CHAPTER 10

Down the back of a chair

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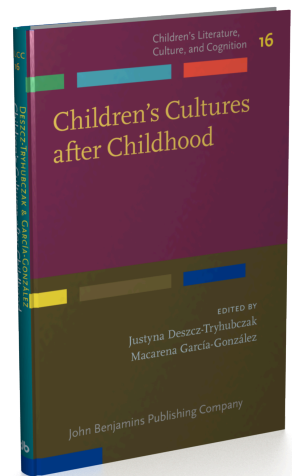
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In this chapter, the authors work with Ursula Le Guin's (1986) *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* to offer a reconfiguration of "the book" in childhood contexts. Attending to the relational agencies generated from messy entanglements of (hence hyphenated) reader-book-child-chair-cat-lice-mites, they feel their way around to arrive at other ideas about what books are, what books do, and what else they might potentiate in contemporary imaginations of "the child". Le Guin retells the story of human origin by redefining technology as a cultural "carrier bag" rather than a weapon of domination. The authors offer a scrabbling methodology of "research-creation": a method of scrabbling "down the back of the chair" (both literally and metaphorically). This feminist methodology attunes to assemblages of odds and ends, hair and dust mites, children's literature and child readers and facilitates an exploration of the intersectional, relational meanings that might tell us something else about childhood in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: relational, posthuman, assemblage, material

From the margins

This chapter proposes a methodology for childhood research that celebrates the potential for messy assemblages to generate different knowledge, differently. To do this, we draw on some ways that the aesthetic practice of assemblage – and literary, rather than literacy studies – have challenged conceptualizations of childhood in the Anthropocene by "scrabbling", meaning to grope around to find, collect, or hold onto something. Putting to work Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of*

Fiction we upend established assumptions that have come to shape how books, literacy, and knowledge about children hold currency. By embracing uncertain, unpredictable, and sometimes seemingly nonsensical emergent forces that circulate when researching with humans, nonhumans, and more-than-humans, another logic begins to reveal itself. Following Rosi Braidotti (2013), it is crucial that we bring critique and creativity into generative partnership; dominant discourses and practices that shape contemporary childhoods (including those related to reading and literacy) are deeply problematic and work to limit, contain, and regulate children according to a narrow developmentalist logic.

Taking the image – drawn from a children's picturebook – of finding treasure "down the back of a chair", we imagine research as searching into a similarly hidden space, uncertain of what we will find, yet ready to allow whatever *is* found its agency. Our methodology transforms our speculations, as occurs in arts practice research. It is through our experimental and uncertain scrabbling methodology that we can bring a rich tapestry of childhood research together with posthumanist philosophy to arrive at other ways to theorize and practice childhood that offers a response-able and care-full (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015) alternative which creates space for the becoming child to find expression from our research creations formed from "scrabbling down the back of the chair".

As feminist scholars working with arts-based methods, we endeavor to realize a commitment to acknowledging an important debt to the work of others: to a plethora of texts, practices, and provocations offered by generations of feminist scholars, artists, and activists in search of more livable worlds (Haraway 2016) that resurface and reverberate within the work we present in this chapter. Our project is underpinned by a firm commitment to generational reclamation and reinvigoration. Whilst posthumanist and feminist new materialist approaches to childhood studies are gaining traction, they have not come from nowhere, and the newness must be treated with caution. Tracing some of the legacies and connections to previous generations and "turns" in the field of childhood research provides an important reminder of our constant becoming as a field of inquiry and the value that is available through practices of re-turning (Barad 2007). Throughout our research careers, we have persistently and consistently worked at the margins, on risky thresholds where our knowledge production has been considered non-normative. This has not been in a quest for novelty or innovation for innovation's sake, but rather it stems from a shared commitment to making the familiar strange in the name of social justice. By approaching the world differently, we are engaging in subversive feminist acts that seek to make some tangible, worldly difference.

Critique of "the child" and "childhood": Towards a posthuman (re-)conceptualization of the child

Our work has been fueled by a concern with the implications of contemporary conceptualizations of the child in neoliberal contexts firmly framed by developmentalist logic. The child of the Anthropocene is not fully formed: it is a child waiting to become fully human once it has passed through ages and stages closely monitored and measured against normative expectations. Conceptualizations of the child are shaped by futurity; who and what the child will become, with the ultimate goal of becoming an adult. In pursuit of this linear developmental trajectory, the role of the adults surrounding the child (educators, parents, researchers; pressured in various ways by one another) becomes framed by developmentalist logic. The (mis)conception of adults having to decode and understand children in order to identify what is lacking and therefore support them to become fully competent, functioning humans has been widely critiqued (e.g., Blaise 2005; Burman 2008; Cannella 1997; Murris 2016). Nevertheless, it remains stubbornly in place. Such a narrow conceptualization persistently marginalizes and devalues childhood as a life stage and makes certain children inferior. Hence, it is urgent to conceptualize childhood in ways that unshackle it from developmentalism. We turn to posthumanist approaches because they offer the means to philosophically attend to who and what counts as (fully) human and illustrate the reasons this ontological (re)turn matters ethically and politically (Osgood & Robinson 2019).

Limitations of contemporary conceptualizations for our doings on/for/with children

Developmentalist conceptualizations of the not-fully-formed, deficit child powerfully inform and inflect both teaching and research practices. Prevailing approaches to childhood studies tend to position the child beneath the all-knowing, expert adult. Similarly, teaching literacy and the promise of books in childhood is regulated, stifled, and narrow. The scrabbling methodology we map in this chapter attends to other possibilities that might be available to (re-)imagine "the child", "the book", and "research" as emergent, speculative, unfolding and risky adventures that aim to shift ideas about "the child" and "childhood". Haynes and Murris (2021: 5) argue that "working it out together" necessarily entails resistance, imagination, and taking an unequivocal stand on the historical exclusion of children and the justification of this exclusion on the grounds of insufficient or unreliable capacity to reason, something Rollo (2016: 32) claims is a "remnant of colonial injustice". For Haynes and Murris (2021), "When we allow ourselves to be guided by children, and engage in respectfully reciprocal relations with them,

the agency of children is right under our noses" (6). Researching-with children in a posthumanist tradition necessarily involves processes of de(con)struction (Barad 2017) of the human to arrive at understandings of the human as part of intra-connected networks of socio-political, material-discursive, nature-culture, human-nonhuman relations. We go on to map how "scrabbling down the back of the chair" is a methodology committed to decentering the human that does not involve an erasure of the fleshy individual human. Instead, it values conceptual (and practical) work to reconfigure what the human (child) is in processes of becoming in relationalities within messy assemblages.

Challenging contemporary approaches to childhood literacy: What (more) can a book do?

Western literacy is dominated by privileged notions of developmental, "normative", "standard" "attainment" set in real-life underprivileged contexts of failure, learning difficulties, and exclusion. Parallel to the "reading wars" of the US, there has been much political and educational controversy over how to teach reading in the UK (broadly, holistic language experience versus reading or phonics schemes) from the 1950s to the present. The politics of reading over the past thirty years in particular has become a scapegoat for neoliberal policy reforms, increasingly adjusting the teaching of reading to standardized national tests and school Ofsted inspections for market comparisons. However, after fifteen years of raising the "expected standard" for reading, the CLPE Report *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure* (2021) noted that over the period of the pandemic, children had less access to books and less support in reading for pleasure. This remains a national concern.

Thus, in the UK, if a child is not decoding words by the age of five, teachers and parents start to worry. Well-known British children's authors such as Beverly Naidoo, Michael Rosen, and Philip Pullman have been lobbying for years to "give children books, not SATs [Standard Attainment Tests]", arguing that tests limit teaching, ruin poetry, and deny interpretation and reading for pleasure. The British Grande Dame of reading, Margaret Meek, repeatedly warned of the negative effects of "Reading and literacy (…) crammed with the vocabulary of military metaphors 'strategies', and 'word attack skills'" (Meek in Rudd 2012: 233). A metrics culture, measuring children's reading in three reductive bands: "working towards", "at", or "exceeding" "expected" national levels, is all-too-often interpreted as "low, middle and top" labels, groups, sets or streams- labelling which persists to this day, and which powerfully plots children along a developmental continuum marking some as demonstrably inferior to others. The book, in this context, becomes little more than a reading primer; it is in itself a test mechanism, often ranked, colored, labelled according to reading "level". Victoria once asked

a group of children at school "What are you reading?" "I can't read," answered a child, "I'm only an orange." A description of a label and a limitation. In this assemblage, reflecting on what a book and reading is *necessitates* working together with what a child thinks, feels, senses, draws, and says.`

Taking up the invitation for child agency

Resisting models of "ontologically reductive and oppositional thinking and practice" (exemplified by the "Literacy Wars" of the US and UK and a universalized narrative of progress), posthuman researchers remind us that children handle language materially, voicing orally and mark-making experientially, playfully and joyfully, breaking through the bars of metrics and fixed, measurable meaning-making. Arguing that accounts of young children that "dwell in the cuteness/competency/ progress/learning of the child are no longer enough. They were never enough", Hackett (2021) uses Le Guin's Carrier Bag theory to ask: What kind of flourishing might be imagined as "literacies yet-to-come", beyond the trope of a forward moving, linear upward trajectory arrow? (161). This changes how we view research, too, taking seriously Maggie MacLure's call for "flat ontologies that can critically interrogate the way in which representationality within research has rendered material realities inaccessible behind the linguistic or discourse systems that purportedly construct or 'represent' them" (MacLure cited in Hackett, 2017: 659). What follows is a series of material engagements.

In 2019, a small new press called Ignota Books, an "experiment in techniques in awakening", published a pocket-size volume of *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, precisely small enough to be lost down the back of a chair. The book gathers artworks by Lee Bul, an introduction by Donna Haraway, and Ursula Le Guin's essay from 1988. Borrowing from anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's 1970s "carrier bag theory of human evolution", Le Guin retells the story of human origin and fiction by redefining technology as a cultural "carrier bag" rather than a weapon of domination, re-telling our prehistory as not so much hunters but as gatherers. She argues that the bag is the recipient, holder, story, sack for holding words, and in turn, "words hold things" (Le Guin 2019: 34). The overuse of one word (e.g. mankind) and one story (e.g. heroism) limits both diversity and our collective imaginations; the carrier bag theory allows room for everything and everyone.

The bag theory manifest for us, throughout the research described in this chapter, holds our collective resistances to notions of the child, the nonhuman, and the book or literacy. It also holds resistance to research practices privileging adult/academic/written/seeable knowledges over others, including resistance to theorizing ("after") the child as part of delimiting prepositional orders in the analysis of childhood culture. Messing with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) onto-

logical framework – "assemblage theory" that allows for relational fluidity in systems they call "constellations" of imaginative articulations – we offer a series of multimodal assemblage methods as a means to practice mutually constitutive carrier bag "scrabbling".

Posthumanist approaches to researching with child, book, and more-than-human assemblages

Laura-Rosa is a young neighbor who hangs out regularly with Victoria. Living on houseboats, they share a nomadic category and community. Laura-Rosa's tearful struggle in learning to read first brought them together as Laura-Rosa's parents met the rigid metrics of school reading expectations and spelling tests and asked Victoria's advice as a teacher-educator. As both dyslexic and nomadic, Laura-Rosa is thus a doubly othered child in developmentalist logic, yet our posthuman orientation firmly repositions her, the research, and how we do it. Whilst discussing reading, we drew "chairs that children read books in". Her drawings separate school-based reading from reading for pleasure: as if held inside a rabbit in the park "with a cloud of thoughts going up" or held inside a duck on the dock (where we live).
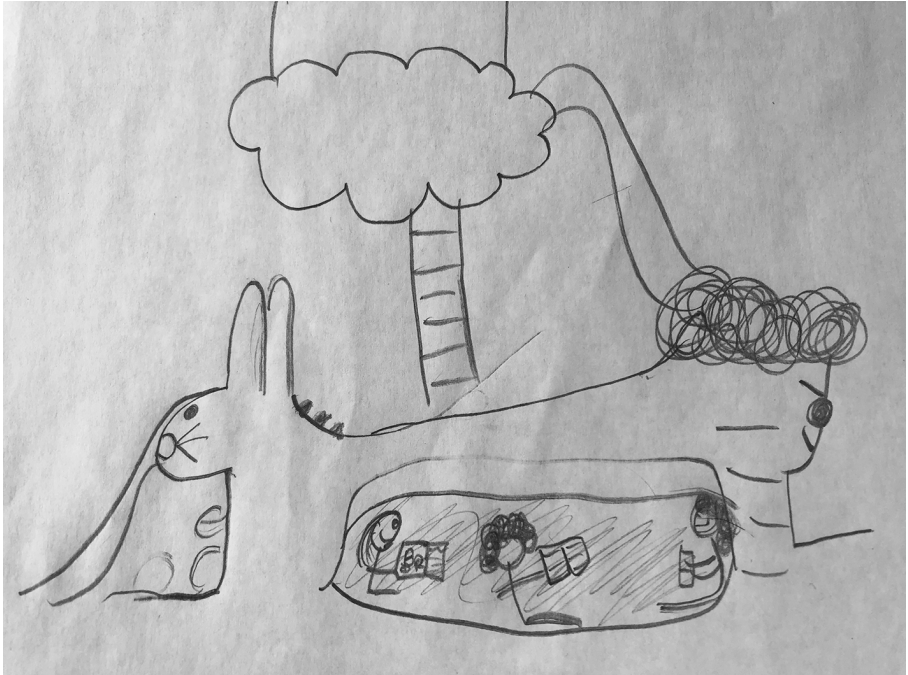

Figure 10.1 "Reading Chair as Rabbit". Drawing by Laura-Rosa, 2020

Figure 10.2 "Reading Chair in School". Drawing Laura-Rosa, 2020

In stark contrast, the school chair has "pins all on the seat, a great big light on you, a fork to stab you if you get it wrong- and I will cos my brain works way worse in chairs at school", she says with a laugh.

Researching-with Laura-Rosa's reading assemblages can open our eyes to what (else) books and reading in different sensory settings can mean to children. It also makes us aware of the broader imaginative unfurlings that are made possible. In composing her preferred territories, she creates outdoor, many children-populated, creature-inhabited constellation metaphors: "thoughts lifting up", "floating", and "stars" to read through, contrasted with the school chair *empty of the child* but overlooked by the 1000-watt light, book, fork and (faceless) imposing figure of a teacher. Just as Deleuze & Guattari (1980) argued, the constellation includes some heavenly bodies but leaves out others, demonstrating the social complexity of assemblage. The child's eye-view sees Le Guin's conclusion to her carrier bag theory: that if we re-imagine what holds (and is) knowledge, "still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars" (Le Guin 2019: 37).

Scrabbling inside the book

Following Barad (2003), if we allow "matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its intra-activity", we will need a new "agential realist ontology" to think with. Arguing that agential intra-actions are material, causal enactments that may or may not involve humans and that they are always ongoing and certainly not passively awaiting signification suggests that the matter of books, reading, research, and the child are "boundary-making practices, fully implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity", whose boundaries are being continually reconfigured and where "matter comes to matter" iteratively. Baradian thinking provokes a set of questions: what is child? book? reading? research? Whilst each is typically presented as a construct of adult-determined boundaries, properties, and meanings, posthumanist thought activates a different logic that articulates child, book, reading, and research as *doings*, "practices of knowing and being" (Barad 2003:829). Having explored notions of the child and literacy practices, approaching the book as matter or material, we turn to an example of a picturebook, bearing in mind that a "book", Deleuze and Guattari (1980:3) emphasize, is not *about* something nor *by* somebody; it has "neither object nor subject"; it is made of "variously formed matter" that, "worked" together, constitutes an *agencement* (assemblage) and holds the potential to agitate a host of possibilities to reach beyond narrow understandings of what a book is and what a book can do.

The mattering of books

Though the award-winning New Zealander Margaret Mahy is probably best known for YA fantasy fiction, her humorous stories in rhyme are also popular. *Down the Back of the Chair* (with illustrator Polly Dunbar), featured on the USBBY 2007 "International Outstanding Books List", is categorized as a picturebook within the children's literature genre because every page is fully illustrated. It is an assemblage composed of 16 double-page spreads of middle-grade cream unrecycled paper featuring rhyming text and colorful images in pen, ink "cut paper", and watercolor wash. The book was printed and barcoded in China and published by Frances Lincoln in 2006, originally costing £6.99, but bought second-hand from an Oxfam shop in the UK marked £3. At the cash till Victoria noticed it had a reading level sticker ("Green Reader") and had been a library book in Slough (Feb 2010). "I expect the library was closed down", Victoria said sadly. (Since 2010, consecutive Conservative governments have shut over 800 libraries in the name of "austerity"). "Because it has scribbles on it", the seller said: "I'll let you have it for £1" (a bargain, as Victoria collects scribbles).

Tracing the life of this book would involve the publishing story of the (New Zealand) author and (British) illustrator brought together, the economics and conditions for workers of the publishers outsourcing their printing to China, what the sticker signified in reader-level in the UK, the library or later owner donating it to Oxfam, Oxfam itself (as a charitable organization alleviating the same global poverty contaminated by British publishing houses outsourcing printers in China for workers paid below living wages), and my buying it with a pound coin I scrabbled for in my pocket. It would also include reading it with Laura-Rosa and Jayne and giving us the idea for scrabbling down the back of our chairs to think about all of the life we found in the chairs we read in and in the books we read.

Over its 15 years so far, this book has become with a host of other matter, microbes, organisms, and memories: dust, hair, and fiber particles or parasites, fingerprints, micro-stains, composting and congregating over the many journeys the book has taken (e.g. NZ, UK, China, UK, globally) – all mostly imperceptible to the human eye. During its life as a library book, children of Slough may have handled it whilst crying, picking their noses, or eating, as might booklice, who also frequent libraries to feed on books. (In 2019, the largest library in the city of Marseille had to be closed due to an "infestation" of bed bugs brought in by readers. Mites – like booklice or bed bugs – are parasitic in that they feed on matter such as the paper, binding pastes, and glues in books, burrowing down for moisture). The book effectively becomes what Anna Tsing calls a "disturbance-based ecology", where matter scrabbles into matter "without either harmony or conquest" (2015:5), recalling Le Guin's cultural carrier bag theory: gathering, holding, and sharing. As she implies, if we approach story/history (and in our case the chair/the child/the book/research) as not bound by tired linear, progressive narrative tropes, but simply as a "thing that holds something else", we free ourselves to reinvent all of it "according to a new plan" (Le Guin 2019:34).

Working online by sending pictures and text via google, zooming, and also (V & L-R) hanging out in person on several occasions, the adults and child became-with the book, a relationality that generated a joyfully nonsensical list of impossibly wonderful things found down the back of a chair. The story goes: Dad loses his keys and two-year old Mary suggests looking down the back of the chair, where they find a bizarre assemblage of treasure. Using the literary devices of parody, nonsense, and intertextuality, as well as the dialogical construction of the story's "queer" subjectivities, the narrative poem finds various live animals and even a missing baby along with "pleasure, treasure, toys and trash". We began scrabbling down the back of our own chairs to the refrain: "the chair, the chair, the challenging chair!" finding:

rich pickings
nail clippings
dust balls
hairballs
paper, Lego bricks
the ace of hearts
toys, toothpicks
lots of tiny parts
coins, stains, secret dens
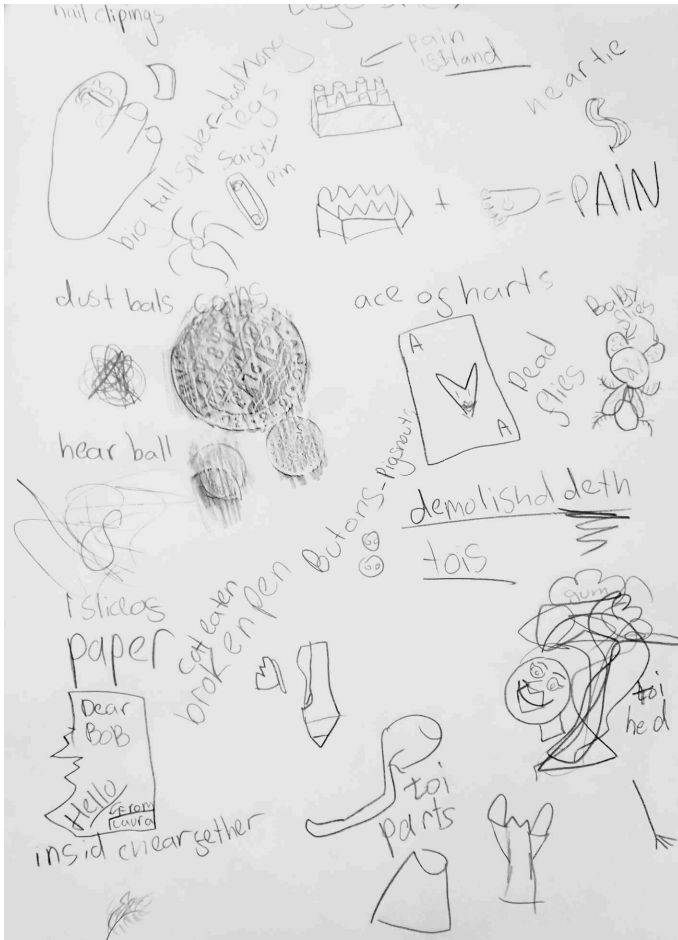feathers, fiber, broken pens
dead flies
hair ties

Figure 10.3 Laura-Rosa's list of things scrabbled. Laura-Rosa, 2021

Haraway's recognition of Le Guin's "many rhythms" in her writing as "acts of theory" is evoked by this rhyme, first written as a list by Laura-Rosa, who scrabbled most fearlessly into the darkest recesses of the chair, called out, wrote down, and drew what we had found down the back of our chairs. Then, on her suggestion, we gathered her list into a poem in the style of Mahy's text, the book *agitating* with the child. "Listening to the unheard voices", as Le Guin puts it, is as important for fiction as it is for reconfiguring what the child and literacy mean to us (Le Guin Haraway debate 2018).

And when we looked closely under a microscope, we also found eggs, lice, and nits. Then the two of us checked our hair and realized the nits were ours.
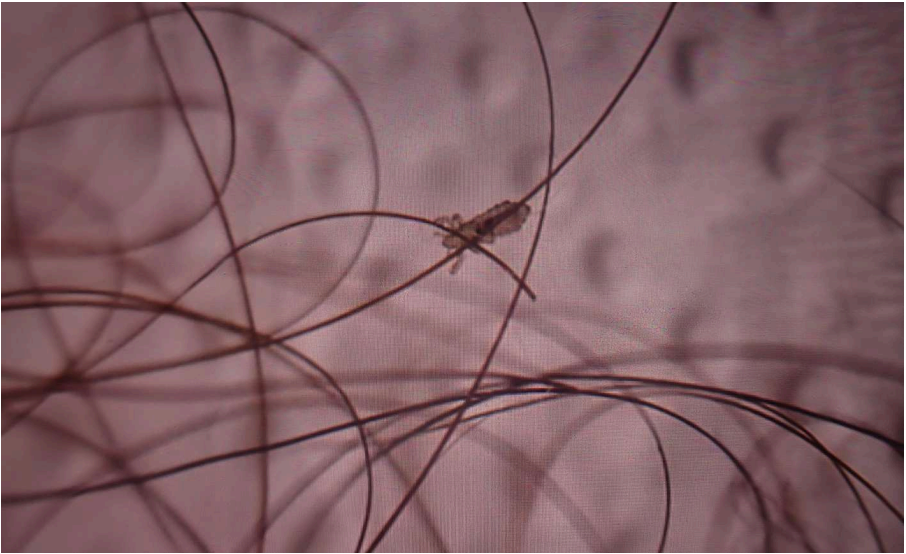
Figure 10.4 Screenshot from Laura-Rosa's film of a nit still moving on a hair. Laura-Rosa, 2021

Jayne was transported back to a hauntology of delousing her children throughout their nursery and primary school years, when bedtime stories were curtailed because the arduous process of combing them out to "break the nit's legs" took so long.

Researching-with nonhuman others; parasitic-others

Pediculus humanus capitis (commonly known as head lice or nits) are the obligate ectoparasites of humans. This hyper-diverse species is omnipresent but rarely features in studies of biodiversity. These creatures may not play what we traditionally consider an important role in the ecosystem. They do not pollinate plants; they are not food for other animals. Lice relate to *us* as playing a role – providing them with food – thus, we are part of *their* food chain. As our obligate parasites, *we* are obliged to host. We are their habitat, their room and board. They are poikilothermic, meaning they cannot control their body temperature, and so we do that for them. Head lice have adapted perfectly to life on us. They are a fine example of living-with, as humans are the only known host of this non-disease-carrying parasites who spend their lives on the human scalp, feeding exclusively on human blood. Parasites are victims of unscientific myth and frequently used as dehumanizing metaphors, such as viewing migrants as parasites or "leeches" on the system or "blood-suckers" as part of a history of racist discourse.

From genetic studies, head lice are thought to have diverged as subspecies up to 110,000 years ago, when humans began to make and wear material for clothing. They live in human head hair and are most often found on school-aged children, sucking blood, mating and laying eggs, but they are inactive for most of their lives. They sit quietly and hold on to the hair, grasping firmly, moving along the hair shaft forwards and backwards. They have specially designed claws at the ends of each of their six legs that are perfect for scuttling up and down the hair shafts. When head lice feed, tiny hooks surrounding the mouth grasp the scalp. They feed several times a day. Head lice deposit their eggs on hairs close to the scalp, then secrete a glue that hardens into a nit sheath that covers the hair shaft and egg. Saliva, feces of the larva and adult lice, and blood sucking cause itching, which may lead to infections, though this is rare. They do not hop, jump or fly from one person to another. Spread occurs through sharing clothing or belongings, such as hats, brushes, combs, towels, clothes, and bedding (and via the back of a chair).

The nit, as Niccolini (2021) has minutely observed (of ticks on her daughter's body), "is not only itself. It is a vector, reliant on relationality for survival. Like human bodies, it is multiple, potentially carrying a microbial wealth to pass onto others" (Niccolini citing Schuller 2018, 2021:79). As we value sketchy lists, rhymes, drawings, collages, and photographic "snaps" made in moments of immediacy, such "vulnerable literacies ask us to be willing to learn from what evades language, what digs into our skin, hides in our body, leaves traces we can't eradicate, what resists immediate reading, waits for later to reveal itself, sets off effects we can't contain" (Niccolini 2021: 81).

Figure 10.5 "A nit balancing on hair". Laura-Rosa, 2020

The most visible nonhumans living with humans are pets. Animal studies and posthuman perspectives encourage us to rethink our far from "natural" superiority and speciesism, reject demonizing certain species such as insects, and accord agency to nonhuman life forms whilst carefully considering human-animal entanglements (Hohti & Tammi 2019). Anthropocentric child-pet relations are challenged by proposing common world pedagogies for "staying with the trouble" that multispecies relations bring in the era of the Anthropocene (Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo 2017). Though pets are normally kept for social and emotional reasons, and we have assumed organisms that swarm are de-individualized and tend to fall outside western understandings of a bounded subject, Laura-Rosa announced that the nits were pets on finding her hair full of them and eggs. "You're a nit!" (nit is slang for foolish in English), I replied. Words hold things, reminds Le Guin. So, after a pause, I said, "Are they, though?" "They totally are my pets", she retorted. "If they live on me and drink my blood, they're automatically signing a form that says they're mine". Having examined an adult louse to draw it, she announced while drawing, "He looks like a butler who should be retired".

In a nomadic perspective, the process of subjectivity starts from the body and, given nomadic subjects are always materially embedded in the environment that they inhabit (in this case, on human heads), Laura-Rosa's "nomad thought" affords the nits humorous agential force via her passport-style drawings combined with the mock "official" status of living in one's hair as equivalent to signing a pet agreement or being a butler past retirement. Her acceptance of nits' difference and diversity as her nomadic point of reference thus thinks against and outside the "sameness" of state forms and social norms of head lice.

Given the joint lives of humans and nits, we are indeed bonded in the "significant otherness" of companion species (Haraway 2003); suffering a nomadic presence which challenges twenty-first century squeamish standards for "clean", untroubled hair. Like the rhizome, nits enact a state of "becoming, heterogeneity, infinitesimal, passage to the limit, continuous variation" and, as nomads, appear to have "no history, only a geography" (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 363, 393). Children's exposure to literature or animation entertainment anthropomorphizing insects (e.g. Pinocchio's friendship with a cricket or WALL-E's with a cockroach), which as Zoe Jacques (2015) points out, speak to Haraway's co-constitutive "contact zones" in *When Species Meet* (2007), informs their positive emotional connection across human-insect-robot relations. Connecting her work with Dutch philosopher Spinoza's ethics, Bennett explores "thing-power" of connectedness with humanity and nonhumanity, "towards an ecology of matter" (Bennett 2004: 349). According to Spinoza, nature is a place wherein bodies strive to enhance their power of activity by forging alliances with other bodies in their vicinity. A material body always resides within some assemblage, and its thing-power is a function of that grouping.

Following Bennett's suggestion that Darwin's tendency to anthropomorphize his objects of study enabled him to appreciate resonances and resemblances, "fostering a knowingly naïve receptivity to these things, even if it involves a little anthropomorphising, will leave us open to such encounters" (Schroeder & Óh Aodha 2014). Yet, when the nits were found, the adults were all for killing them rather than for keeping them as pets. In play, children are likely to view anything as a potential companion species and frequently destabilize ideas of the human by subverting and disrupting its norms (Hohti & Osgood 2020). Laura-Rosa was later observed happily playing with a friend constructing "families" with a range of plastic toy insects tucked up in bed and sitting at a table in a doll's house, with the "parent" children calling: "your blood dinner's ready!"

Perhaps playing with pretend blood-sucking insects removes any fear or revulsion: "play-as-therapy", as child psychotherapist D.W. Winnicott termed it, promotes "self-healing". An analyst who cannot play, he maintained, is "not suitable for the work" (1971: 54). Given that "observers might attend more closely to what children actually say and do during object play" (Pellegrini 1992: 2, 571), and taking into consideration Le Guin's advice for "trying on" people and ideas, we should know that the rhythms of pretend play – gathering matter and playing around with spatial and symbolic relations in abstract and non-linear ways – feed our imaginative representational abilities, problem-solving, memory, and creative survival skills, all of which are crucial to research. We have known this for long enough to suggest we should have more respect for it.

Studies comparing groups of children who play freely with objects to solve a problem with those who were trained to approach the problem have long since shown that play is simply better research practice (e.g. Sylva et al. 1976; Hutt et al. 1989). It provides children/us with the "what if?" or "as if" of "possibility thinking" (Craft et al. 2012), creating surprising situations that encourage the brain to confront "sweet spots of relative complexity" (Andersen & Roepstorff 2021). As the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith long argued, play is also an (always) unfinished process: iterative and elastic, it is "the potentiation of adaptive variability" (1997: 231) where making *is* flexible thinking.

As part of our scrabbling and gathering arts and research practice, we drew and photographed what we found down the back of a chair, and humorous and unlikely assemblages began to take shape, like those described in the book. Our assemblages are "open-ended gatherings" placing matter we have scrabbled together in free-floating (impermanent) collage and quickly photographing happenings as they emerge before all the parts are used again differently. In this way, adults and children may play with different combinations as a form of thinking-with, asking "about communal effects without assuming them", creating a research practice of "liveability, impermanence and emergence" (Tsing 2015: 23, 158). As Le Guin demonstrated in all her writing and as Tsing argues, "assemblages coalesce, change, and dissolve; this *is* the story" (Tsing 2015: 158).

An un-ending-ness to our scrabbling methodology

This chapter has been our attempt at producing knowledge differently as a counterpoint to developmentalist logic that so forcibly frames contemporary childhood and limits the ways in which children are understood and are permitted to become-with the world. Le Guin argues that "We're not telling that story; we've heard it" (Le Guin 2019: 37). We need new stories, like Fisher's Carrier Bag theory of evolution and hers of fiction. Le Guin's collection *Words Are My Matter* begins with the 1977 poem "The Mind is Still":

> The mind is still. The gallant books of lies
> are never quite enough.
> Ideas are a whirl of mazy flies
> over the pig's trough.   (Le Guin 1977)

While reading, "ideas flit like flies above the swill". Schooling the child/book/research into machinic regulation limits ideas that *need* to flit, as Laura-Rosa's deep-seated need to anthropomorphize and her ideas (and nits) have shown. All of the "pieces" in this chapter thus work together to "build an open-ended assem-

Figure 10.6 "A chair with hair". Collage by Laura-Rosa and Victoria de Rijke, 2022

Figure 10.7 "A nit in a chair". Collage by Laura-Rosa and Victoria de Rijke, 2022

Figure 10.8 "A nit with hair". Collage by Laura-Rosa and Victoria de Rijke, 2022

Figure 10.9 "A nit with nits". Collage by Laura-Rosa and Victoria de Rijke, 2022

blage, not a logical machine; they gesture to the so-much-more out there" of what Tsing calls "lifeways". And "assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they make them" (Tsing 2015: 23).

By making explicit the limitations and costs of investing and perpetuating developmentalist logic at the expense of other ways to encounter childhood, we have arrived at a complex and hopeful exploration of what else is possible when space for becoming-with "the book" in relational messy assemblages is created. Our scrabbling methodology was neither defined nor regulated by concerns for certainty or measurability. Instead our Le Guin-inspired methodology

is characterized by unanticipated affectively charged processes that attune to what (else) gets produced through intra-actions. We have sought to illustrate the human, more- and other-than-human relationalities that unfold within events and encounters, which can open up enquiries and allow the everyday, taken-for-granted to be reimagined in deeply political, ethical, enmeshed, and accountable ways (Strom et al. 2019). "Scrabbling down the back of the chair" is our feminist commitment to activate theory through embodied arts-based practices to generate knowledge (differently) in order to get at ways to tell other, worldly stories that can offer something else to childhood studies. "It sometimes feels", wrote Le Guin, "that story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here (…) think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with, once the old one's finished. Maybe" (2019: 33).

Practices of (literally and metaphorically) getting inside the book can be both joyful and troubling, raising important questions, agitated through a serious recognition of the significance of the non/more/other/less-than-human for childhood studies. Our taking matter, parasites, humor, and the fantastical to the heart of our research practice resulted in the emergence of the possibilities within anthropomorphizing and the limitations of textual representations. "Scrabbling about" reveals the endless, uncertain, emergent possibilities for the "what else" when the human is decentered. We celebrate the vitality of the posthuman child to innovative arts-based research, concluding that this methodology, which infiltrates and inflects our everyday lives, frees us, as researchers, to embrace the possibilities for what else a book can be, what else a child can be, and what else children's literature studies and childhood research can become.

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