Culture as Ability: Organizing Enabling Educative Spaces for Humans and Animals

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Abstract
Drawing on a multispecies ethnographic encounter with a physically disabled feral kitten, Whiskey, I take an intersectional theoretical approach to place disability studies in conversation with ecofeminist perspectives. In so doing I ask: How does a culture that produces disabled and unwanted humans render animals deserving of the same label? And how might we reconfigure this culture through "retying knots" in educational spaces so as to divest animals of these labels? To conclude, I draw on a vignette from my own ethnographic research and teaching at the university level to offer possibilities for "enabling" cultural work in educational settings that explicitly draws on and engages ecofeminist and disability studies paradigms.

Résumé
Mettant à profit une rencontre ethnographique multi-espèces avec un chaton handicapé et ensauvagé, Whiskey, j'adopte une approche intercatégorielle et théorique pour mettre en contact les études sur l'invalidité et les perspectives écoféministes. Ce faisant, je pose la question : comment se fait-il qu'une culture créant des êtres humains estropiés et indésirés réserve-t-elle le même sort aux animaux? Et comment pouvons-nous reconfigurer cette culture en « renouant les liens » dans les espaces éducatifs de façon à épargner ce sort aux animaux? En conclusion, j'ai recours à un aperçu provenant de mes propres recherches et de mon enseignement ethnographiques en milieu universitaire afin de proposer des moyens de soi-disant permettre le travail culturel dans les environnements éducatifs en vue de tirer parti de façon clairement affirmée des modèles d'études sur l'écoféminisme et l'invalidité et d'y donner libre cours.

Keywords: disability, ableism, anthropology of education, posthumanism, ecofeminism, multispecies ethnography

Confronting Culture as Disability

When I spied the feral kitten in the mass of bushes shrouding the side of a home next to mine—he was the "feral kitten" then and not "Whiskey"—I hesitated in attempting to capture him. My family and I had rescued and homed many ill feral kittens during the last year and I was, admittedly, exasperated. My love of all things furry triumphed, however, and I rushed over to scoop him into my

arms. I was instantly enamored with his fluffy black and white fur and sweet kitten face, and this made it all the more shocking when I realized three of his four legs were severely twisted. When I set him on the ground to walk, he seemed to traipse around just fine, but he appeared as a tiny contortionist with each step. *I* knew he was "disabled" and instantly wondered if *he* knew the same.

Inhabiting a cultural milieu where it is "humane" and "ethical" to make certain animal bodies killable—the sick, disabled, homeless, feral, or aging—while paradoxically, doing the same to humans is usually considered murder, I immediately wondered if the kitten should be euthanized.[1] As a domesticated animal intentionally bred to rely on humans for care, he also had a physical disability that "counted" in his surroundings. Leaving him in my neighbour's yard would make him fodder for local predators and his inability to climb fences and trees left him unable to hunt and vulnerable to starvation. He would have been the archetype for what ecologists and naturalistic ethicists deem sick, dying, or injured animals that predators benevolently remove from the gene pool (Callicott, 1980; Taylor, 2014b). I also felt uneasy in realizing that his "disability" and feral status might also count in America's cultural space, where nearly three million adoptable dogs and cats die in shelters each year (The Humane Society of the United States, 2013). "Disabled" and "feral" ones like Whiskey seemed doubly disadvantaged, as they demand additional resources where there are few. As Taylor (2014b) argues, disabled animals' perceived increased dependency and "less important, unessential or nonexistent" (p. 117) contributions to their communities typically render them killable. So I asked: Would Whiskey even be considered "adoptable?" And if he were, would I be able to find a suitable home given Whiskey's larger placement in a culture producing millions of unwanted "companion" animals?

I begin this paper by placing disability studies (McDermott & Varenne, 1995; Taylor, 2011, 2014a, 2014b) in conversation with ecofeminist (Clark, 2012; Donovan, 2006; Harvester & Blenkinsop, 2010; Kheel, 2008; Li, 2007; Plumwood, 1996) perspectives, asking: How does a culture that produces disabled and unwanted *humans* render animals deserving of the same label? And how might we reconfigure this culture through "retying knots" (Haraway, 2008) in educational spaces so as to divest animals of these labels? To answer these questions, I first chronicle my experiences with Whiskey to illuminate how our entanglements prompted my own contemplation of the ways in which educational spaces, despite national educational framework documents that continue to frame the nonhuman world as collective resource-to-be-sustainably managed (Lloro-Bidart, 2015), could be opened up as enabling for both people and *animals*. In this narrative, I am both participant and, following Behar (1996), "vulnerable observer." Grappling with "problems of representation" (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Kuhl, 2011), I seek to de-center my own agency and that of my fellow humans through highlighting multispecies ethnographic encounters (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Lorimer & Srinivasan, 2013; Ogden, Hall, & Tanita,

2013) with Whiskey that allow his subjecthood to be in the "spotlight" (Pedersen, 2012; White, 2013). To conclude, I draw on a vignette from my own classroom research at the university level to offer possibilities for "enabling" cultural work manifested as dialogical praxis *with* nonhuman animals.

Theoretical Frameworks

Culture-as-Disability

McDermott and Varenne (1995) and Varenne and McDermott (1998), based on ethnographic research in schools, describe three ways of thinking about culture and disability: (a) the deprivation approach, which focuses on perceived developmental abnormalities prohibiting some individuals from completing defined tasks; (b) the difference approach, grounded in cultural mismatch theories; and (c) the culture-as-disability approach. Through culture-as-disability, McDermott and Varenne (1995) assert that "disabilities" are not concrete physical realities that always "count," rather they are "cultural fabrications" made to count in particular circumstances. To illustrate, they draw on Groce's (1985) work in a deaf community in Martha's Vineyard, where constructed cultural spaces made being deaf inconsequential. There, "deaf persons [were] thoroughly integrated into the life of their community and the hearing thoroughly integrated into the communicational intricacies of sign" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 328). McDermott and Varenne's argument, which shifts the analysis from a focus on the perceived physical abnormalities of the individual to the cultural work of many, is grounded in the idea that culture creates disabilities while simultaneously demanding solutions for these disabilities.

Extending this notion of the cultural model of disability to animals, both Humes (2008) and Taylor (2011, 2014a, 2014b) argue that we actually project onto nonhuman animals the kinds of ableist thinking McDermott and Varenne (1995) describe as "the deprivation approach." Though scholars like Wolfe (2003), Pedersen (2004), and Wolbring (2008) specifically invoke the language of "speciesism" to denote the privileging of the category "human," I intentionally maintain the use of "ableism" here to argue that insufficient attention is given to how nonhumans are actually disabled by educational spaces. This has significant educational implications; as Humes (2008) highlights: "Animals do not even have the basic privilege of being on the 'human' side of the 'human/nonhuman' binary…As a result, it seems because of their positioning, animals slide through the cracks of who gets counted as oppressed in most [pedagogical?] circles" (p. 79). Further, as Pedersen (2010) emphasizes, schools are sites where participants organize culture that, "through a complex web of social processes and interactions, not only continually re-inscribes and 'closes' categories of 'human' and 'animal', but also tends to sustain and reinforce the incorporation of animals into capitalist-specific modes of production and consumption"

(pp. 241-242). Precisely through these categories that both reify the human/nonhuman dichotomy and insert nature into resource-based paradigms, educational spaces "disable" animals and do cultural work that helps to create a society that does the same. Ableism, therefore, not only involves dialectically defining human disability in relation to a paradigmatic able-bodied human, but it also involves doing the same to nonhumans—especially disabled animals like Whiskey. Nonhumans as disabled others effectively become, then, removed from consideration as subjects both in educational spaces and beyond.

Taylor (2014a), who works productively at the intersections of disability studies, animal studies, and feminism, evinces gaps in the disability studies literature regarding animals. Most of this research, she explains, focuses on how disabled animals affect able-bodied members of their own and other species, but rarely examines the real-lived experiences of the disabled animals themselves, including the insights that might be gleaned from their worldly and embodied interactions. The emphasis on the able-bodied animal in research, though valuable, also perpetuates ableist thinking insofar as it privileges normalized bodies by focusing on how they receive and cope with those bodies perceived as abnormal. Further, Taylor (2014a) points out that animal ethics scholarship has the tendency to caricature animals as voiceless because of the focus on suffering. While acknowledging suffering is highly relevant due to the erroneous notion that nonhumans are incapable of feeling pain (Calarco, 2008; Dawkins, 2006; Jones, 2013), Taylor (2014a) highlights:

> Exploring these issues through the lens of disability studies can help us to ask who these animals are beyond their suffering. It asks us to consider how the very vulnerability and difference these animals inhabit may in fact embody new ways of knowing and being. (p. 113)

As such, I use multispecies ethnography here as method to move beyond my own ableist preoccupation with Whiskey's suffering. I hope to capture the wonder of his modes of being in the world through dialogical encounters attuned to his communicative capacities.

Ecofeminist Perspectives

Early ecofeminist research established how the cultural ideals of the privileged in liberal democratic societies, who largely control access to information, are rife with the remnants of Cartesian dualisms (King, 1990; Merchant, 1990; Plumwood, 1996; Shiva, 1988). These dualisms (reason/nature, human/nonhuman, woman/man) obscure the paths toward socioecological change by designating some living beings (women, minority groups, animals, the disabled, and also the non-living natural world) as in need of domination by more rational beings (white males). In addition, the dualism of public/private ensures those issues relegated to the sphere of the "private" are eschewed from public responsibility.

Educational spaces, which reflect the institutional and political structures of wider society and are “mainly responsible for educating prospective citizens for their civic engagement in the public domain” (Li, 2007, p. 57), produce disabled “others” through structuring paradigms in line with Plumwood’s (1996) informal cultural climate of liberalism. In Plumwood’s view, socioecological change does not occur through expanding democratic participation structures in the existing climate of liberalism (and now neoliberalism). Rather, it must be achieved through eradicating socially constructed dualisms that establish the category of “other” (Gruen, 1993; Plumwood, 1996).

While Kheel (2008) emphasizes that such early ecofeminist research failed to adequately concern itself with nonhuman animals, several scholars, including Donovan (1990, 1994), Adams and Donovan (1995) and Gruen (1993, 1996) explicitly aimed to explore how ecofeminist theories might be applied to caring for nonhuman animals (see Deckha, 2012 for critiques of essentialism in such early ecofeminist thought). More recently, Donovan’s (2006) dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care approach develops a framework for “shift[ing] the epistemological source of theorizing about animals to the animals themselves” (p. 305). The following are foundational to this approach: (a) ethical relationships with animals must be understand within the political context in which they occur (political perspective), and (b) local and embodied experiences with individual nonhumans provide a “point of reference to which the remote actions of others maybe be compared and analogized on the principle of homology” (dialogical method) (Donovan, 2006, p. 310). (See Warkentin, 2010 for a critique of Donovan’s principle of homology.) Connecting such dialogical care theory to disability studies opens up possibilities for understanding human-animal relations[hips] in educational spaces. First, this epistemological and ontological positioning provides a space for thinking about and understanding the experiences of disabled and able-bodied animals, particularly as they unfold in culturally-constructed (educational) spaces that make embodiment relevant/irrelevant. Second, while Donovan (2006) rightfully gives much attention to empathizing with animal suffering, drawing on disability studies, Taylor (2014a) stresses that it is important to explore how “animals are beyond their suffering” (p. 113). A dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care approach, woven together with disability studies, provides this space to engage at the local and embodied level to understand and also move past suffering. Simultaneously, it provides a vehicle to grapple with the larger political context in which the local and embodied occur, i.e., a nation that legally sanctions and funds the killing of nearly three million unwanted dogs and cats each year.

Culture-becomes-Ability

In the moment I encountered Whiskey, I occupied a cultural space defined by deprivation and ableism; cats (and animals) with twisted legs were “obviously”

disabled. Cats, especially those living outdoors, are supposed to jump, climb, hunt, and tear about. I initially saw his legs as embodied manifestations of what he could not do—thanks to nature's cruelty. These initial thoughts, coupled with knowing that being "humane" sometimes seems to entail euthanizing sick, disabled, or aging animals so they will not suffer, quickly led me to a veterinarian so an expert could weigh in on his condition. As an animal rights advocate, I was admittedly preoccupied with the notions of suffering that dominate scholarship in animal ethics (Taylor 2014a). Disability scholars have worked to challenge these preoccupations to demonstrate that "much of the suffering around disability stems from the discrimination and marginalization that disabled people face" (Taylor, 2014a, p. 112), and not concrete physical realities (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). And like, Taylor (2014a), I also wanted to understand how Whiskey might "embody" a way of thinking, feeling, and being "cat" that, while unfamiliar to me, had value, purpose, and joy.

At the veterinarian's office Whiskey meowed, trembled, and tried to scurry under my arms while I talked with him and assured him that he would be okay, though I had no certainty as to what would happen. While I could not know what Whiskey wanted, partially due to my own communicative disabilities that seemed to count in this context, I attempted to "look back" at him to understand what he might "actually be doing, feeling, thinking" (Haraway, 2008, p. 21). I, as ethnographer and self-described animal advocate recognized that I could not "speak *for*" him, but knew that my analysis would be "woefully inadequate" if I did not "*try* to understand how [this] cat experiences the world around [him]" (White, 2013, p. 96). In an attempt to centre his feelings (Donovan, 2006), I interpreted his meowing and trembling as signs of discomfort and resistance, as he had little contact with humans in his short life and probably preferred to nuzzle with his mother and littermates in the bushes. Following White (2013), who argues of the importance of incorporating "animal behavior and sensory data" (p. 102) into multispecies ethnographies and Pedersen (2012), who calls the combination of phenomenological experience and ethological knowledge a "double articulation," I relied on my veterinarian's skill in understanding the bodily and psychological experiences of felines in a way superior to my own.

During this actual visit, the veterinarian gently sized up Whiskey's tiny body, explaining that his condition was not fatal. X-rays would indicate with certainty what pieces of his soft bones and connective tissues were not developing properly, should we be interested in surgery; but this was not that kind of office visit. The only diagnosis I sought was: Could this kitten survive and have a "good life?"—and the veterinarian, based on his decades of personal and professional experiences with "twisted kittens" indicated he could—as long as he were placed in a home understanding of his different needs.[2] Whiskey, then, required not only a physical space where his "disability" would not count (he could not survive long-term outdoors), but also a cultural space where being "different from perceived norms" did not mean that he was "missing something"

(McDermott & Varenne, 1995). The vet cautioned that if I could not find this kind of space for Whiskey, the proper course of action would be euthanasia, or what he interpreted as "killing responsibly" (Haraway, 2008), despite also insisting a life "like this" would be better than "no life at all."

Whiskey and I returned home and I promptly created a space for him. He voraciously gobbled the provided food, though at six or seven weeks of age he probably should have suckled his mother's milk a bit longer. Following Donovan's (2006) principle of homology in the dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care approach, which involves "humans pay[ing] attention to—listen[ing]—to animal communications" (p. 306), I was struck by his demeanor and affections; every feral kitten I rescued at his age was initially a fiery terror—hissing, scratching, and often attempting to bite. Whiskey, however, rolled on his back, waved his curved front paws in the air, and purred as his soft warm belly was tickled. Having a lifelong interspecies entanglement with multiple felines, some knowledge of feline behavior, and my veterinarian's assertions that he could have a "good life," I interpreted his corporeal actions as contentedness, though the differences in our communicative capacities ensured that I could not be sure about what *he* wanted (see Warkentin, 2010). Grappling with deciding *our* next move, since Whiskey was my companion on this journey, I pondered Haraway's (2008) "sharing pain" as humans sometimes find themselves jumbled up in (mutually) painful relations with companion animals. His possible pain, which I struggled to understand, could be physical if we chose for him to live—How is life for a kitten with no home? Will he grow into malformed bones and joints, causing suffering?—and it could be mental or emotional—How is it for an animal about to die? Does she or he know imminent death and suffer emotionally as a result?

Haraway (2008) argues that "human beings must learn to kill responsibly… knowing there will never be sufficient reason" (p. 81). She maintains that we cannot "pretend to live outside killing" (p. 79), which I was fully cognizant of when contemplating Whiskey's fate and the implications of the decision for his young life. As an "able-bodied" human, how could I ever fully grasp what the needs and desires of a disabled kitten might be? Haraway's words, flitting around my mind, joined with those of McDermott and Varenne (1995)—Whiskey's legs were indeed concretely different than most cats, but the "disability" was a cultural fabrication woven from the threads of an ableist society rejecting "variation[s] of being" (Wolbring, 2008). I realized this was not a matter of killing or living; rather, it became a moment of cross-species intersubjectivity (Kuhl, 2011; Milton, 2002; Pedersen, 2010) where I was called to *think* and *learn dialogically with* Whiskey (Donovan, 2006; Yusoff, 2012). Whiskey taught me that while he was physically different than most kittens, the disability *I* saw resulted from my occupying a particular cultural space "actively organiz[ing] ways for persons [and animals] to be disabled" (McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 337).

Not only did I view him as "disabled" due to what I perceived as his physical

limitations, but also because I worried there was no physical or cultural place for him in a society where locating permanent homes for feral and unwanted companion animals is always difficult. This prompted me to rethink the ways in which educational spaces, broadly construed, could be sites to not only re-imagine our relationships with "nature" and nonhumans more generally, but also with domestic and liminal animals who have, through humanity's own design, become inextricably enmeshed in our everyday lives (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2014; Luther, 2013; Taylor, 2014b).[3] Indeed, as Taylor (2014a) highlights, millions of domestic farm animals are literally and physically disabled by the cultural work we do as they "live in such cramped, filthy, and unnatural conditions that disabilities become common, not inevitable" (p. 104). While many scholars purposefully distinguish between wild/domestic and indigenous/alien (exotic) animals in their analyses, often placing domestic and alien (exotic) animals on the bottom of a culturally-constructed hierarchy (Callicott, 1980, 1989), my intention here is to *blur* them with "nature" because I, like ecofeminist and disability scholars (Kheel, 2008; Taylor, 2014a), argue that these distinctions establish dualisms that often reduce particular individual animal bodies (domestic, disabled, alien/exotic) to the realm of the abject and killable (Haraway, 2008). My aim is not to essentialize them into one category of "animal" or "nature"; rather, through my own discursive practices here I seek to dismantle the very binaries I critique.[4]

Enabling Possibilities in Formal Educational Settings

Although Whiskey's story is that of one physically disabled feral kitten, he is emblematic of all animals disabled by the cultural work of humans, including that which gets done in educational spaces.[5] While McDermott and Varenne (1995) and Varenne and McDermott (1998) do not invoke the term "ableism" (Taylor, 2011, 2014a, 2014b; Wolbring, 2008, 2014) in their analyses, what they describe and theorize through concrete empirical case studies is *how* one sort of ableism manifests in schools. As both Taylor (2011, 2014a, b) and Wolbring (2008, 2014) point out, ableist cultural work not only disables certain human beings through normalizing particular physical, biological, personal, or social attributes, but it also disables nonhumans as "humans are here to use nature as they see fit" due to their superiority (Wolbring, 2008, p. 55). The lenses of ecofeminism and disability studies provide a framework to understand *how* people in liberal (and now neoliberal) democratic societies disable animals by defining them dialectically as lacking the *human* qualities of rationality, sentience, and reason. They also provide a space to rethink these dialectical relations.

Such an approach to understanding how educational spaces disable animals focuses not only on political and economic structures like standards, frameworks, and funding schemes, which Donovan (2006) emphasizes are essential to the dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care approach, but especially

on the local and embodied cultural work people do in educational spaces to re-inscribe *or* undo disabling dualisms (Donovan, 2006; McDermott &Varenne, 1995; Plumwood, 1996). Curriculum studies scholars have long pointed to the ways in which the institutional curriculum and actual curriculum events in classrooms diverge. Doyle (1992) argues that this occurs for two reasons, "First, the language of curriculum policy is discontinuous with the demands of conceptualizing and managing classroom events [and] …Second…the curriculum is shaped in powerful ways by local factors in classrooms, including teachers' own curriculum perspectives" (p. 508). These local factors and teacher perspectives could provide the key to deconstructing the dualisms guiding the disabling cultural work done in educational spaces. Recall that Plumwood (1996) argues that the path to democracy, subverted "by the Western project of rational mastery" (p. 162), is not paved by extending formal participative structures so that more and different voices may be heard. Rather, the dualisms that pervade these participative structures need *undoing*, "both in theoretical and political structures and in the culture and practice of everyday life" (p. 163).

Harvester and Blenkinsop (2010) highlight that ecofeminists, in general, have two broad aims: (a) "to expose the logic of domination" and (b) "to seek alternatives that replace destructive ways of relating to each other and nature" (p. 123), which Plumwood (1996) refers to as *undoing*. Part of this undoing, as Li (2007) and Harvester and Blenkinsop (2010) discuss, involves changing the language utilized in schools, and, I contend here, a variety of other educational spaces. This is particularly true for sites of science learning, given they are most often mired in naturalistic ethics and the resource-oriented paradigms that frame research and practice in the natural and physical sciences (Rotas, 2015). While educators are indeed embedded in the language of the wider society in which they live—and the discipline or disciplines they teach—they are not automatons without the ability to critically think through their everyday practice.

A Multispecies and Enabling "Classroom" Vignette

In the following and concluding section, I draw on data from ethnographic participatory research of my own teaching practice to illustrate how educators might challenge ableist and speciesist paradigms (Taylor, 2011, 2014a, 2014b) through concrete actions, including discursive reframing. I refer to the cultural work I describe here as *enabling* insofar as it seeks to create participative structures in everyday life (i.e., that of professor and students in an educational space) that recognize the subjecthood and moral agency of humans and nonhumans. In the excerpt depicted below, as in all of my teaching experiences, Whiskey and my embodied experiences with him remain at the forefront of my mind. In these processes, I work to reciprocally engage practice (embodied and local experience) with theory (disability studies and ecofeminism) in a sort of political "praxis." This praxis extends beyond Freire's (1970) anthropocentric notions of praxis (Bell & Russell, 2000; Corman, 2011; Kuhl, 2011) insofar as it works

to undo “the separateness of humans and other animals” (Kuhl, 2011, p. 109) “that establishes human superiority” (Bell & Russell, 2000, p. 191) and fails to recognize nonhumans as possible subjects (Russell & Bell, 1996; Russell, 2005).

In my then-position as professor of science education at a large, mostly residential public university in California, one of my roles was to teach life and environmental science in two contexts: to pre-credential Kindergarten-Grade 8 teachers and to first-year undergraduates fulfilling introductory science, English, and sustainability requirements. In this capacity, I often struggled with my own identification as an animal rights advocate and my pedagogical duty to teach science. As feminist philosophers have pointed out, science and the scientific method have deeply woven associations with imperialism, colonialism, and the subjugation of certain voices (like women, Indigenous peoples, and nonhuman animals) (Donovan, 2006; Harding, 1986; 2008; Kahn, 2010).

The laboratory requirement for this course involved students in a Citizen Science project where they made weekly phenological observations of plants and animals residing in a local park. Broadly, Citizen Science often involves the crowdsourcing of scientific data that participants typically upload to a website so that the data can be used by working scientists (Bonney et al., 2009; Dickinson et al., 2012). Phenology refers to the study of how the timing of biological events, like bud burst and mating, coincide with the seasons; it is of particular interest to climate change biologists studying the impacts of climate change on living systems. I purposefully chose this project so that students would have contact with animals and plants in the environments where they typically live (versus a laboratory), but would not have to harm them to carry out their scientific work.[6] The following fieldnote excerpt describes an incident that took place in the park as students made their weekly observations.

February 24, 2015

Local Park (Outdoor “Classroom”)

> As I walk along my usual path to head to a Restoration area of the park, I stop at the large valley oak tree in front of the bathroom. There I meet Gina, Brinda, Kelly, Dulce, Treniece, Jessie, and a few other young women in my class. This tree is one of their usual observation points as they’ve shared with me the past few weeks that there are usually a lot of acorn woodpeckers feeding here [acorn woodpeckers are one of their focal species for their phenology project]. For the past two weeks, they’ve also been observing very small taupe birds in the trees, though none of us knows what they are called. In order to foster inquiry skills, I ask them to figure out the name of the little taupe birds using the guidebook they have in their field bags. They agree…As we’re all standing there together and I’m showing them how to use the book [I discuss how it’s hard to tell how large or small something is based on a photo, so it’s important to always read the sizes of the birds in the book], Treniece notices a rather large ant in my hair and freaks out a bit, “Oh my gosh! You have an ant in your hair!” I tell her not to worry about it and I start to gently weave my hair out of the ant’s tiny grasp. It was clear to me from the ant’s wriggling around that

it wanted to be let free. I hear one of the students say something like, "Don't you know she's not worried about it? She's a nature girl." This young woman did not speak with a sarcastic tone of voice; rather, she seemed to want to make sense of why it didn't bother me. After this process started to take a little longer than we all anticipated [the ant did not seem to want to cooperate with my aims, even though my aims and the ant's aims probably coincided. That is, I wanted to safely let her/him free and s/he wanted to be let free], I hear one of them ask why I don't just "flick it away." I calmly explain as I finally and gently send the ant off on its way, "I try to avoiding harming or killing living beings, unless I have to do so in order to protect myself." For the most part, the group was quiet and nodded.

In this vignette, my aim as an educator was to concretely and practically engage my students in a pedagogical moment (praxis) grounded in ecofeminist theory and disability studies. While the tiny ant did not appear to my naked eye as physically disabled like Whiskey, s/he risked being caricatured as voiceless (Taylor, 2014a) and "disabled" if I simply flicked her/him away in an act of blatant disregard. Further, drawing on Donovan's (2006) dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care approach, I hoped to demonstrate to my students that even insects like ants, who typically do not appeal to humans in the same manner as the charismatic megafauna (Small, 2012), deserve our consideration and care as we *learn with* them (Yusoff, 2012). Donovan (2006) highlights, for example:

> We need…to reorient or reemphasize that care theory means listening to other life-forms regardless of how alien they may seem to us and incorporating their communications into our moral reaction to them. In other words, even if we don't feel the cuddly warmth we might toward a human infant—presumably the paradigmatic experience in care theory—we nevertheless can read other creatures' language on the principle of homology, for their nonverbal language is very much like ours. In the case of snakes and spiders, for example, we can see by their body language (which is homologous to ours) that they experience terror and anxiety, that they shrink away from sources of pain, that they want to live. We must respect their wishes in any human decision making about their condition. (p. 315)

In this one, short-lived pedagogical moment, I attempted to "respect [the ant's] wishes in [my own] decision making about [her or his] condition" as I interpreted the ant's wriggling as a desire to be set free. I cannot be sure from the data I have collected, however, that this deliberate moment of praxis challenged my students to think dialogically with the ant in an enabling, rather than disabling manner. As I further move through such pedagogical and research projects with my students, I will continue to explore how these kinds of praxes challenge students to think differently (perhaps in more enabling ways, perhaps not) about their relationships with nonhumans, particularly in a setting where they engage in scientific thinking. While Donovan's (2006) principle of homology was at work when I learned with Whiskey, as he prompted me to rethink how my teaching practice might become more enabling, additional research and analysis is needed to examine how the dialogical extension of the ethic-of-care (and principle of homology) might be fostered in educational spaces.

Conclusion

In this article, I wove together ecofeminist theory and disability studies in an intersectional analysis to chronicle Whiskey's and my experiences together. Our short journey served as a dialogical moment of praxis as I worked to understand Whiskey's embodied experiences in the world as "beyond suffering" (Taylor, 2014a). Further, he enjoined me to reflect on the ways in which the very educational spaces I inhabit reproduce problematic dualisms that disable not only certain humans, but also nonhumans. As my classroom vignette illustrated, a teaching informed by ecofeminist and disability theories can converge with actual multispecies teaching practice to create a sort of praxis that moves past the anthropocentric dialogism of critical pedagogues and theorists like Freire (Bell & Russell, 2000; Corman, 2011; Kuhl, 2011). The preliminary findings presented here do not yet unpack student sense-making related to these educational experiences, identifying a need for further empirical research.

Whiskey in his physically and culturally enabling home, 2015

Notes

[1] Here, I borrow from Haraway's (2008) notion of making animal bodies killable.

[2] Internet searches (July 2015) reveal that kittens like Whiskey are often called "twisty kitties" or "squittens." The medical term is *radial hypoplasia* for the forelegs and *femoral hypoplasia* for the hind legs. Whiskey has both conditions, as his forelegs and one hind leg are twisted.

[3] Taylor (2014b) highlights that disabled domestic "food" animals typically get reduced to their flesh, as in the case of Lou and Bill, two working oxen at Green Mountain College who were murdered for their meat once they came of age and could no longer till the school's land.

[4] Li (2007) similarly points out that while the universal category of "woman" can essentialize women, overemphasizing difference among various groups of women can "lead to fragmentation of the women's movement" (p. 365). Since distinctions among domestic, liminal, and wild animals have marginalized domestic and liminal animals and romanticized wild ones, I attempt to blur these categories here.

[5] Whiskey resided with my partner and me (and our very large furry family) for approximately two weeks before I found him a permanent and enabling physical and cultural space. At just two years of age (as of July 2015), he is flourishing in his home.

[6] Citizen Science projects are not without critique, and sometimes do involve the harming of nonhuman animals. See Ottinger (2010a, 2010b), Lave (2012), and Korzekwa (2015) for various critical analyses of Citizen Science Projects.

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