which foregrounds open-ended engagement and interconnectedness with the children and animal’s material surrounds through wandering as a form of wondering. As Bennett (2010) would put it, we do not tread lightly in our environment but rather live “as one of many conative actants swarming and competing with each other” (p. 122). Haraway (2008) prefers to articulate this flurry of ongoingness, alterity, urgency, and mutuality as one of *shared* movement, that is, becoming-with across the contact zone. The young boy in “Undertow” is attempting an urgent process of wayfinding as he tries to escape his experiences of suffering within the home, if only for a short time. The changing imprint of the dugong presents to us a strange but significant relationship in the present that offers an alternative to parental relationships as hurt-full records of the past. And it also hints at the difference between the sort of knowledge that can be derived from an encyclopedia of marine zoology as opposed to deeper-rooted embodied place wisdoms and associated autotelic practices that communicate a vital need for attunement and responsiveness to the precarity and changefulness of one’s environment *beyond* the threshold of the home.

Dislocation in both tales is a consequence of movement—specifically, movements “off the map” so to speak. Through the motif of mapping, Tan creates a suburban world that, although it draws references from our own, chiefly draws readers’ attention to dilemmas facing the humans *and animals* by the use of the surreal. Both species in these tales typically belong to a herd, but in Outer Suburbia they are positioned as being “on the move” in a different way—an unsettling and noninnocent way—and the isolated animals are thus arguably metonymic, standing more broadly for the changing conditions of many species at risk in our troubled world, hence they are *more than* companion animals in these stories. And yet, neither of these tales—nor any other in this collection—foregrounds that overt message of planetary care. Rather, I argue that what is at play here is a more nuanced *troubling* effort of reconnecting and reimagining in the present, which speaks to Duhn et al.’s (2017) proposition, in which they ask:

Are we already beyond teaching to “care for the planet” (Heise 2008), and instead should focus on how childhood/nature/urban as concepts need to be transformed, so to afford a *better set of grounds for engagement with the changing conditions our species—as one among many—is facing?* (p. 1359, emphasis added)

In addition to the inherent surreality and strangeness, both tales are further underpinned by *slow* movements: lingering, pausing, and stopping altogether to lie down, flat upon the earth. Through unhurried processes of deliberation, noticing, and attending to that which is present, Tan's characters discover pathways of possibility with/in the strangeness of Outer Suburbia: pathways that I argue afford precisely what Duhn et al. are calling for: a "better set of grounds for engagement with the changing conditions our species ... is facing." Caring begins at ground and pavement level, as we see in both stories: It is, quite literally, grassroots, starting from the immediate locale. Moreover, although the effects of these caring relations are not realized until the animals in these tales have both gone, the entangled bonds of care endure long enough *for the tale to be told*: to be remembered, recounted, and passed on. There is an element of responsibility and accountability that underpins the exchanging and telling of stories such as these (an act of care in itself): tales that possess potential for engaging readers—both younger and older—in thinking with the liveliness of our own more-than-human world that is so full of wonder, and not so unlike Outer Suburbia.

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