Children:
Global Posthumanist Perspectives and Materialist Theories
Series Editors: Karen Malone · Marek Tesar · Sonja Arndt

Claudia Diaz-Diaz
Paulina Semenec

Posthumanist and New Materialist Methodologies

Research After the Child

Springer

Children: Global Posthumanist Perspectives and Materialist Theories

Series Editors

Karen Malone, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC, Australia
Marek Tesar, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
Sonja Arndt, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

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Claudia Diaz-Diaz · Paulina Semenec

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Claudia Diaz-Diaz
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Paulina Semenec
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC, Canada

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Introduction

In the early months of 2017, the two of us, along with a small handful of graduate students and a willing professor, took part in a reading group centered on the theme of "posthumanist and new materialist" theories in education. This reading group was the result of our curiosity about this growing and diverse body of work that we were becoming increasingly intrigued and puzzled by. Together, we were (re) introduced to concepts like Braidotti's (2013) "posthuman", Barad's (2003) "intra-action" and "diffraction", "assemblages" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), "affects" (Coole & Frost, 2010) "vibrant matter" (Bennett, 2010) as well as non-representational approaches (Thrift, 2008) and postqualitative methodologies (Lather, 2013; St. Pierre, 2011). We had invigorating discussions about what these concepts and approaches not only *meant*, but what they had the capacity to *do*. During this time, both of us were also conducting fieldwork with children as part of our doctoral studies—one of us in an early childhood setting, and the other in a primary school classroom. The combination of reading difficult theory alongside the more practical demands of our own fieldwork had a profound impact on our thinking and research practices. We started to re-imagine the parameters of what "mattered" to the children in our studies, and to pay attention to things we once thought were insignificant.

Our thinking about data, analysis, and the limits of representation were also being challenged by childhood scholars who were thinking with many of the approaches and concepts we were reading about, and who were putting them to work in interesting and provocative ways. At the same time, we wondered about the challenges that many of these scholars, who do posthuman and new materialist work, encountered in their own research with children. We were curious about how they navigated the tensions as they moved away from child-centered methodologies that "decenter" the child, when children seemed to be so central in educational settings as well as during research (Spyrou, 2017; Prout, 2005). How did they put the various concepts we were encountering in our readings like "diffraction" or "porosity" to work in ways that allowed for different reconfigurations of the child? How did they approach their writing in ways that did not privilege child-centered perspectives?

This book—*Research After the Child*—was our attempt to better understand some of these questions. To do this, we reached out to several prominent scholars who have taken up many of the challenges brought forth by the ontological turn and engaged with each one in an in-depth interview about their work. These scholars are at the forefront of posthuman and new materialist research with children, and they have become central to our thinking about what research might look like if we set aside human-centered methodologies. Within the broad field of early childhood studies, this has meant an interrogation of, and move away from child-centered methodologies toward those that "decenter" the child. Posthuman and new materialist theories and approaches complicate the notion that children are the products of either social or biological forces. Many of the scholars in this book discuss how children are entangled within the social, material, and discursive practices in ways that demand other research methodologies to understand those relationships. As they show, this opens up opportunities to focus on children's relations with human and more-than-human others and on generative ways of understanding children's agency as something beyond human capacity.

Discussions about research methodologies have long been present in the field of early childhood studies. Since the 1980s, scholars concerned with the dominant role that psychology and child development theories had in defining what a normal childhood looks like, started to open spaces for debate. For example, scholars interested in reconceptualizing early childhood education (Bloch, Swadener, & Cannella, 2018) have continually challenged notions of the "child" and "childhoods" that labeled and constrained children's lives. Among these critiques, childhood scholars had come to challenge the limited and often very adult-centric ways of understanding children as well as child-centered methodologies (see: Blaise, 2014; Burman, 2007; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Lubeck, 1998).

The unprecedented challenges that children are facing in the global, environmental, social, and economic crisis has become an urgent call for early childhood researchers. For scholars in this collection, it is imperative to rethink the foundations of what it means to be a child and their relationships with the more-than-human world. Much of this diverse work pushes the boundaries of qualitative research and seeks to reconfigure methodological notions of, for example, voice, experience, data, and agency in order to attend to the more-than-human (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2017; Mazzei, 2016). This effort certainly welcomes interdisciplinary approaches inspired by broader debates in a diverse range of disciplines including affect studies, feminist studies, cultural geography, science studies, and philosophy.

As the interviews in this book highlight, the methodological and ontological attention to decenter the child through posthumanist and new materialist approaches unsettle dominant discourses and practices that position the child as a given, coherent, agentic, and knowable subject that moves through specific developmental stages. What many of these approaches attend to instead, is how the child is always already entangled with human and more-than-human others, and how these various entanglements come to matter. In the context of the proliferation of research

methodologies, we are aware that the term posthumanist and new materialist methodologies may not be precise or accurate enough to describe the myriad methodologies the scholars in this collection engage within their research. In this book, we use the terms to signpost approaches that embrace (albeit in varying ways), relational perspectives in which relationships are privileged over singularity.

It is on this note that we are also humbly reminded of our privilege that enabled us to think, write, and live on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Musqueam Nation. As uninvited visitors in what is now known as the coastal city of Vancouver in the province of British Columbia in Canada, we wish to acknowledge the systems of knowledge(s) that have become displaced and devalued in place of more dominant Western ontologies and epistemologies. Moreover, in thinking and writing about posthuman and new materialist approaches, we strive to keep in mind that Indigenous peoples around the world have long related to and protected the land in ways that honor the intimate connections between humans and the more-than-human world.

Traveling Conversations

The interviews in this book took us to different places, both literally and figuratively: New York, Copenhagen, Vancouver, and to virtual locations including Wee Jasper, Australia, the U.K., Finland, and South Africa. Multiple forces including jetlag, time differences, noisy spaces, busy schedules, unreliable internet connections, among many others, all informed the different ways we came together to think through questions related to "research after the child". As many of the scholars in this book think with the work of others, and often conduct research collaboratively, the various intersections and entanglements provided exciting opportunities to deeply engage with research from multiple contexts. The many overlaps and divergences in projects, approaches, and lines of inquiry enabled for rich, but also difficult conversations about a variety of issues related to doing research with children. We structured the interviews around some of the key questions that were emerging for us—conceptual/theoretical, working in the field with children, and writing/representing research, although many interviews ventured to other areas and addressed different issues and concerns. However, a core question in each interview was about how the scholars thought about methodological practices that decenter the child in their research. What does this look like in theory and in practice? What are the implications of a decentered childhood, and what new questions, practices, and ways of being does it make possible?

The very material forces of time zones and life commitments made some interviews challenging to conduct in person, but we were fortunate to be able to meet with the following scholars for our interviews: *Iris Duhn, Sylvia Kind, Karen Malone, Fikile Nxumalo, Pauliina Rautio, and Christopher Schulte*. The interviews conducted in person were edited by us for clarity. Our "virtual" interviews were conducted with: *Mindy Blaise and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Riikka Hohti, Peter*

Kraftl, Jayne Osgood, Margaret Somerville, and Affrica Taylor. Some of the contributors in this book asked to respond to our questions in writing, so in the written format readers will find interviews by *Sonja Arndt, Bronwyn Davies, Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Karin Murris, Marek Tesar, and Casey Y. Myers*. While the written interviews were collaborative in nature, we want to acknowledge that they were solely written by the contributors.

Traveling Ideas

The interviews in this collection were carefully curated by the contributors and the two of us. We proposed a set of questions for each researcher based on their scholarship and contributions to early childhood studies and research methodologies. One guiding question that we asked of every scholar was how they engaged in methodologies that decenter the child. These interviews offer insights regarding that question. More specifically, the interviews delve into what decentering the child might look like in research, the opportunities and challenges of posthumanist and new materialist methodologies, and the ethical–political commitments behind their methodological choices. Through the interviews, scholars shared with us how they have rethought key ideas in methodology such as agency, voice, data, analysis, and writing through posthumanist and new materialist perspectives. To invite the reader to go through the 18 interviews, we organized the book into three sections. Although scholars speak to all the themes highlighted throughout the book, the sections bring together their perspectives in ways that illustrate the prominent themes that came up in our conversations.

The first section of the book titled, *From the Individual to the Collective*, features interviews with Margaret Somerville, Bronwyn Davies, Jayne Osgood, Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Sonja Arndt, and the collaborative interview with Mindy Blaise and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw. These contributors offer insights about how decentering or moving away from child-centered methodologies works as a principle to resist or interrupt ideas that focus on the individual and that situate the human as superior and exceptional. These scholars share their ethical–political concerns with the production of knowledge, emphasizing their commitments to research that is collective, transformative, and feminist. While these scholars value a move away from child-centered methodologies, they remain in conversations with the production of racialized and gendered identities through children's relationships with the world.

The second section titled, *Recreating and Tracing Childhoods*, features interviews with Karin Murris, Pauliina Rautio, Casey Myers, Christopher Schulte, Sylvia Kind, and Marek Tesar. Their research shows us that decentering the child can be also understood as a method to understand the underexamined multiple relationships children have with/in the world. For them, research becomes material and posthuman in that they work with animals, materials, drawings, photographs,

storybooks in ways that are creative and embodied in their research practices. Their purpose is to move the field toward more affirmative and diverse childhoods.

The third section titled, *Situating Children's Lives*, feature interviews with Karen Malone, Fikile Nxumalo, Iris Duhn, Affrica Taylor, Peter Kraftl, and Riikka Hohti. While in the previous section, scholars discussed their research methodologies as a way to decenter the child, scholars in this section make us think about decentering as the result of understanding the child as one part of the world of entanglements. Their research is situated in place and time but always in an intimate relation with global issues. For them, thinking with concepts (e.g., such as Haraway's idea of compost, water, or porosity) allows them to think about their research in pedagogical terms. Overall, the researchers in this section discuss their interest in creating pedagogies for caring about/with the world.

Our Invitation

We invite readers to engage in the conversations that follow in any order, and with an openness to being challenged, much like we were and continue to be. Each interview includes a "further reading" section which is a short list of some of the contributors' writings we have found inspiring, or recent/forthcoming work we look forward to exploring. We hope that the diverse range of perspectives offered in this book will contribute to the growing body of literature that seeks to legitimize the proliferation of alternative research methodologies and the productive possibilities they offer to the study of children's lives. Moreover, our hope is that this book of interviews engages doctoral students and early career scholars who, like us, find themselves intrigued by posthumanist and new materialist work, and who may be wondering how to put some of the ideas into practice. While the interviews in this book do not seek to resolve the many tensions and challenges that are discussed in regards to the methodological approaches this ontological turn brings forth, they do provide the encouragement to continue to think deeply with others, to attend to things that may seem too small or insignificant, to experiment and wonder, and do "research after the child" otherwise.

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Contents

Part I From the Individual to the Collective

1 Interview with Sonja Arndt 3
Sonja Arndt, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
1.1 Attending to "Otherness" 4
1.2 Decentering the Child 6
1.3 Unsettling Concepts of Voice and Agency 7
1.4 Addressing Critiques: Re-doing Ethics in a Posthuman Times 8
1.5 Areas for Future Research 10
Further Reading 10

2 Interview with Mindy Blaise and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw 13
Mindy Blaise, Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
2.1 Collaborative Engagements 14
2.2 Challenging Narratives Around 'Early Childhood' 16
2.3 Composing Other Worlds 17
2.4 Experimentation in Childhood Research 19
Further Reading 20

3 Interview with Bronwyn Davies 21
Bronwyn Davies, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
3.1 Tracing Lines of Thoughts About Gender 22
3.2 Decentering the Child 26
3.3 Writing and Mentoring 27
3.4 The Neoliberal University 28
3.5 Ethics and Politics 29
3.6 Research Contributions and New Projects 30
Further Reading 31

4 Interview with Hillevi Lenz Taguchi 33
Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
4.1 Challenging Systems of Knowledge Production 34
4.2 Acknowledging Multiples Ways of Knowing 38
Further Reading 45

5 Interview with Jayne Osgood 47
Jayne Osgood, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
5.1 Thinking with/Alongside Poststructural and New Materialisms Work 48
5.2 Addressing Critiques of New Materialist Work 49
5.3 Thinking with Theory/Concepts 51
5.4 Decentering the Child 56
5.5 Attending to Children Differently/*Being with* 57
Further Reading 59

6 Interview with Margaret Somerville 61
Margaret Somerville, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
6.1 Learning About the Land Through Embodiment 62
6.2 Intra-action as a New Methodological Lens 65
6.3 Decentering the Child 66
6.4 Mentoring Future Researchers 67
6.5 Embodied Writing 69
Further Reading 71

Part II Recreating and Tracing Childhoods

7 Interview with Sylvia Kind 75
Sylvia Kind, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
7.1 Walking into the Studio 76
7.2 Doing Research as an Atelierista 77
7.3 Researching Children's Encounters: Cinnamon Bear 77
7.4 Decentering the Child in Research 79
7.5 Thinking with Others 81
7.6 Intentions in Research 82
Further Reading 84

8 Interview with Karin Murris 87
Karin Murris, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
8.1 Material Approaches to Doing Research with Children 88
8.2 Decentering the Child Through the Neologism "iii" 91
8.3 Addressing Critiques 94
8.4 Current Issues in Childhood Studies 96
8.5 Approaches to Writing 97
Further Reading 98

9 Interview with Casey Y. Myers . . . 101
Casey Y. Myers, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
9.1 Photography-as-Method and Everyday Materialities . . . 102
9.2 Children, Among Other Things, and Decentering the Child in Early Childhood . . . 105
9.3 Posthumanism, New Materialism, and (a) Political Intent in Research . . . 106
9.4 Attending to Pressing Issues . . . 106
9.5 Temporality and Material Worlds . . . 107
9.6 Writing and Early Childhood Scholarship . . . 108
9.7 Upcoming Research Projects . . . 109
Further Reading . . . 110

10 Interview with Pauliina Rautio . . . 111
Pauliina Rautio, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
10.1 Entering into the Field of Childhood . . . 112
10.2 Child–Animal Relations . . . 115
10.3 Thinking with/About "Decentering" the Child . . . 116
10.4 "Doing" Posthuman and New Materialist Research . . . 119
Further Reading . . . 120

11 Interview with Christopher Schulte . . . 123
Christopher Schulte, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
11.1 Engaging in the Study of Childhood . . . 124
11.2 Researcher/Child Positionings . . . 125
11.3 Decentering the Child . . . 126
11.4 Conceptual Orientations . . . 127
11.5 Teaching/Working with Children . . . 129
11.6 On Writing and Critique . . . 132
Further Reading . . . 133

12 Interview with Marek Tesar . . . 135
Marek Tesar, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
12.1 Disrupting data . . . 136
12.2 Posthumanism in childhood studies . . . 137
Further Reading . . . 141

Part III Situating Children's Lives

13 Interview with Iris Duhn . . . 145
Iris Duhn, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
13.1 Naming the World: Posthuman Focus and Qualitative Data . . . 146
13.2 Place and Decentering the Child . . . 149
13.3 Addressing the Critiques of Posthuman and Materialist Perspectives . . . 150

13.4 Pedagogies of Caring for the World . . . 152
13.5 On Writing . . . 153
Further Reading . . . 155

14 Interview with Riikka Hohti . . . 157
Riikka Hohti, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
14.1 Entering into the Field of Childhood . . . 158
14.2 Concepts on the Move . . . 160
14.3 Decentering the Child . . . 162
14.4 Children's "Voice(s)" . . . 162
14.5 (Troubling) Child–Animal Entanglements . . . 163
Further Reading . . . 166

15 Interview with Peter Kraftl . . . 167
Peter Kraftl, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz
15.1 Entering into the Field of Childhood . . . 168
15.2 Nonrepresentational Research Practices and Children . . . 168
15.3 What Else? . . . 171
15.4 Decentering the Child . . . 173
15.5 Interdisciplinarity . . . 176
15.6 Children's Challenges and Childhood Studies . . . 177
Further Reading . . . 178

16 Interview with Karen Malone . . . 181
Karen Malone, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
16.1 Tracing Perspectives on Children and Childhood . . . 182
16.2 Decentering the Child . . . 185
16.3 Shifting Lenses on Research Methodologies . . . 187
16.4 Companion Grief and Children's Challenges in the Anthropocene . . . 189
Further Reading . . . 192

17 Interview with Fikile Nxumalo . . . 195
Fikile Nxumalo, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
17.1 Challenging Colonized and Neoliberal Childhoods . . . 196
17.2 Feminist and Indigenous Frameworks "for" Early Childhood . . . 197
17.3 Foregrounding Indigenous Presence Through Research Practices . . . 198
17.4 Decentering the Child in Early Childhood Education Research . . . 198
17.5 Working with Educators and Destabilizing Dichotomies . . . 199
17.6 Collective and Collaborative Research-Creation in Early Childhood Research . . . 200
17.7 Writing About What Troubles Us . . . 201
Further Reading . . . 203

18 Interview with Affrica Taylor 205
Affrica Taylor, Claudia Diaz-Diaz and Paulina Semenec
18.1 Challenging the Divide Between Culture and Nature 206
18.2 More-than-Human Methods 207
18.3 Writing as Potentially Playful 210
18.4 Decentering the Child 211
18.5 Rethinking the Politics of Living Well Together 213
18.6 Research as Bringing up Difficult Conversations 215
18.7 Thinking Collectively with More-than-Human Methods 216
18.8 Justice and Activism 218
Further Reading 218

Afterword 221

Contributors

Sonja Arndt Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Mindy Blaise Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

Bronwyn Davies Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

Claudia Diaz-Diaz University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Iris Duhn Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand

Riikka Hohti Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

Sylvia Kind Capilano University, North Vancouver, Canada

Peter Kraftl University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Karen Malone Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

Karin Murris University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Casey Y. Myers Kent State University Child Development Center, Kent, OH, USA

Fikile Nxumalo University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Jayne Osgood Middlesex University, London, UK

Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw Western University, London, Canada

Pauliina Rautio University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

Christopher Schulte University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, USA

Paulina Semenec University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Margaret Somerville Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

Hillevi Lenz Taguchi Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Affrica Taylor University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

Marek Tesar University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Part I
From the Individual to the Collective

The interviews featured in Part 1 draw together a focus on collectivity, collaboration, and the transformative potentials of methodologies and approaches that seek to decenter the child.

When the two of us conceived of this book, one of the core questions we had in mind was how each scholar, decenters the child in their research. Throughout the interviews, however, we were continually provoked to think beyond the individual researcher who has the agency to decenter. The responses shared by many of our contributors pointed to a more collective force of decentering and one that does not necessarily come from Western epistemologies and ontologies.

The interviews in this section drew our attention in particular to these ideas—to the power of collaboration with others: communities (both abroad and local), educators, children, and other researchers. This work of decentering thus, in never done individually—it takes thinking *with* others (through theory, engagement, collaboration, experimentation) and doing this work in ways that are always committed to ethical and transformative potentials. To compose new worlds as Mindy Blaise and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw discuss in this section, takes time, dedication, and even failure—moving toward collective transformation—and to produce research that encompasses more-than-human concerns, is never completed in a single research project. As the interviews with Sonja Arndt, Margaret Somerville, and Bronwyn Davies highlight, ongoing, embodied engagement with research communities—working and learning together (and from) those we work with, is essential and always situated in the spaces/places we do research. As Sonja Arndt highlights in her interview, we all still have much to learn!

Other scholars included in this section drew our attention to the ethical–political concerns of knowledge production, and how we can never lose sight of the ways in which children's gendered and racialized identities continue to inform their relations in the world. Methodologies for decentering the child, therefore, should always remain committed to the politics of identity, while also taking into account the ways in which materiality comes into play. Our interviews with Hillevi Lenz Taguchi and Jayne Osgood bring such ideas to the fore, while also once again, reminding us to be careful with how such new work is taken up. What do we want this work to do?

Why are we thinking with particular theorists and not others? These are some of the questions that these interviews really provoked us to think more about.

While all the interviewees in this book spoke to these ideas, the interviews included here illustrated what collective and collaborative research could do for our thinking (and doing) as researchers. As early career scholars, we often find ourselves working individually, so any opportunity to work collectively with others—whether through joint writing projects or collaborative research is always a refreshing change of pace. The interviews in this section demonstrate that a collective research ethos means not only working together as researchers, but also working well with our research participants—be they human/children participants or more-than-human others.

Chapter 1
Interview with Sonja Arndt

Sonja Arndt, Paulina Semenec and Claudia Diaz-Diaz

> I love how the notion of the posthuman challenges us to decenter ourselves and the children we are researching with, to pay more attention to the wider worldly relationships that we're all enmeshed in.

In the first interview of this section, Sonja Arndt highlights the political and ethical implications of working with others in diverse/international contexts, and about the importance of "recognizing those 'relations of significant othernesses' that Donna Haraway talks about, when we start to see ourselves as entangled with so much more than just the humans around us or in relationships with us." Thinking with concepts such as otherness and interconnectedness, Sonja suggests, enables us to think beyond the human, a point that many scholars in this collection also echo. Recognizing this interconnectedness and entanglement, Sonja poignantly suggests, however, is not "new," as it is a central to many Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies. This gave us much to think about, especially as we continue to engage in what many consider to be "new" methodologies and research practices. Sonja's scholarship focuses on otherness (including diversity as a problem that requires a solution) and draws on posthumanist and materialist approaches to think through notions of teacher identity and subjectivity formation. She critiques the impact of globalization on teachers' education especially the influence of the theories and pedagogies from the West that are used in developing countries giving no value to their own knowledges, experiences, and practices. Sonja's interview was an important

S. Arndt (✉)
Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: sonja.arndt@unimelb.edu.au

P. Semenec · C. Diaz-Diaz
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada
e-mail: paulina.semenec@ubc.ca

C. Diaz-Diaz
e-mail: claudia.diaz@alumni.ubc.ca

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reminder for us to always keep notions of difference and otherness in mind, especially as we seek to find "better" approaches to doing research. Sonja's interview prompted us to ask: *better for whom? Who and what knowledge remains othered in the work that we do?* We also appreciated Sonja's invitation to accept the uncertainty of our times, and to become responsible in our entanglements with others (both human and more-than-human). This responsibility entails not only that we take account of more-than-human agencies, but also that we actively acknowledge Indigenous knowledge systems that hold these epistemologies and ontologies at their core.

1.1 Attending to "Otherness"

Q. *Your scholarship centers heavily on the concept of the "other" and "otherness." How do these specific concepts inform the work you do in the early childhood context (either with early childhood educators or children) both locally and globally?*

These are central notions in all of my work. They underpin the courses I teach, the work I do in support roles in early childhood education (ECE) settings, and my local and international teacher education work. In undergraduate teacher education they influence the ways that I approach the content, the students, my teaching space. As a foreigner in many of these situations, I live multiple othernesses myself. As an example, my focus on otherness relates strongly to teacher identity and subjectivity formation (mine and that of my students). Using Julia Kristeva's ideas, as was a seminal focus in my Ph.D., helps my students and myself to focus on the notions of the self as always evolving, never there yet, "constantly in construction," as Kristeva says. Learning to see ourselves as, in that sense, always becoming, in some way or another, is quite a humbling way of thinking. Kristeva mentions that we should stop thinking of ourselves as "unitary and glorious," and this way of orienting ourselves toward ourselves and our relations to others helps to bring us off our "high horse," to make us more aware of others (people and things). We don't always think of the ways in which we make assumptions about others, or treat others in particular ways, intentionally or unintentionally, and using Kristeva's ideas reminds us through our own otherness, of the unfathomability of diversity and difference.

In my teaching on topics related to interculturality, intercultural relationships, or belonging and contribution in society and in ECE, the topics of the other and cultural otherness are central. I try to emphasize the diverse ways that we experience otherness, feel other ourselves, and work with and across othernesses—including students' otherness, as they work across cultures and ECE "normalities" to complete their assignments, practica, and thinking. Students say this work gives them deeper insights about not only people from other countries, or from different cultures, but it helps to see how diverse people's lives are, that grew up just down the road, that they've been sitting next to throughout their studies, and that they assumed would be the same as their own. These students are strong advocates now of not making assumptions, and recognizing that we cannot really know the other.