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Bewildering the legacy effects of Gail Melson's wild things/ animals/children

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ABSTRACT

This article bewilders dominant discourses about child-animal relations by acknowledging and challenging the work of Gail Melson who positions animals as providing emotional, social and pedagogical support for children. Melson's psychological approach rests upon implicit assumptions that shape and support anthropocentrism whilst also critiquing a utilitarian approach to animals in educational learning spaces. The legacy effects of this approach are steeped in neoliberal discourse that entangle with pedagogy and practice. Unless modified these effects pass through generations as sticky webs of knowability that are difficult to contest. Research from Australia and Finland, framed by critical posthuman and relational ontologies, unsettles these effects to reconfigure child-animal relations as fluid and situated. 'Bewildering education' grants insights into historical political legacies that can be traced in education policy, practice and theory preoccupied with knowledge development, relations and meaning-making around the productive 'good' human subject. Child-animal relations expose complex and far-reaching effects of early childhood because processes of becoming and being human with other animals provides spaces for knowing 'difference' as a constituting force that disrupts anthropocentric relations with the world. Building a political history of animals that pays attention to agency and ethical relations reconfigures and reconstitutes animal species, not as objects of pedagogical inquiry, but rather as subjects and fellow earth dwellers.

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Introduction

Pioneers are defined as those who explore or settle in a new country or area. In more abstract terms pioneering refers to the first to pursue something new – an idea, a method, an activity that becomes part of a bigger movement. Pioneer status is thus granted in retrospect, as a recognition for discovery. The colonialist legacy of 'discovering' and claiming place is a well-known erasure of existing relations, engagements and knowledges that has been significantly experienced by Indigenous habitants of settler places.

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The more metaphorical pioneering discussed in this issue and this paper – that of crafting new ideas and approaches is equally entrenched in colonialist histories of such accomplishments and original discovery. The animal turn can be linked to these ideas of pioneering as the impact of the more-than-human to human thinking and discovery has recently become established in the social sciences and humanities (Ohrem and Bartosch 2017; Weil 2010) as an academic interest. This turn or discovery, however, also echoes the colonialist heritage of pioneering in that it dismisses how Indigenous thinkers and scholars have rehearsed more-than-human thinking for millennia before the pioneers entered the stage. ‘When we cite European thinkers who discuss the “more-than-human” but do not discuss their Indigenous contemporaries who are writing on the exact same topics, we perpetuate the white supremacy of the academy’ (Todd 2016; 18). For non-Indigenous scholarship, serious focus on the status of animal species and human-animal-environment relations, beyond that of utilitarian function, has entered new ground during the past 30 years, emerging as a process of self-critique rather than claiming as if uncharted territory. The animal turn signifies a counter-discourse to the normalising dominance of humancentric social science discourse where ‘animals have been edging toward the mainstream’ (Ritvo 2004; 205) however, the prevalence of humanist assumptions persists. This paper emphasises how child-animal relations are still theorised within dominant humanist discourses focused on development and education as a monospecies phenomenon (Pedersen and Pini 2017; Rautio, Tammi, and Hohti 2021; Snaza 2013; Weaver and Snaza 2017).

American psychologist Gail Melson pioneered assigning serious attention to children’s relationships with other animals. While recognising the importance of her legacy, we bewilder and question the still human-centred focus on human children and their development. The process of bewildering can be understood as troubling seemingly settled and tamed phenomena and explanations, legacies even. Methodologically it leans on the recently emerged approach of post-qualitative inquiry (e.g., Lather and Pierre 2013) where intentional bewildering and confusing, complicating, slowing down and hesitating, are used to explore and to multiply – rewild – the possible versions and future directions of a given phenomenon (e.g., Rautio et al. 2022; Young, Crinall and Malone 2022).

Melson’s ‘Why the Wild Things are: Animals in the Lives of Children’ (2001) explores the psychological and historical impacts of how children engage with animals over a decade with ‘real and symbolic animals’ (4). It was the first such book published by a major publisher and has been translated to Chinese, French and Japanese. It continues to be widely cited in literature on early childhood and adolescence (eg., Ding et al. 2023; Jalongo 2023; Steel 2023), thus contributing to the pioneering status of her research. Melson’s book and subsequent publications, especially the highly cited entry in a handbook on animal-assisted therapy (Melson and Fine 2015) frames child-animal relations through the conception of child development, asking what animals might offer human child development, with barely a mention of the development of the animal species they encounter. While mindful of respect towards other living beings (Bone 2013), this legacy keeps effecting a human-centred interest to study why the ‘wild things are’ – and how they focus on the benefits to the desired development or education of a human child.

Within education and childhood studies, Melson’s influential legacy affirms the study of child-animal engagements in the adult-led contexts of schooling, education,

pedagogy, or therapy, often leaving everyday life environments or the viewpoints of children themselves, let alone the lives and interests of other animals, untouched (e.g., Rautio, Tammi, Hohti 2021). Melson (2001; 2002b) acknowledges how her field of study paid little attention to the relationship between children and animals and that she too ignored this in her prior teaching, writing, and research, despite animals being present in early childhood learning spaces. Melson also identifies ‘that the historical roots of psychology work against a psychology of human nonhuman animal relationships’ (Melson 2002b; 348) because it focuses on human behaviour and mental processes.

Melson (2003) details psychological and educational benefits of child-animal contact and how companion animals such as dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, guinea pigs and mice in homes and classrooms can stimulate children’s cognitive development and language as children are curious and eager to learn about animals. Melson (2011) also identifies that because companion animals, especially dogs, both give and receive affection, they can contribute to and partially fulfil children’s attachment needs. Bonds that children form with animals help to support emotional wellbeing through the social catalyst effect (2003) that can lessen social anxiety as animals can create pathways for social interactions. The pairing of children with companion animals for Melson (2003) offers powerful stimuli for learning, as children’s interest in animals is evident when infants are learning animal names and how they live and communicate and this knowledge is retained if children are also emotionally invested in meaningful relationships with companion animals. Melson (2001) notes that not all teachers share this enthusiasm for animals in the education context, and she voices concerns that animals can become objects of scientific inquiry, absent in the bustle of the educational context, in contrast to being beloved members of a family. Opened to the ‘animal’ Melson reassigns developmental concepts from social and cognitive development, attachment theory and behaviourism (2002b) and moral reasoning (2013a), to consider how animals can be brought under the psychological umbrella.

The questions we pose in our bewildering are thus not meant to undo the legacy of Melson’s work, but to indicate what has been overlooked and to make room for the vitality of other ways to know and to attend to children, other animals and the ecologies they share. The naming of the ‘animal’ in this paper acknowledges how such terminology is shifting and different disciplines and paradigms adopt different terms such as ‘more-than-human’ that also extends to earthly elements and lifeforms. Our use of the term ‘animal species’ concede the breadth of animal life that cannot be reduced to a single category (Young 2019) and ‘other animals’ that also recognises the human animal without using the hierarchical ‘nonhuman’ nomenclature.

We begin with three legacy effects that regularly appear in Melson’s (2003; 2011; 2011; 2013a; 2013a; 2015; 2002a; 2002b; 2020a; 2020b) writings. First, the child-animal bond is a relationship of mythical proportions and importance to childhood and the future adult in the making. Second, the tendency that Melson has to privilege the wild animal and ‘wilderness’, mourning the loss of these encounters in the lives of children. Third is the role of agency in these relatings: the agentic child plays a role in Melson’s research, whereas the agentic animal is missing or only partially granted agency. Two narratives from Finland and Australia are presented that resist developmental reasoning located in the individualised child by decentring the human, intending to show the inclusion of other

species into scholarship on childhood and early years education not only nominally, but at an ontological level. Relational ontologies guide us to approach child-animal relations as situated events that come into being and gain their existence because of inextricably interwoven relations present, conditioning each other's existence (Ceder 2018). Consequently, human development becomes only one explanation and the nature and significance of such relations expand. We conclude by discussing ways to bewilder relations with animal species in childhood. Melson brought this to the attention of the early childhood community with claims that child-animal relations were ignored. We press further by saying that animal species have also been ignored, misunderstood, concealed and oppressed. We do not aim to write a final statement, rather we see this as an inquiry into reconfiguring critical relational, animal ethics for early childhood education.

The legacy effects of the child-animal bond

The western configuring of the world permeates with western ancient Greek and religious ontological assumptions that divide the world with binary logic that separates humans and animals through a logic of hierarchal difference. We observe from Melson (2003; 2002b; 2020a) that knowledge is located in human rational minds (Murriss et al. 2021) with the child at the centre of the humanist developmental project that is firmly attached to the ideals of making good humans who flourish at the centre of things (Young and Bone 2020). Little space is given for knowing animal species in ways that attune with them as feeling, thinking, caring family members who also experience attachments, or communicate in diverse ways. By resisting the hierarchical classifications of such binary logic, it is possible to move beyond the developmental traps of the child-animal bond. We start by noting the emphasis that Melson (2001) places on this bonding process with two concepts. The first is that these relations are natural and universal, where they occur with children in most geographical and cultural locations of the world. The second is that animals are good for children as they influence social and emotional, language and cognition skills teaching them how to be good humans who care for and about others.

Melson (2002b; 2020b) aligns with theories that execute ideas about the natural and universal 'child-animal bond' such as ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson 1984). Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis claims that the universal human instinct to care for all life is especially strong in children (Melson 2001) where children are born 'hardwired' with a natural predisposition and attraction towards animals. Melson builds a case for this approach recognising how children must 'gain a sense of their own place in a multispecies world' (Melson 2001, 199) and that these bonds and hardwired connections help children affiliate with other living organisms. From this certainty of the psychological paradigm of hegemonic and essentialised relations the child's needs and interests are foremost, presenting the only possible approach to childhood-animal relations.

Melson disseminates this depiction of universality in ways that homogenise childhoods with broad assumptions about what constitutes the makings of such relatings, overlooking differences across geographical-cultural contexts. Born (2014) affirms Melson's (2011) influence noting how adults consume animals for companionship and the products that are produced from them, whereas young children seem to value animals

because they are who they are and ‘children’s innate love for animals seems to be universal’ (Born 2014; 8). Universalising child-animal relations pays little attention to multispecies or cross-cultural research in majority world and marginalised communities. Such understandings not only essentialise children (and humans) but idealise and categorise animal species that deny complexity of animal lifeworlds. Do children really have an affinity for all animals – mosquitoes and monkeys, rats and racoons, the stray dog and the one who sleeps on their bed? DeMello (2012) also rehearses this familiar instrumental reasoning of the significance of child-animal relations in the humanist project where animals help children understand their humanity through transferable skills and values.

Children relate to animals, and, since at least the Victorian age, adults have understood that they could use the natural affinity between children and animals to teach valuable social skills. Through reading about animals, children learn empathy, relationship skills, kindness, and compassion. First, children identify with animals, and from identification comes empathy. If children empathize with animals then it is much easier for them to empathize with other humans as well, and to learn the difference between treating someone right and treating someone wrong. (DeMello 2012, 330)

The second developmental trap of such universality is that child-human relations are filled with wonder, like a magical elixir for children’s development and growth. These idealised connections do an injustice to human and animal for they neither tell the story of what is taking place nor study the complexities of these encounters from a deeper attentiveness to the child or animal. Melson (2020a) defines child-animal relationships and social interaction, as dynamic interchange, however, she makes a distinction between actual social interaction (two or more individuals physically present) and constructed ideals such as imaginary play with animal others where the child has all the control and rehearses ways of relating without engaging in actual relationships. Referring to her empirical studies, Melson states that classroom animals ignite great wonder and demand care, but that caring can also go wrong and instil unwanted lessons if not carefully directed by adults (see Melson discussed in Bone 2013). Melson importantly recognises child-animal interactions as sociality, but instils a developmental view onto it, distinguishing between ‘actual’ and ‘rehearsed’, and thus implying that the measure of social interaction lies outside of the interaction itself. The children in the child-animal relations, even in the imaginary ones, do not have complete control over how they perform sociality but are seen in somewhat universal, albeit culturally specific, adult-imposed frames. Furthermore, the ‘social’ is defined as human sociality with little acknowledgement of the social needs of individuals of other species, nor the possibility of specific and situated interspecies socialities.

In contrast, nuanced and complex animal relations foreground emergent and complex aspects of animal sociality previously disregarded as relevant for their wellbeing (Brakes 2019; Cudworth 2011; Kramer and Meunier 2019). The animal species typically seen in classrooms such as rabbits, fish, guinea pigs, chickens and hermit crabs can be understood as social beings leading complex social lives (Young 2024). They do not flourish in isolation or with only human company. Rather, socialisation and cultural transmission support learnt, species specific behaviours observed in a wide array of species (Whitten 2021), between parents, offspring and peers. By not broadening the scope of ‘relationship’ or ‘kinship’, ‘interaction’ or ‘communication’, Melson (2020b) perpetuates the idea that

a relationship is one of intentional and mutual interaction between individuals. What kind of co-living might this emphasis on relationships exclude? Ingold's (2013a) notion of correspondence, is a fruitful rival of relationships and interaction: giving the example of a kite being flown, Ingold argues, 'flyer and air do not so much interact as correspond' (2013a, 101). Correspondence is thus a parallel relation with the world in which the focus is not on independent entities but on the nature and quality of the correspondence; how the world is mutually constituted (6–7; see also Hackett and Rautio 2019).

Narrative one: bewildering child-animal relations: a story of significant others

The following narrative from a research project in Finland (Tammi et al. 2020) highlights a child-animal relationship that lacks the characteristics of what Melson would categorise as a relationship. This story aligns with Ingold's (2013a) concept of correspondence, showing alternative relating to the developmental approaches that Melson's legacy affirms. In this project, we were seeking children's perspectives and experiences about their relations to important other animals in their lives. We realised that virtually all research that existed about children's relations to other animals, at that time, was produced from the viewpoint of onlooking adults, and assessed the usefulness of animal contacts to children, particularly for their development. These included the benefits to socio-emotional, cognitive or moral development, to motor skills, or to preventing allergies. Hardly anyone had paused to ask children what mattered to them in their important animal relationships. And virtually all research focused on companion animals: dogs and cats (Tipper 2011b, 2011b) again disregarding what children themselves consider animal relations. We engaged in a year of multispecies ethnographies which sought children who considered themselves to have important animals in their lives. We worked with the children in places they spent time with these animals and by engaging in participant observation. We concentrated on the children who had culturally unconventional relationships with animals.

It is a spring afternoon and I welcome an eight-year-old child into my home. He comes with his father who says that his son has been eagerly waiting for this meeting. We decided to meet at my home because I have lots of companion birds and the boy is a self-confessed bird-maniac for many years but doesn't have companion birds inside his house but enjoys watching wild birds outside. For his bird-enthusiasm to be recognised as a child-animal relationship, the distinction between owning companion birds and watching wild birds is crucial: the focus on a relationship that Melson discusses, requires one or more particular animal individuals who stay the same. Birdwatching might be an interest and a hobby, but it is not recognised as a child-animal relation culturally nor in research.

The father explains that as parents they have no idea where this interest in birds originates as they are not especially interested in nature-related activities. I guide the father to wait in another room and ask the child if he would like to come with me to greet my birds. As soon as he sees my budgies - four of them at the time - flying free inside the house, he begins to talk about his interest in birds. He proceeds to tell me that he has binoculars and attends a bird club, watches documentaries about birds and is just really, really, really interested in all kinds of birds. I tell him about the injured wild birds that I take care of and show him pictures from my phone. He can identify all the species, even the most difficult ones. Then he begins to tell me something special, I know this because his eyes light up and he becomes excited. He tells

me that he sometimes invents new bird species. That he might dream about a new bird and draw it quickly in the morning, or that an idea about a new bird species just comes to him. He then says how he imagines how they look, and what they eat, how they behave and what kinds of sounds they make. He says he pretends to be each of the birds he invents. Explaining this he climbs to stand on my couch and asks if he can show me. I say 'yes'. He jumps off the couch waving his hands, 'this is how I try out and imagine what it would be like to be that bird'. He sometimes develops hybrid birds that are half-human and half-bird, sometimes even with machine-like body parts that can dig underground. He says he has many drawings of invented birds. I ask him if he wants to bring some over the next time we meet. He says he will. We continued to discuss birds but the most spectacular thing I had witnessed did not end up in my recording. The boy jumping off my couch and exuberantly showing how he explores the newly invented bird species with his own body.

What kind of child-animal relationship are we witnessing in this story? There is no individual animal that the boy is relating with. But he chooses to spend his time with the diversity that one species offers. He delights at sights of birds with his binoculars on bird trips, he loves spending time learning to identify birds with the help of books, he dreams about birds and invents new species. He is in relation with not even one particular imaginary bird but 'birdness' itself! He is delighted, invested, and caring in his relationships with birds. But is this a relationship, or a hobby, or a special interest? What do we call it? For it matters what things are called – different framings produce different possibilities for different kinds of relationships.

If we consider the boy's affections towards birds a relationship then we need to expand our thinking of what are significant child-animal relations, and significant for whom – who benefits? The legacy effects of Melson's scholarship established in developmental psychology are, however, only a sliver of how these engagements could and should be studied. The more situated, critical, cultural-historical and political approaches can shed light on the stories and frames of understandings we continually miss.

Inspired by the story of the boy and birdness, we propose going beyond thinking about child-animal relationships through two individual bodies and embracing a more relational ontology instead. If a relationship is de-individualised, could it be thought of as a space? A relational space of potentialities, a space that enables certain kinds of thinkings and doings – and so whoever and whatever share that space, are drawn to that space, are in relations through being part of the same enabling elements and surroundings. So, to recognise child-animal relationships and to focus on their significant social qualities involves looking for spaces that seem to invite children and other beings and sustain an engaged sharing of that space. Where Melson (2013a) would argue that to be called a genuine social relation, a child-animal relationship would have to entail mutual interaction, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) points us away from interacting individuals – the traditional focus of psychology – towards the structures that frame it. What we share in our sociality are not individual subjectivities but that which allows us to share. '[C]ommunication is not an instrument of Being: communication *is* Being, and Being *is*, as a consequence, nothing but the incorporeal by which bodies express themselves to one another' (Nancy 2000, 93). Child-animal bodies co-exist, side-by-side, sharing the conditions of their existence with differing vulnerabilities and members of a community (Hackett and Rautio 2019).

The boy's parents present a mystery: not knowing how or why their son is so intensely interested in birds. But they admire and support this interest regardless. The boy has a mystery: he is working with the idea of birdness through embodied knowing

and inventing answers – new bird species – to explore the phenomenon of there being birds in the world. Rather than only seeking to master all the birds through scientific means, which he also does, he seeks to know birds and birdness as an embodied and sensuous way of being, and through artistic representation and visual study.

The legacy effects of the wild animal

The significance of contact with animals for children's development is important for Melson (2013a) where she positions contact with, and knowledge about wild animals, more highly than child-pet relations (Melson 2001). The question of wildness is a complex one, for Melson (2013a) with many liminal categories such as wild animals that cohabit the same spaces with humans (squirrels, fox, rats), or wild animals who depend on humans (birds relying on feeding, falconry, zoo animals), or invasive animals such as dogs, cats or introduced animals that have become displaced moving from domestication to becoming wild or untamed. Melson (2013a) addresses conflicting contexts of animal species such as rabbits who cross boundary positions where they can be defined as pets, food, pests and a wild animal, and she proposes hierarchal gradations rather than clear definitions of wildness. Similarly, unpacking the notion of contact, she reports that like wildness, contact or access to wild animals is completely context dependent, ranging from touch to admiration from afar, and that contact with wild animals should consequently be considered an historical-cultural construction. Important blind spots remain. In this discourse the wild animals are given much more freedom and contextual understanding than human children – allowed to remain a mystery to be solved by other disciplines, such as ethology and biology. The notions of 'child' or 'development' are not unpacked or cultural-historically evaluated. Rather they are kept as universals and the discourse of measuring the exact impact on the child. Adult mediation of animal contacts imposes cultural scripts to disturb the objective study of development, or the learning of correct biological facts (Melson 2013a).

The shifting absence/presence of animal species in children's lives creates confusing categorisation of animal species with hierarchal relations. Melson (2001) proclaims direct child-wild animal relations are of utmost importance and are diminishing from childhood experience as they become mediated across the vicarious nature of children's experiences with animals through picture books, visits to zoos and farms to see wild animal species from a distance. Privileged 'exotic' animals of childhood who live 'out there' in nature not as kin but in alphabet books, colonised collections of lions, tigers and elephants in zoos and the happy farm tales that pervade childhood. 'More and more, children encounter both wild animals and farm animals only dimly and at several removes' (Melson 2001; 28). Melson (2020b) notes.

Even children living in less industrialized societies . . . are meeting wild animals 'at a remove'. Thus . . . now observing wild animals primarily in nature documentaries, through popular television programs such as Animal Planet and in cartoon depictions. These presentations shape emotions using background music and film editing to create cultural depictions of animals through narrow lenses where they perform 'amusing antics' or frightening predation and killing. (1225)

The allure of Melson's wild animals perpetuate an outmoded legacy effect established in colonialism. Contact with such wildness can be dangerous; interaction is contentious when the animal might bite, sting, crush or injure the human child. In most majority world contexts that coexist with such animals a respectful distance is maintained, for these relations are not the idealised, wondrous ones observed by Melson who laments that wild animals have become missing from the lives of children without identifying the geo-political-environmental influences for such loss to animal habitats, populations and ecosystems. Melson (2013a) instead grieves for the loss of these animals in the lives of western children and yet these animals have always been in states of flux. Their existence has been controlled by colonising market forces that shift mobility, alter habitats and relocate animals as utilitarian global products for entertainment, for the pet market, education, science experimentation and food, becoming corralled into ever decreasing territories. The translocation and migration of animal species test the boundaries of nature and culture and contest how mainstream scientific disciplines perceive and centre human knowing to the exclusion of other ways of knowing and ordering the world.

In more recent writings Melson (2020b) writes within a childhoodnature approach and yet this is still firmly attached within human domains of child development. The concept of childhoodnatures aligns with the work of Haraway's naturecultures (Haraway 2003) – a synthesis of nature and culture that recognises their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed. Naturecultures bewilder the nature-culture binary, rejecting that humans are the only species capable of producing knowledge and openings are sought between the wild things/children/animals that are the focus of this paper. For Melson, childhoodnature is still tilted towards the human experience and the ever-present romanticising of idealised relations of the child-animal bond 'which returns children (and all humans) to the environments in which they evolved, the buzzing, blooming natural world of other living things' (Melson 2020b; 1223).

Unlike contact with wild animals, the everyday animals that children encounter are not subjected to the same ethical considerations or level of interest in Melson's (2013a) research. Where are the rats, backyard birds and invertebrate species that children encounter in their everyday lives, in many countries? Melson (2020a) later acknowledges the place of urban animal species even terming them 'wild' and how encounters with squirrels, possums, bees, worms, are rarely thought of as wild animal experiences. 'Yet, these experiences may be important developmentally' (2013, 8).

There is growing recognition of the ways children – even those in dense urban centers – encounter untamed animals of all kinds. Children acquaint themselves with animals not just in zoos and aquariums, but through everyday activities like backyard wild bird feeding, beachcombing, or digging in a patch of dirt. (Melson 2020a, 210)

Wilderness for Melson represents an exoticized childhood, a place to learn about, a place to visit, a place of value for children to experience with exclamations of concern for diminished childhoods when they become disconnected from it (Louv 2005). These representation and categorisations of animal species perpetuate the binary logic of separation between wild and

domestic animals. Wild animals are part of nature, often untouched by humans, 'while domestic animals are extensions of human sociality, degraded creatures who invade and harm wilderness' (Peterson 2013, 13). These binaries between humans and animals, humans and nature and domestic and wild animals are symptomatic of the bifurcation from the natural world and privileging one animal encounter as being more superior for the growth, development and cognition of children immortalises acts of speciesism and anthropocentrism.

The legacy effects of the agentic child and the absent animal

The legacy effects of the agentic child are also part of the humanist experience, first to know the child through psychological states of 'intentions, emotions and personality' (Melson et al. 2009; 545) and second to define how the individual western child participates in decision-making, speaks up, is self-aware and able to make changes that effect their lives. Agency is perceived as lurking within human bodies and minds as desires, waiting to be unleashed when the time arises. Oswell (2013) defines children's agency far more broadly as a relational ontology, as 'children's capacity, as both individuals and as collectives, to "make a difference"' (6) for the ability to directly or indirectly influence or determine how something is done. Hartnug (2011) argues how agency plays into neoliberal discourses to produce a child responsible for their own development. These neoliberal discourses also render the animal absent as capitalist production and consumption is mobilised creating regimes of truth to support political, educational and economic interests where animals are exploited, objectified and oppressed. For Melson, animals are passive: responding not interpreting or structuring encounters with little attention to animality and agency. The animal is an entity first an individual body, a category and not considered actively and intentionally engaged relationally. The construction of power as property only makes sense within a logic that privileges entities in this way, dependent on the will of humans to ignite, notice or give permission for such actions to take place, rather than interpreting the encounters or possibilities for thinking about animals with care, as beings with their own lifeworlds. Within relational ontologies (Escobar 2017, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) agency is contextualised and distributed in time and space, across the collective of diverse human and more-than-human configurations that does not presuppose subject-object and nature-culture binaries. Relationality between entities is a constitutive element of their existence where these relations are entangled within a multi-directional nature culture continuum and not separated by the illusion of nature culture boundaries. Braidotti (2019) elucidates how we are connected, but not the same and this approach to relational being is the process of differing togetherness. There is an intra-action between agency and context where social, political and cultural structures limit agency. Hence agency is a relational concept (Oswell 2013) and is not context or value free. In many communities' young children are not encouraged to make decisions, animals can bite back in ways that are neither passive nor absent as animals express many 'forms of resistance against human ordering' (Wadiwel 2018; 530).

Animal lifeworlds and animality are mostly unknown to children. These absent 'biohomogenised', biomedicalised and industrialised animals sequestered from sight both industrially and epistemologically' (Acari, Probyn-Rapsey, and Singer 2021, 943) are part of the legacy effects that perpetuate this silence with anthropocentric

visions and blind spots of biophilic relations. Adams' (1990) concept of the 'absent referent' shows how animals become absent in the animal industrial complex (AIC) both literally and figuratively through consumption where they become products, through habitat loss, extinction and impacts of climate change, and through language that renames them. For example, slaughtered baby cows are renamed meat/proteins/veal or a mouse in a home is named as a pet, but when they escape their enclosure and breed with other mice, they are renamed a pest (Young 2019). The absent referent is both absent and present as a transformed thing. 'The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present' (Adams 1990; 66). Wadiwel (2015) argues that human relationships with billions of animals are essentially hostile and this war against animals is founded on violence. The blurring and bewildering of the nature-culture dualism should not deny the embedded violence in these relations nor use humane education, attentiveness, entanglements or ethics of care in ways that are 'pitted against a falsified theory of human interest' (Celermajer et al. 2023, 44).

Multispecies entanglements (Haraway 2008; 2014) can also be paved with anthropocentric machinations, sometimes camouflaged with posthuman rhetoric, or even within an ethic of care; whilst denying or overlooking the impact and violence of the IAC (Giraud 2019). Noske (1989) describes the IAC as a key concept for analysing the exploitation of nonhuman animals on an industrial scale, and how different industries are interrelated within legal, state-sanctioned frameworks, so that together they form a 'complex'. The effects of this complex are known in childhood, in homes, schools and communities and so must be part of what is seen, known, and sensed about child-animal relations for children in learning to love and consume animals through these seamless networks where they are taught compassion for a minority of animals at the same time as being taught to ignore the exploitation and suffering of the majority (Cole and Stewart 2014; Pedersen 2011; Stewart and Cole 2009; Young 2019). Relational ontologies also sideline animal species through entanglements that blend species in common worlds where difference and the alterity of the other is lost. More-than-human relationality has been defined as entanglements with 'things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and human' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; 1).

Attending to animal agency and animality minimises trading one form of human subjectivity (human supremacy) with another (posthumanist subjectivity). 'Rather, we must cease thinking about, acting on, and relating to animals as if their ontological status is for us' (Pedersen 2019; 8). Theorising with humanism and posthumanism has led us to partner these ontologies with critical animal studies as a reminder of the heavy liability on the other animal when species meet. As Ingold (2013b) suggests, agency and animacy 'pull in opposite directions', (248) as agency is attached to cognitive intentions of mostly humans, and animacy involves being alive to the world through attention, vitalism, growth, and becoming. We argue that drawing attention to the legacy effects through which ideologies within childhood and education are constructed can be helpful in evaluating normative perceptions that are present in psychological or biological measures. Melson's legacies reify the child as agentic and the animal as absent and we contend that relational ontologies welcome messier, divergent, context-dependent understandings of participatory practice for both children and animal species. These

relations shape us to the extent that it is impossible to know an individual, or even a species, universally.

Narrative two: bewildering by making tracks on Boonwurrung Country

The following narrative attends to relational onto-epistemologies that emerged within a research inquiry (Young 2019) situated in a suburban Australian early childhood education setting within an independent school where children and animals come together on 42 hectares of traditional Boonwurrung Country, in the south-eastern region of Melbourne. The generative ways young children experience and shape dynamic relationships with, and as animal species occurred in four family homes with children, their parents and grandparents, and the animals they live with. This school was ideal for multispecies ethnographies as many animal species live on the property including Kosi the dog living with Joe the outdoor education teacher (See Young and Bone 2020). A large lake attracts water birds, and there are rabbits, foxes, cows, sheep, birds and alpacas. Stick insects, chickens, yabbies, turtles are some of the more contained animals that assemble specifically as early childhood classroom animals. Data was generated through multispecies ethnography with 25 children aged five-to-six years, over a six-month period involving walking, roaming, talking, observing and sensing.

Commitments to noticing, attuning-with and integrating animality moved beyond traps of humanist modes of researching-animal. The intention to invite the more-than-human into discourse prompting poly-vocal accounts to emerge, whilst acknowledging that the privileged human knower is always the prevalent subject.

Its been raining, and we are equipped with gumboots, rainsuits and jackets, for this Wednesday walk on a winter, overcast day. Joe the outdoor educator, the children, Kosi the dog and I approach a messy, overgrown space on the school grounds, a favoured place that the children name 'the forest of dead trees'. The unpredictable nature of the uneven surfaces, and what could be perceived as an ugly landscape compiled with twenty years of discarded trees and mounds of branches, covered over time by long grass and weeds; provides joyous possibilities for moving in unfamiliar ways. This challenge to mobility means that manoeuvring skills are tested in this obstacle course, where overgrown grass and branches fashion springy trampolines that satisfyingly crack when you stand, or better still, jump on them. We are paying attention to soundscapes to sense what stirs below.

Joe channels the children's attention to what could be stirring underfoot as he points to the mounds of grass, sticks and prickles, suggesting these are rabbit homes. Hope looks at the entrance indicating 'this is the front door' shaped like the hollowed shape of a 'holloway' (Macfarlane, Donwood, and Richards 2012) a passageway formed by the pressure of traversing rabbit paws. Joe asks the children if animals build houses, noting how if this is the front entrance there will also be a back entrance as rabbits are clever, needing ways to get in, and ways to get out. Hunter points out he saw a buck rabbit in this one and when Joe asks why the blackberry prickles might be useful for a rabbit, Hunter says the 'blackberries are for protection'. Maddy worries 'they will get thorns' and Joe laughs stating, 'I think the rabbits are sitting inside saying na, na, na, na, na as the foxes and even Kosi cannot get inside'.

The family of rabbits huddle together in their warm warren trying to temper their amusement. 'Shush can they hear us?'

Paths and tracks mark time leaving traces of embodiment for those who have crossed over them. These paths are alluring, lighting up neural pathways that stir the memory of readings

about tracks, traces and landmarks (Macfarlane 2012). Pursuing these grassy lines in the land from animal bodies carries the ghostlike remnants of the histories of a route and those who pass by. Who traverse(d) these spaces on Boonwurrung land? Joe also attunes to tracks pointing to a furrow forged by rabbits and Hope broadcasts that 'it smells like rotten pooh on this rabbit track'. I seize the opportunity to pose a provocation to the children 'You have noticed that these small tracks that leave marks in the grass are made by rabbits and I notice that all along our walk, we have also left marks in the grass. Does that mean that we are animals like rabbits?' All the children call out 'NO', except for Maddy who confidently announces that. 'Yes, we are animals'. This prompts James to think about dogs. 'Animals are like Kosi who walk on four legs. 'Eagles walk on two legs' states Ari, and Jack thinks about how 'animals have paws and not legs'. Joe adds another provocation to the leg/paw criterion they are grappling with 'What about whales and dolphins who don't have any legs'?

The data events described in this narrative bewilder child-animal relations, particularly when these explorations trouble anthropocentric and 'normative' ways of being, knowing, and doing. The child is no longer always positioned front and centre, as different kinds of pedagogical relationships with more-than-human entities are taken seriously to reimagine what it means to live and learn with relational reciprocity. Bewildering disrupts the status quo of legacy effects with glimpses into the lives of animals, finding ways to attune with their lifeworlds through homes, front doors, pooh, prickles and tracks in the land. Some of the animals like the rabbits, are present even when not visible, as their intellect, creativity, emotions, and self-awareness are part of the discourse.

The following manifesto from Acari, et al. (2021) resonates with our critical questions about child-animal entanglements that move beyond developmental approaches to getting to know who we are entangled with and how we ethically enter relations with them.

(1) how do types of entanglement vary across species and between individuals within species? (2) to whose benefit, primarily, is the entanglement? (3) is there an option for another species to end or refuse the entanglement? and (4) who is being excluded from a particular conception of entanglement? In this way, the detection of hypocrisy, if that is how it is conceived, can offer an opportunity to challenge its normative scaffold and amplify the capacity of these narratives to extend their fresh perspectives to all animals. (955)

Bewildering and reconfiguring child and other animal co-existence

We have bewildered three legacy effects of Melson (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2011, 2013a, 2013a, 2020a, 2020b), describing how her pioneering ideas about children and animals contribute to the dominant discourse of child-animal relations in early childhood that limits possibilities for children and other animal species. The legacy effects of these pioneering approaches are to be applauded for turning the spotlight on animal species in early childhood education, acknowledging how childhood animal relations are an important part of the lives of children. Like Cole and Stewart (2014) we are interested in the way children and other animals have become mutually constructed through discourse and practice in childhood through hierarchical relations that are part of the animal industrial complex. The dominant discourse of child-animal relations is also part of this legacy that perpetuates well-worn tropes of sentimental, universal 'innate' connections and where animal species are subscribed the role of being a humanist pedagogical tool and death

apparatus, helping children to understand grief or loss when the family or classroom pet dies.

Children are grappling with multiple, contradictory social and cultural representations and positionings of animals. Serpell (2009) identifies how animal species occupy a grey area between being human and being a 'thing'. This grey area 'confronts us with fundamental questions about what it means to be human' and leads to 'extraordinary inconsistencies in attitudes and behaviors toward animals' (Serpell 2009; 633). We are both drawn to overlapping ways of knowing and being in our research that muddles with children, animals and naturecultures (Young and Rautio 2020). Developmental approaches offer partial answers revealing blind spots, and by knowing such ontological distinctions 'scholarly alliances for multispecies justice' (Srinivasan 2022; 79) and cultures can become known. Neither psychological theories that seek to control and universalise, nor posthumanist-new-materialist approaches that advocate for complete and situated entanglement of existence, can or should try to escape the mystery of the other. Biopolitical power relations can be given a peripheral emphasis in posthuman frameworks and critical pedagogies help to redress this imbalance (Pedersen 2011b).

Our unconventional narratives of relating from the perspective of a bird-connected child who vicariously knows about and relates with birds and a posthuman experience that children encounter with rabbits reveals how early childhood education needs research committed to such alternative inquiry, critically evaluating animality to enable possibilities for agential action. By bewildering the legacy effects of Melson's pioneering work we identify how persistent anthropocentrism is present in the legacy of humanist rhetoric and question what alternative expressions of early childhood pedagogy and practice could address in these child-animal encounters of correspondence (Ingold 2013a), co-existence and co-habiting with earth dwellers as kin and allies in multispecies forms of differing togetherness (Braidotti 2019) and what might this begin to produce differently?

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