



Sticky: Childhoodnature Touch Encounters 72

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Abstract

Children's attention to sensuous and affective qualities of nature-matter affordances and constraints is the focus of this chapter, along with related possibilities for movement, learning, and thought. An eco-aesthetic account of childhoodnature touch is developed in relation to Barad's quantum physics-informed theory of agential realism. By this account, all particles are entangled in the void so that every degree of touch is touched by all possible others. Encounters of childhoodnature touch are drawn from the author's lived experiences of child-led walks in Chiang Mai, Thailand. These are performative walks from "The Walking Neighbourhood Hosted by Children" project, in which arts workers supported primary school-aged children to locate places of connection in urban landscapes for curating and leading walks as public performance. Sensory

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ethnographic attention to the encounters were privileged due to limited mutual language sharing. The eco-aesthetics of childhoodnature touch encounters in three child-led walks of Chiang Mai are storied from the author's lived encounters to invite "possibilities of engaging the force of imagination in its materiality" (Barad, *Differ J Fem Cult Stud* 23(3):206–223, 2012). Poetics and storying are purposefully offered to entice readers to imagine sensing the insensible – the indeterminacy of the entanglement of matter. By doing this, experiences of childhood connections with nature can be (re)imagined, foregrounding the affect of eco-aesthetics in provoking appreciation and care for the entangled other.

Keywords

Childhoodnature · Diffractive analysis · Intra-actions · Sensory ethnography · Spacetime mattering · Storying · Touch · Walking

Kraing (age 11) is leading me with a group of about eight adults and children down an alley lane in Old Chiang Mai; I wonder where we were headed. The only clue I hold is "sticky," as *Sticky Duang Dee* is the name of Bai Bua (9), and Kraing's walk and Bai Bua had already taken us to Wat Duang Dee. Suddenly, Kraing stops near a large concrete wall bordering a hostel. He invites us to admire an ivy vine that was growing all over the wall (Fig. 1).

Kraing is fascinated by how it *sticks* to the wall. He invites us to stop and marvel at the beauty of the vine and wonder at its capacity to cling and adhere to the wall – as if we are encountering vines for the very first time. I have seen this vine before; in fact, something similar grows on a wall in my own garden. But, in this moment, following Kraing's invitation, I notice how the leaves diminish in size toward the end of a branch, reaching out with fine tendrils and how the branches grow over each other sticking with fine stem roots clinging to other leaves as well as the wall. I marvel at the aesthetic of its irregular tangled quite flattened form – noting the relationship between vine (nature) and concrete (manufactured). Nature pervades urban development, discretely crawling and clinging to its surfaces. However, it is not as simple as that – the binary of nature and development are troubled and diffracted.

English ivy is an introduced plant to Thailand. Though Thailand was not claimed as a colony, the colonizing forces of the British and French Empires surrounded it and so introduced species surreptitiously crept in – the metaphoric entanglements of past-present colonialisms. Along with the historical questions of how the vine came to be, I searched for scientific explanations on how the tiny stem root hairs thread into fine cavities in walls, learning how the root hairs grow in a spiral-like locking formation with hooklike ends fastening the connection (Bourton, 2010). Ivy vines are known aggressive invaders, just as concrete invades nature. The concrete wall conquers space as a divider between private and public property. Though the vine has an aesthetic appeal, and this is what Kraing notices and wants others to notice, recognizing the histories of both matters, it is not as simple as nature permeating the manufactured; both are in response to the other and both are in tension to the other, as

Fig. 1 Sticky vine

what Barad (2007) refers to as intra-acting. These diffractive readings collide in and out of my mind – visual and tactile wonderings that would not have occurred, without Kraing’s invitations to notice and wonder. I came to notice human-plant-place relations in the everyday lives of children through immanent materialized connections (Bellacasa, 2009). Through heightened sensory awareness, ethicality in being and knowing is awakened, alerting my recognition of entanglement of alterity, vine, concrete wall, of child and adult, and of past and present, as what Barad (2007, 2010) names as spacetime-matterings. These different relations provoke a rethinking of human-plant-place relations, of colonizing entanglements, to be emplaced differently, as Nxumalo (2015, 2016) too experienced in her childhoodnature encounters. Kraing invites attention to the vine – a caring appreciative relation that emerges in the ordinary to consider the inherent material connections between each tendril of the vine and its chosen habitat.

I open with this story, as it was this encounter that inspired this chapter and my ponderings on the stickiness of childhoodnature touch. Kraing chose the ivy-vined wall as his walk destination for the social practice (or participatory) arts (see Bishop, 2012) project *The Walking Neighbourhood hosted by Children* (To date *Walking Neighbourhood hosted by children* (<http://thewalkingneighbourhood.com.au>) has taken place in Brisbane, Darwin, and Sydney in Australia, Chiang-Mai in Thailand, Seoul in Korea, and Kuopio in Finland.) when it took place in Chiang Mai, Thailand at the Chiang Mai City Arts and Cultural Center in May 2013. *The Walking Neighbourhood* was designed by Lenine Bourke (Artistic Director) and a team of co-artists to provoke rethinking of the geographies of fear (Valentine, 2004) that control children’s limited access to the public sphere (e.g., see Gill, 2007, Malone & Rudner, 2011) and perpetuate commonly held perceptions of children as incompetent becomings (e.g., see Coady, 2008). *The Walking Neighbourhood* arts project confronts the public imaginary through public performance of child-led neighborhood walks that foreground children’s visibility and independence in public spaces. However, the politics of children in public spaces is not the focus of this

chapter; instead I zoom in to diffractively read intra-actions in childhoodnature touch encounters that emerged in the child-led walks in Chiang Mai in May 2013.

Following Kraing's invitation, I savor the eco-aesthetic appreciation of stickiness in childhoodnature touch. And like the growing body of work in more-than-human geographies (see, for instance, Ginn, 2014), I examine how heterogeneous materials become sticky and cohere into broader webs of relation. To explore and tease out the entanglements of a sample of childhoodnature touch encounters, I first briefly explain Karen Barad's (2007) feminist quantum physics theory of agential realism to consider what happens with the action of matter touching itself. Key concepts and understandings of intra-actions, agential cuts, and spacetimemattering are explained with reference back to my sticky encounter with Kraing. I then define the focus of touch in childhoodnature and the applied methodology of diffractive analysis through sensorial ethnographic storytelling. These explanations set the scene for further sensory readings of another two childhoodnature touch encounters in Chiang Mai. I then close the chapter with childhoodnature touch offerings on eco-aesthetics, responsibility, and indeterminacy toward ethico-onto-epistemology.

How Matter Matters in Intra-actions and Agential Cuts

I look to Barad's (2007, 2010, 2012, 2014) writings because she seeks to "understand the nature of nature and the interplay of material and discursive, the natural and cultural, in scientific and other social practices" (2007, p. 42). Her work offers a commitment to the material nature of practices and how they come to matter. In her theory of agential realism, matter is an active participant in the world, which "is a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still" (2007, p. 170). So to understand the tensions, possibilities, and dynamics of childhoodnature touch, I look to materiality at play to broaden understanding and insight. More specifically, I look at what Barad refers to as intra-actions.

Contrary to the concept of interactions, *intra-actions* do not assume prior existence of independent entities. Emphasis instead is on what emerges from actions, not on the preexistence of child, adult, vine and wall, and all predetermined meanings ascribed to these constructs. Intra-actions involve all types of matter: natural, synthetic, corporeal or incorporeal. When examining intra-actions the primary ontological units are not things but "phenomena – topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/ (re)articulations of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 141). The phenomena of attention in this chapter is the eco-aesthetics of childhoodnature touch. Through intra-actions "the boundaries and properties of components of phenomena become determinate and particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations) become meaningful" (p. 139). Attention to intra-actions reads distinct entities, agencies, and events as emerging or materializing through or from the intra-action, rather than existing in their own right prior to the intra-action (Barad, 2010). Entities do not preexist; they are agentially enacted and become determinately bounded and propertied within phenomena. Agencies are only defined in relation to their reciprocal interconnection. The vine and the wall and their relationship only

became defined when Kraing invited my attention to them. The boundaries and properties of the vine and wall became determinate, and specific articulations of the world became meaningful through Kraing's invitation. Others engaging in this childhoodnature touch moment would sense different intra-actions producing different phenomena. "The dynamics of intra-activity are non-linear, causal and non-deterministic" (Barad, 2007, p. 240). No individual agents cause change; rather it is in the intra-action that change can emerge. It was the coming together of Kraing's aesthetic appreciation of vine and wall and my openness to wonder that the everyday vined wall became a provocation for recognizing the entanglement of children, aesthetics, subversive invasions, nature, and urban development. The storied intra-actions of childhoodnature touch encounters in child-led walks that I share in this chapter invite differing meanings regarding children, nature, place, and touch to emerge.

Intra-actions enact agential cuts, that is, the subject and object within the phenomenon become determined. It does not produce absolute separations but rather a "cut together-apart (one move)" (Barad, 2014, p. 168), the quantum entanglement of matter, in that matter can be both together and apart with one move. It is through material intra-activity that concepts "enact the differentiated inseparability that is a phenomenon" (2010, p. 253).

In agential realist ontology, neither materiality nor discursivity takes priority, welcoming both material and discursive readings of phenomena that emerge in intra-actions. The primary units of analysis are thus material/discursive practices (e.g., walking, touching), not words. Outside of agential intra-actions – things are indeterminate. Through attention to what happens and what matters in the intra-activity (Barad, 2007) of childhoodnature touch, I see and feel what sticks, that is, what retains as a resonant memory – what lasts and what is sticky as in troubling because of its viscosity – it clings and lingers.

Childhoodnature Touch

In attending to this handbook's focus on childhoodnature, I have chosen to specifically look to what happens in children's touch encounters with nature, that is, moments when children initiate attention to touch in and with natural matter. I look to what emerges (intra-actions) in childhoodnature touch encounters, because "[s]o much happens in a touch: an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times—are aroused" (Barad, 2012, p. 2006). The entire history of physics "can be understood as a struggle to articulate what touch entails," pursuing a myriad of questions, such as "How is a change in motion effected?" (p. 208). Kraing named his walk destination "sticky." It was how the vine stuck to the wall that intrigued him. In classic physics, all touching is repulsion; the electrons of the atoms that make up whatever is touching and being touched electronically repulse each other. The sensation of touch is an effect of electromagnetic repulsion. Matter is made up of particles that repel each other – mutual repulsion that to the naked eye looks like they are sticking together. While I am not a physicist, Karen Barad (2012, 2015) offers

these explanations as a base to build and contrast quantum physics explanations of touch. In quantum physics, particles act and react in the void; they are entangled with the void so that “all material ‘entities’, are entangled relations of becoming . . . materiality ‘itself’ is always already touched by and touching infinite configurations of possible others, other beings and times” (p. 215). What this means is that “[e]very level of touch, then, is itself touched by all possible others” (pp. 212–213) so that “[a]ll touching entails an infinite alterity” (p. 214). To contemplate the expansiveness and complexity of the entanglement of all matter magnifies the profundity of touch beyond imagination and measurement.

This notion of infinite alterity also defies classical definitions of space and time. What Barad refers to as spacetime-mattering invokes the differential patterns of mattering across different times and spaces (Barad, 2010). History (spacetime) is understood as a linear unfolding. In spacetime-mattering, past, present, and future are threaded through one another – “a topology that defies any suggestion of a smooth continuous manifold” (p. 244). Time, instead, is understood as diffracted. Take a moment to contemplate, sensing touch of multiple times and places at once, the spiralled hook grasping of vine root hairs interlocking with rock, sand, and gravel taking place in millions of places over Earth across thousands of years and the millions of children across times and places wondering how vines stick.

Barad (2010) further explains that relations define responsibility as the ability to respond, that is, a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the response of the Other. Attention to specific intra-actions in childhoodnature touch in child-led walks acknowledges and makes such *relata* (potential preceding components of relations). “Responsibility is not an obligation” and “is not a calculation to be performed. . . It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness” (p. 265). What Barad calls response-ability “is a relation always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. . . an enabling of responsiveness. . . an iterative reworking of im/possibility; an on-going rupture” (2007, p. 265). Response-ability flows out of the cuts that define phenomena in intra-actions. Through attention to how matter relates and intra-acts in childhoodnature touch, irreducible relations of response-ability are read as entanglements with others: not as mere connections but rather as indebtedness to difference and how such debt permeates our sense of self. An ethico-onto-epistemology (ethically knowing through being) of entanglement with all others provokes an ethic of care for all others. It is through widespread embracement of such an ethico-onto-epistemology that I see offers hope for sustainability of Earth.

Diffractive Sensorial Storying

The multiplicity of difference in intra-actions can be read through diffractive analysis (Barad, 2007). Agential realism enquires “into how differences are made and remade, stabilized and destabilized as well as their materializing effects and constitutive exclusions” (Barad interview with Kleinman, 2012, p. 77). To move away from Cartesian/positivist representation and reflection, I explore diffractive readings.

In physics, diffraction is a process in which light or waves spread in multiple directions once they pass through a narrow aperture. Barad proposes that the concept of diffraction in analysis is applied to produce multiple and diverse perspectives elicited through differing meaning-making, such as through narratives, graphics, poetics, the political, the spiritual, the sociological, and so on. Diffractions map where the effects of differences appear, to study how differences are produced, how they matter, and the entangled effects these differences make. In this chapter, I apply diffractive analysis to explore different ways of childhoodnature touch and being with touch “and sensing the differences and entanglements from within” (Barad interviewed by Kleinman, 2012, p. 77).

I share diffractive analysis of intra-actions of matter in child-led walks through diffractively storying performative accounts of material bodies (human and non-human), because I agree with Cronon (1992) that narrative is “our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world” (p. 1374) and with Cameron (2012) that telling stories “can move, affect, and produce collectivities” (p. 575). Through a storied approach to inquiry (Denzin, 1997), I seek meaning in the stories and encourage active reader engagement with the stories. I hope, as Haraway (2008) proposed, for readers to be touched by these stories so to inherit different relations and begin to live different histories and provoke alternative worlds and new realities as Gibson-Graham (2006) proposed for geographical storytelling.

Performative accounts place our “thinking, observing and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (Barad, 2007, p. 133), as opposed to above or outside in a representational view. A performative account advocates for “relationality between specific material (re) configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties and meanings are differentially enacted (i.e., discursive practices in my posthumanist sense) and specific material phenomena (i.e., differentiating patterns of mattering)” (p. 139 – italics as per original). Phenomena are thus read as an ontological entanglement of intra-acting agencies, with openness to indeterminacy so that differing ways of seeing and understanding can emerge, pushing aside or muffling preconceived notions through attention to being. Knowing through being is studied, that is, an “onto-epistem-ology” (Barad, 2007, p. 185). I am looking to understand what differences matter in nature touch proposed by children, how they matter, and for whom within a shifting entanglement of relations while acknowledging that I am part of the differential becomings. Attention to these differences includes the aesthetics, affects, sciences, and politics of touch.

With limited knowledge of Thai language, I let go of privileging meaning-making through words and actively heightened my sensory awareness to make meaning through visual, auditory, tactile, gestural, and olfactory modes. Following Ingold’s (2011) proposition, I draw from animist ontologies and embrace openness to being “alive and open to a world in continuous birth” (p. 64), engaging with the world as a source of astonishment. Such a way of being is curious and welcoming of the new and unknown. It could be argued that many children readily embrace such an ontology, whereas adults have experienced years and years of cannons of Western

thought conditioning, to be “sealed by an outer boundary or shell that protects their inner constitution from the traffic of interactions with their surroundings” (p. 68) as we consistently define, construct schema, classify, and set parameters of how we know the world. Through a more open (animic) and sensorial way of being, I endeavored to welcome all that the children wanted to share to experience new ways of sensorially being in neighborhoods of Chiang Mai with others.

When I accompanied the children on their walks, I recorded video and embodied memories of which I journaled later the same day. I drew from Pink’s (2009) principles for sensory ethnography (perception, place, knowing, memory, imagination) as a framework for engaging with sensory data gathered through walking. My sensory *perceptions* were read as interconnected in alignment with the ontology of agential realism, with no one sensory modality dominating and multiple socially, culturally, and biographically specified meanings intersecting. These sensory perceptions defined *places*. The children’s nature touch encounters were very much emplaced, with the intra-actions in space defining *places* of meaning (Creswell, 2004). I drew on my sensory memories of previous visits to Thailand, of previous walks with children, of previous walks in general, and of previous lived experiences. My embodied sensory *memories* of ethnographic data of childhood nature touch were not merely reported but rather reactivated, imagined, mused over, and linguistically played with. Insights (*knowings*) were generated through the creation and sharing of stories of emplaced sensory memories of children’s nature touches. “‘Imagination’ is implicated in everyday place making practices” (Pink, 2009, p. 39), not just visual imagining but multisensory imagining. I imagined each child’s experience of the walk, and their previous experiences of the walk, imagining what she/he was interested in, thinking, and feeling. Collectively, these principles guided my attendance to the sensoriality and materiality of another’s way of being in the world, by aligning my body and rhythms and ways of seeing and listening with theirs so that I could become similarly emplaced to come to be with the children’s sensations, understandings, and imaginings.

Through embodied and emplaced sensorial research of *The Walking Neighbourhood hosted by Children*, I have been alerted to the ongoing responsibility to the entangled other (Barad, 2007, 2010) that I am entangled with other people, animals, plants, things, and places. I am affected; I am not separate from but rather blurred with others. Such heightened awareness of whole of body in place with others invokes relationality. Allow me to take you on two further walks with children in Chiang Mai.

Childhood nature Touch that Initiates Movement

As we walked down Ratvithi Road, Pang Pound (9) asked us to stop and to notice hundreds of golf ball-sized seedpods on the ground. She then invited us to roll on them like a skateboard or roller skates. The walking tour group of about 15 then experimented with rolling on seedpods, skating along the footpath of Ratvithi Road. Rather than be bothered by the slippery hazard of seedpods interrupting the

path designed and made for humans to walk along, Pang Pound invited us to relish the very quality considered as a nuisance by pedestrian safety auditors. As Ranciere (2010) noted, urban design and civil services commonly demand that pedestrians “move along” so that the only permissible activity is walking through public spaces. Being spherical invites diverse movement. We played with moving differently – sliding rather than stepping. Pang Pound invited us to notice what can happen if we work with the touch of our shoe-clad feet on the spherical seedpods. We worked with the offer of the seedpods. They scattered, and many crunched, cracking the pod open – a necessity to perpetuate the dispersal of the seeds and the ongoing life of the tree. Wajuppa Tossa (Thai co-researcher) relayed in her version of the walk that Pang Pound said, “I don’t want to leave this place. It’s so much fun” (Phillips & Tossa, 2017, p. 22), reflecting childhood’s stickiness with nature.

As we turned the corner to Khang Ruan Jum Road, Pang Pound and her accompanying walk hosts Jenny (age 7) and Kwan (age 9) warned us with nose blocking gestures that we were passing open rubbish bins. With the intense damp heat, the rotting organic matter was pungent. For a moment, through embodied sensation, the pervasion of the odor and suffocating humidity felt like being in literally a compost bin, being with organic matter in the slow lingering process of decay, like Haraway (2016) invites us to be with in *Staying with the Trouble*. This sensation was only fleeting as we did not stay with the decomposing matter for long but turned the corner to be refreshingly aroused with the fragrant aroma of Thai cooking from street stalls.

Pang Pound then led us to the Mueang Chiang Mai District Office, a place where she played when she was little, when her Dad worked there. In the open space to the left of the office building, Pang Pound pointed to a statue of the King of Thailand, her embedded dutiful practice. She then invited us up the front steps of the office building to collect leaves from the ground under a large overhanging yellow India tree and throw them in the air. The leaves were like feathers with an embedded pealike seed at one end. “It falls like rain,” exclaimed Pang Pound. No government officials were to be seen. The grounds were quiet aside from our group playing with leaves on the front step. It was Saturday. There was much laughter and chatter as we delighted in throwing leaves in the air in the forecourt of government offices. This was a space of power and authority, yet Pang Pound invited us to contrast this with the carefree action of throwing leaves in the air. Her association with this space was as an open play space. There are no playgrounds in Chiang Mai, so the car park and forecourt of the government offices were to Pang Pound a space to move and explore. The regulatory space was disrupted by a child’s invitation to hold and throw leaves and admire the beauty of their wafting drift to the ground.

Pang Pound invited us to see and experience an institutional space differently, by not permitting its authoritative nature to feature or intercept with aesthetic sensory pleasures. Pang Pound could have asked us to throw leaves in the air at any site, but this wasn’t any site. I indulged in the playfulness of throwing leaves in the air against the backdrop of the sterility of government offices. The exquisite irony was not lost in this moment of childhoodnature touch.

Pang Pound's provocations of seedpod sliding and leaf throwing were delightful playful offers to enjoy and appreciate qualities of these plant parts. What emerged in these intra-actions was an honoring and celebration of the seedpod and leaf's qualities – how they can bring joy and wonder while at the same time enacting their dispersal to perpetuate the life cycle of the plant. The entangled effects of noticing these differences with adult sensibilities of the typical patterns of human privileged and policed usage of public spaces sparked readings of the politics of space and how childhoodnature touch can provoke the reconfiguring of spacetime-matterings with playful humor. Pang Pound's childhoodnature touch provocations furthered my embodied commitment to ethico-onto-epistemology – I sensed the differences of child, adult, seedpod, footpath, decaying organic matter, leaves, and offices and their entanglements from within.

Human and Nonhuman Touch

A couple of days earlier, Seemie, all of 6, with a sparkling smile, dressed in a pink dress topped with a crocheted white bolero and wide koala-shaped thongs (globalization is alive and well), held her hand out to accompany me. I entered the walk with a post-humanist ontology of openness – letting go of preexisting conceptions of Seemie as child and me as adult, of me as foreigner (farang), and of Seemie as a local; rather we were beings engaging with the streets of Old Chiang Mai. Seemie wrapped her hand in mine to take me on the walk.

I felt the delicate nature of Seemie's small hand in mine. My senses alerted to the weight, texture, and warmth of her hand that is neither a subject (i.e., to be used for a purpose, e.g., guide me in direction of walk) nor an object of observation. I sensed a "proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer... an infinity of others—other beings, other spaces, other times" (Barad, 2012, p. 206).

Her hand is matter intertwined with the matter of my hand, engaged in the intra-activity of handholding. The affect of connection to another was created. My embodiment was integrally entangled with Seemie's. *This is not to say that I experience this when I hold hands with anyone or that the act of holding hands automatically produces such; that is too simplistic an application of agential realism. I am sharing my perceptions and sensations of this moment of being with participant and with data. My predefined identities as mother and early childhood teacher that would be readily socially welcomed in the action of adult woman holding young girl's hand are not foregrounded in my perceptions. The moral panic of adult and child touch that has risen in recent decades (Tobin, 2004) was not present in the moment; rather, I, like Tobin, am willing to state publicly that I appreciated being affectionately touched by a child. By examining intra-actions, our entities were not predetermined; they emerged from the action. Instead I am attending to the wave of sensations: warmth, softness, tenderness, and delicateness.* In that moment of my hand being taken in Seemie's, I had an ethico-onto-epistemological awakening, that is, in caring in knowing, and in being, which opened corporeal

awareness of connectivity and entanglement: entanglement of alterity, of generations, of child and adult, and of interculturalism.

Seemie was leading the walk; she was responsible for me. Or as an adult, does the default for responsibility always defer to me? *In agential realism I am embodied, I am with Seemie, I am not an outsider observing in, I am in the moment with Seemie. I am engaged in walking along streets of Old Chiang Mai with Seemie. I am adult and child at the same time; binaries blur.*

Our only shared words were greetings (sawatdee-ka) and gratitude (korp-kun-ka). By not sharing a language – the emphasis on words diminished; materiality and performativity claimed more space. My senses heightened to the new urban landscape. All I knew from an adult’s explanation before we set off on the walk was that Seemie was taking us to a mermaid house. Fresh to a foreign city with sensory ethnographic sensibilities, I existed in the indeterminacy of quantum causality at the heart of Barad’s (2007, 2010) concept of intra-actions. With openness to instability and impossibility, I searched for some threads of stability and possibility in my sensory memories for balance and for meaning. A mermaid house, what could that be? I imagined what a mermaid house might be. Is it a museum where Thai folklore of mermaids was stored and documented? Was it someone’s home inspired in design by mermaids? Is it a building with a mermaid painted on it? Being in touch with more-than-human imaginings in intercultural folklore, images of half-fish-half-human beings across cultures floated in and out of my mind as Seemie led us onward.

As we walked down narrow footpaths frequently obstructed by obstacles, such as electricity poles, trees, and rubbish, I wanted to engage with Seemie to make conversation, such as “How much further?” and “Where is the mermaid house?” I guess driven by previous patterns of walking with another, you converse. Without Thai, all I could do was point, and Seemie smiled and nodded. Committed to holding my hand, Seemie led the way. With the anticipation of the unknown and unfamiliar and the rising temperature and humidity, sweat slipped between our hands, yet Seemie continued to carefully attend to holding my hand. Beads of sweat developed on her petite forehead.

...touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of “us” is constituted in response-ability. Each of “us” is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other. (Barad, 2012, p. 215)

I felt from Seemie a commitment to being responsible for me and the group. She was diligently committed to holding my hand and leading the walk to her desired mermaid house. I wondered if she was perspiring from the heat alone, or was she anxious about leading the walk and having responsibility for a *farang* (foreigner)? She continued to smile sweetly at me and carefully hold my hand.

The entire group of 11 followed Seemie’s lead. I had no idea where we were going yet was comfortable in the adventure of being led to the unknown by a young child, well, aside from prickly discomfort of the heat. We crossed the road and turned

Fig. 2 Mistaken mermaid house



into another road where Seemie stopped across from a carpentry workshop; let go of my hand to approach the translator, Kimmim; and spoke in Thai, which Kimmim relayed as “It’s not there!!” (Fig. 2)

An agential cut, the indeterminate phenomena of the mermaid house became determined through local causal structure (Barad, 2007). Though determined as absent – as missing! – our willing curiosity to see the mermaid house was stumped. Could this, what appeared to be a manufacturing workshop, be differently materialized as a mermaid house at another point in time? Spacetime mattering, that is, the differential patterns of mattering across different times and spaces (Barad, 2010), rearticulated this workshop as the mistaken mermaid house. A few of us took photos to archive this puzzle.

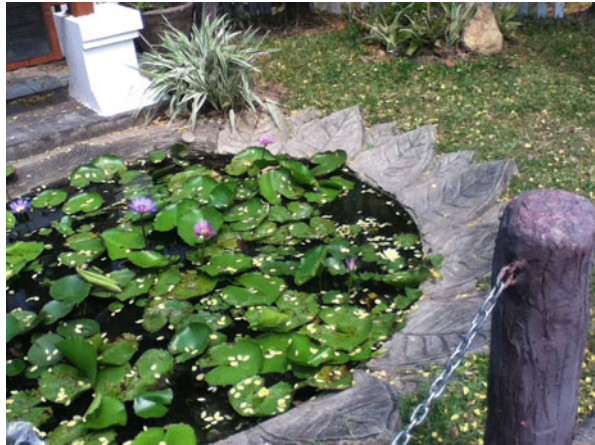
I responded with empathy to Seemie’s disappointment through a convivial offer of a grimace. She shyly smiled, seemingly un-phased by not locating her mermaid house. The workshop to which Seemie had led us had a panel near the roof, with a shadowed mark suggesting a previously adhered decorative piece, but it was dirty and well-worn and looked like a well-established workshop for construction. It was puzzling that it could have changed from a young girl’s perception of a mermaid house within 2 days. The accompanying translator and Australian arts worker (Nathan) talked about what to do. Nathan suggested they talk about it at the group debrief on return.

Sai then led the group onto his destination. Seemie retrieved a camera from her cloth shoulder bag. We then shared intra-activity between human and nonhuman apparatuses (i.e., cameras). This became our new way of interacting, a shift from the physical connection of hand holding to sharing visions of interest. Seemie photographed lotus flowers in a decorative pond on the footpath, sparkly signs, gates, and flowers. . .flowers and more flowers all within two blocks. Like Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) who diffractively read photos of preschool children in an outdoor playground using a relational materialist methodology to enable shifts in habits of seeing children, I too focussed on visual data with a view to glean insight to Seemie’s

Fig. 3 Seemie taking photo of flowers



Fig. 4 Lotus flower pond that Seemie photographed



interests and to know her connections with matter in public spaces. I photographed her photographing and what she aimed her camera at, noticing her connections with places, to build understanding of the phenomena of inquiry: children in public spaces (Figs. 3 and 4).

I regarded matter that I would have otherwise passed. Seemie taking photos of matter in the urban environment physicalized her connection to the neighborhood, and I taking photos of Seemie connecting to matter drew me in as another thread in a web of entangled connections with Seemie and with lotus flowers so that I became with the data (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 534). I visually honored with Seemie what she deemed worthy of archiving.

Then we crossed the road and turned up a narrow road, and Seemie suddenly stopped. I saw her looking at a large copper mermaid painting on a black wall behind a gate. “Is this the mermaid house?” I asked and she nodded affirmatively (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 Seemie with her sought-after mermaid house



The open arms and curving body of the mermaid were alluring. Seemie smiled delightedly, yet she dutifully did not pass the gate. Seemie knew the boundaries of space; even the tantalizing enticement of her object of desire (the mermaid) did not intercept her compliance with the public/private space divide (adapted from a version of *Walking with Seemie* previously published in Phillips, 2016).

My walk with Seemie produced attention to intra-actions of childhoodnature touch between human and human, between human and more-than-human, and between human gaze and flowers. In the child-holding-adult-hand emerges appreciation of the sensations of warmth and tenderness, commitment to reciprocal responsibility (in a Baradian sense of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the ability to respond to each other), and the politics of adult-child touch. The boundaries of each other's being blurred to be entangled in pursuit of the mermaid's house. Being in touch with the pursuit of the mermaid house invited the spirits of mermaids across cultures to accompany the walk. As a storyteller of more than 25 years, I have read, heard told, and told myself folktales of mermaid encounters. A dear friend, Narelle Oliver, published a book "*Mermaids Most Amazing*" (2001), which collates the folklore of mermaids for child readers. In the book, Narelle recounts half-human-half-fish creatures in the mythology and folklore from Arnhem Land, Babylonia, Polynesia, Native America, the Philippines, Mexico, Japan, Ukraine, Scotland, Ireland, Ghana, and Germany. These images and stories along with many others that I had read and heard were aroused and present as I was held in suspense as to

what and where Seemie's mermaid house was. The intrigue of indeterminacy was enticing. The questions of whether mermaids exist did not surface. The commitment of the search for the mermaid demonstrated an enduring commitment for a mixed group of children and adults to support Seemie's desire – her wish. Does childhoodnature have to be only about what is scientifically proven? It was the aesthetic – the beauty of the mermaid that – Seemie appreciated, just as she appreciated the beauty of the lotus flowers, as too have been appreciated across mythology.

Childhoodnature Touch Offerings Toward Ethico-onto-Epistemology

These diffractively storied encounters of childhoodnature touch are shared not to idealize or romanticize childhoodnature touch but rather to witness the possibilities of awakenings that emerge. The children did not offer these childhoodnature touch encounters because of an explicit focus on nature; rather these encounters were entangled and located within what sparked their interest in their neighborhood walks of Chiang Mai. What is at stake is “what counts as nature, for whom, and at what costs” (Haraway, 1997, p. 104) and how. Through animic openness and heightened sensorial awareness to the childhoodnature touch provocations of my child walk hosts, the children alerted me to what matters – to what counts as nature. It is not the untarnished wilderness but rather in the everyday – the ordinary (vine on wall, seedpods underfoot) but also in the extraordinary – the (im)possible (mermaids). Emerging from these childhoodnature touch encounters is attention to eco-aesthetics and the feeding of responsibility toward others, through openness to indeterminacy for an ethico-onto-epistemology. The following discusses understandings gleaned on these three concepts emerging from the above diffractive storying of childhoodnature touch encounters.

Eco-Aesthetics

Kraing, Pang Pound and Seemie invited sensation with nature: not with what is readily visible and visceral but with that which creeps into crevices, rolls underfoot, hangs to the side, and hovers on the boundaries of existence. The stealing of surreptitious moments to sensorially connect illustrates the inseparability of children and nature. With fewer years of Western conditioning to separate mind from body, Kraing, Pang Pound, and Seemie did seem to have an enhanced attunement to sensorially read and be with organic matter. Or was it simply that they were given the luxury of time to walk and wonder in their local neighborhood as a source of astonishment (Ingold, 2011), as opposed to traversing through spaces, to get to a predetermined destination?

The Walking Neighbourhood hosted by Children involved arts workers facilitating workshops with primary school-aged children who self-volunteered (or their

parents volunteered them) to participate. The series of workshops involved drama games for the group to get to know one another and build rapport with one another, lots of observational neighborhood walks, photo documentation of the walks, collecting artifacts on the walks, interviewing neighborhood residents, and group meetings to reflect and debrief on walk experiences and the process of developing a curated walk for adult audiences. The arts do invite us to look closer – to observe – to explore. The whole project invited relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), through artists and audiences manipulating everyday practices to provoke (re)thinking about these practices so that the everyday is engaged with not as predetermined but rather as indeterminate.

The experience of the aesthetic is an intangible, emotive experience that humans struggle to shape into words. By referring to the Greek root *aisthe*, which means to feel or apprehend through the senses, Baumgarten coined the term in 1750 (Abbs, 1987; Barilli, 1993). Sensorial meaning-making is at the core of aesthetics, so it is not just sensory perceptions alone but rather how they are combined with our interpretations or readings of our sensory perceptions (Diaz, 2004). To explain the aesthetic experience, Dewey (1934) applied the metaphor of a stone rolling down a hill that is looking forward to the journey, relishing the encounters along the way, and relates the end of the journey to all that went before. This explanation breathes more-than-human sensibilities, inviting a stone and inclined landform to illustrate interconnected and relational qualities of aesthetic experiences. Though rolling down the hill implies speed, I suggest that slow lingering is far more desirable for the relishing of aesthetic encounters. And it is in these moments of relishing, of savoring, that shifts in understandings can be provoked cultivating a sensuous, analogical, and poetic mode of knowing (Abbs, 1989; Greene, 1995). The symbolism and sensuousness of the aesthetic encounter possess great power for new insight, especially when time is allowed for musings over the sensory perceptions (Marcuse, 1978). The language of aesthetics makes “perceptible, visible, audible that which is no longer or not yet perceived, said, and heard in everyday life” (p. 72). By this Marcuse claimed that the language of aesthetics can communicate what is not communicable in any other language.

The childhoodnature aesthetic encounters of Kraing, Pang Pound, and Seemie’s walks communicated beyond what I have been able to share through words in a linear chapter. Though these encounters may seem a simple, small gesture, they are imprinted within, as I can so viscerally reimagine being in each encounter. Although they occurred more than 4 years ago, they continue to provoke sensuous, analogical, and poetic knowing. They provoke what Maxine Greene (1995, 2004) referred to as wide-awakeness, arousing vivid, reflective experiential responses by releasing imagination through the arts. This state of wide-awakeness is not about sudden or short bursts of shifts in consciousness but rather an ongoing deeper awareness of what it is to be in the world. These childhoodnature touch encounters aroused an openness to be with child, to be with vine, to be with seedpods, and to be with mermaid – to sense their pulses. The addition of eco to aesthetics brings the aesthetic attention to nature or ecological concerns (Miles, 2014), “to cross the contested terrain that makes up the natural world and humankind’s relationship

with it” (Finley, 2011, p. 312). Though Kraing, Pang Pound, and Seemie did not communicate any explicit sustainability agenda in their childhoodnature touch encounters, the experience of each certainly aroused a deepened sense of responsibility for the other, for which I am eternally grateful for their invitations to admire the beauty of vines, the movement of seedpods, the touch of skin to skin, and the welcoming of mermaids. And it is through cultivation of appreciation that we then care, that we then have the ability to respond to another, that we ethically know through being with others (ethico-onto-epistemology).

Response-Ability: Having the Other in One’s Skin

From such an ethico-embodied position, one cannot escape responsibility to all other beings – an ethics of worlding – by bringing the sciences into democracy, acknowledging the politics of nature, flattening the hierarchy of human privilege, and recognizing that all beings share common worlds (Latour, 2004). By reading intra-activity in childhoodnature touch, all bodies came to matter – the tenacious claws of the vine come to matter; the ambiguous and elusive mermaid comes to matter; and the playful movement possibilities of seed pods and seeded leaves come to matter. It is about being entangled with all matter—“having-the-other-in-one’s-skin” (Barad, 2007, p. 392). From an agential realist position, “we (but not only “we humans”) are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails” (p. 393). Kraing, Pang Pound, and Seemie brought conscious attention to our entanglement/stickiness with nature. Although much of the human project has tried to disconnect us from nature, vines continue to creep into manufactured structures, seedpods continue to roll underfoot, mermaids continue to hover on the peripheries of existence, and children seize these surreptitious moments to connect.

Whole of body sensing of interconnectedness/interrelationality evokes ethicality, that is, “hospitality to the stranger threaded through oneself and through all being and non-being” (Barad, 2014, p. 163). In this space, self-interests dissipate, and the attention is to “being with.” Such responsibility entails “an ongoing responsiveness to the entanglement of self and other, here and there, now and then” (Barad, 2007, p. 394). In the shift from humanism to post or more-than-humanism, the ongoingness of responsibility is hard to sustain especially in our age of extreme consumerism and social media-fuelled narcissism. And it would be idealistic to suggest that Kraing, Pang Pound, and Seemie sustained responsibility to the organic matter of their touch encounters. It is difficult to say. There was certainly a desire to linger as expressed by Pang Pound about the seedpod rolling touch with “I don’t want to leave this place.” But they also quickly moved on, though probably in response to adult corraling to keep to predetermined time schedules. As Ginn (2014) expressed, “the aim of more-than-human geography to rethink the ontological and ethical entanglement of life is long term and ambitious” (p. 541). The awareness of the responsibility to all others is a beginning of “facing our responsibility to the infinitude of the other,

welcoming the stranger whose very existence is the possibility of touching and being touched, who gifts us with both the ability to respond and the longing for justice-to-come” (Barad, 2012, p. 219). It is hoped by those of us who have begun to sense, and those for whom such sticky, entangled ethicalities are deeply rooted in our cultural DNA, that response-ability to the infinitude of the other is contagious and spreads and heals the vast injuries of human privilege.

Conclusion

To close, I propose that it is through openness to indeterminacy that holds the space for ethically knowing and being with others: an ethico-onto-epistemology. As Barad (2012) asserts, “being in touch with the infinite indeterminacy at the heart of matter, the abundance of nothingness, the infinitude of the void that is threaded in, through and around all spacetime-mattering opens up the possibility of hearing the murmurings, the muted cries, the speaking silence of justice-to-come” (p. 216). To sit with the unknown/the ambiguous/the indeterminate is a core attitude for creative practice (Piiro, 2011). It is the ambiguity that invites exploration – which invites openness to see the hidden, to hear the murmurings, to feel breath on skin, to smell ghosts, and to taste the notes of earth in water. And it is through the imagination that the arts and aesthetics put “us in touch with the possibilities for sensing the insensible, the indeterminate” (p. 216). I invite you to embrace indeterminacy in childhood-nature touch encounters that are offered your way, to relish and linger with sticky sensations and to embody touching infinite alterity and ethicality.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Artists as Emplaced Pedagogues: How Does Thinking About Children’s Nature Relations Influence Pedagogy?](#)
- ▶ [Embodied Childhood-nature Experiences Through Sensory Tours](#)
- ▶ [Exploring Space and Politics with Children: A Geosocial Methodological Approach to Studying Experiential Worlds](#)
- ▶ [In Place\(s\): Dwelling on Culture, Materiality, and Affect](#)

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