

Too Many Monkeys Jumping in Their Heads: Animal Lessons within Young Children's Media

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Abstract

Young children's media regularly features animals as its central characters. Potentially reflecting children's well-documented affinity for/with animals, this media—books, toys, songs, clothing, electronic media, and so on—carries with it many explicit and implicit messages about animals and human-animal relationships. This article focuses on the particularly foundational age of children under four and their parents/caregivers as children's first early childhood environmental educators. Drawing on ecofeminism, ecocriticism, and early childhood environmental education, we explore messages about animals in children's media, critically considering notions of mis- and dis-placement, anthropomorphism, and subjectivity. Our inquiry challenges parents and environmental educators to reconsider the lessons young children learn about animals from their surrounding media and explore possible alternatives that question and seek to transform social and ecological inequalities.

Résumé

Les médias destinés aux jeunes enfants présentent régulièrement des animaux à titre de personnages principaux. Représentant possiblement la prédilection maintes fois attestée des enfants pour les animaux, ces médias (livres, jouets, chansons, vêtements, médias électroniques, etc.) sont accompagnés de nombreux messages explicites et implicites sur les animaux et les relations humain-animal. Le présent article met l'accent sur l'âge des plus propice des enfants de moins de quatre ans et leurs parents/gardiens en tant que tout premiers éducateurs en environnement. En puisant dans l'écoféminisme, l'écocritique et l'éducation environnementale à la petite enfance, nous examinons les messages sur les animaux dans les médias destinés aux enfants, nous penchant d'un point de vue critique sur les notions de « mal- » et « dé- » -placement, d'anthropomorphisme et de subjectivité. Notre étude met au défi les parents et éducateurs en environnement de remettre en question les leçons que tirent les jeunes enfants des animaux représentés dans les médias leur étant destinés, et examine les autres méthodes pouvant remettre en cause et transformer les inégalités sociales et écologiques.

Keywords: early childhood, animals, media, environmental education, ecocriticism, parenting



Once Upon a Zebra...

Nora: Last year, my son Bridger was given a stuffed zebra as a gift. Not just any zebra, this one is miniature and sits within a small faux zebra-hide handbag, its head sticking out one end and its tail the other. When Bridger squeezes its belly, the zebra squawks out: “How. Are. You? How. Are. You?” As I hear the toy’s question for the 10th time today, I silently have my own: “Who. Made. You? What. Are. You?”

What are our children learning about animals via their toys, books, music, films, and other media? Even for minimalist, “outdoorsy” parents, media showcasing animals as their central characters, such as animal puzzles, animal songs, baby’s first animal books, even animal pyjamas, are significant parts of infants’ and children’s lives and learning. Much research and theory points to the importance of the connection between animals and children (Kahn & Kellert, 2002; Le Guin, 2004; Myers, 2007; Sobel, 1996), notwithstanding the obvious that human beings *are* animals. However, as environmental educators and mothers of young children, we wonder about the types of stories these media are communicating and/or silencing during the formative years from birth to age four.

Defining media broadly to include toys, books, clothing, electronic media, music, art, and so on, this article first inquires into the rationale behind why animals feature so prominently in young children’s media. Subsequently, we consider some of the messages embedded in this media that inform children’s learning about nonhuman animals and human relationships with them. Specifically, we centre our critique on animal mis- and dis-placement, anthropomorphism, and (lack of) subjectivity within young children’s media. The questions

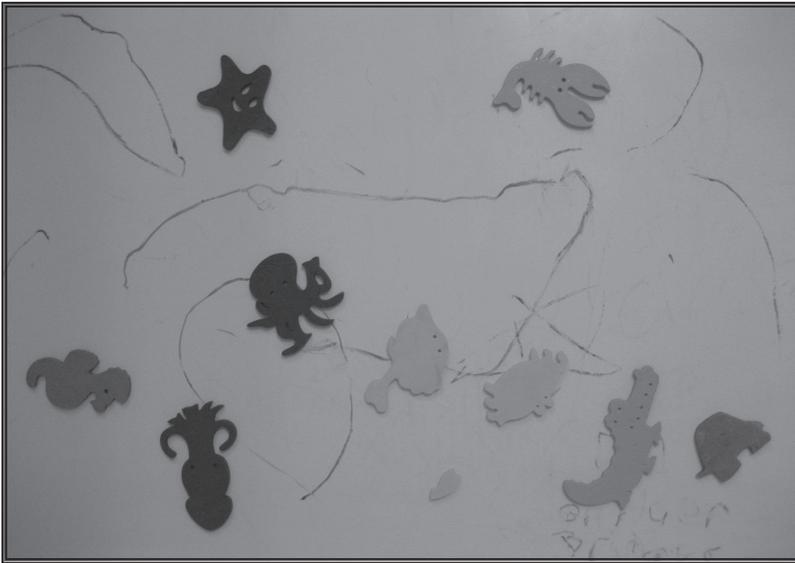
and discussion raised herein challenge environmental educators, early childhood educators, and especially parents and guardians to carefully consider how popular media for children contributes to anthropocentric understandings of animals and human-animal relations.

Even in situations where babies are in childcare from a young age, parents are incredibly influential “teachers” to their children, and the home is a primary source of learning (Bai, Elza, Kovaks, & Romanycia, 2010; Baldwin Dancy, 2000). Recognizing the important role of the family environment in learning, this article alternates between personal narrative and academic text, weaving together our academic and mothering identities by drawing both on daily experiences with our young children and academic literature. We acknowledge that our experiences are situated within our particular contexts as young, middle-class, educated, North American white women living in heterosexual families in an urban area close to forest and ocean. Moreover, our children’s experiences are not representative of all children: children have diverse identities, and adult interpretations of children’s lives remain that—particular interpretations of particular children’s experiences.

Giggles and Goggle-Eyes: Children’s Affinity for/with Animals

Julia: Crows are one of the most common animals in our urban, yet forested, neighbourhood. With their off-kilter hopping, curious gazes, and shrill caws, these were the first animals that clearly riveted our baby’s attention. At around nine months, Olivier learned the baby sign for bird (fingers in the shape of a beak, opening and closing). This was his first “word,” and with it we gained insight into our child’s world and perceptions. Birds were suddenly everywhere, whether we saw them in the garden or from the window. Even more incredible was to see, in the early dawn light, our half-asleep baby sign “bird” at 5:00 a.m. because he could hear the crows’ raucous chatter outside our window.

As mothers, it is hard not to notice our children’s affinity for nonhuman animals. Young children sparkle with enthusiasm when they see local wildlife, and animals are everywhere in children’s media. There is widespread agreement and acknowledgement of children’s affinity for/with animals: “the baby wild with excitement at the sight of a kitten, the six-year-old spelling out *Peter Rabbit*, [or] the twelve-year-old weeping as she reads *Black Beauty*” (Le Guin, 2004, p. 22), although scholars do not agree upon or fully understand this inclination. Some theorize that humanity in general is drawn toward all life, particularly animal life. Wilson’s (2002) biophilia hypothesis falls within this category, proposing an “innate tendency to focus upon life and lifelike forms” (p. 134), as does Shepard’s work (1996, 1998). Shepard attributes children’s affinity for animals to our evolutionary history: “The human species emerged enacting, dreaming, and thinking animals and cannot be fully itself without them” (1996, p. 4). He further suggests that a child’s tendency to role play as an animal or to watch

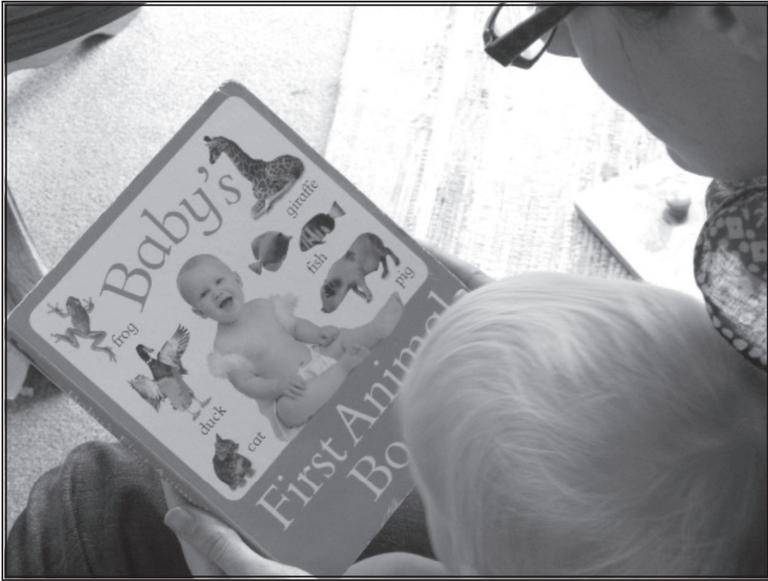


Animals are everywhere: The current state of our bathtub wall, covered with Bridger's drawings and various water-loving animals.

animals intently as an infant is a human necessity; it is both a manifestation of our predator/prey history with animals as well as a tool to help attune children to their future predator/prey life. According to Shepard, “[d]espite our modernity, we are embedded in a venatic, evolutionary past with its foraging and the hunting of game ... [a child’s] ‘game’ animals are those subject to the chase” (p. 82).

Others, however, conclude that children have a stronger affinity for animals than do adults (Melson, 2001). Some of these arguments assume children and animals are more alike than adults and animals, claiming that both children and animals lack the “higher” qualities of the “full human condition” (Shepard, 1996, p. 87), such as reason and rationality (Chawla, 1994). Alternatively, others who claim likeness between children and animals place the burden of “lack” on adults, claiming that children still remember to rejoice in wildness and freedom, experiences that adults have forgotten (Jardine, 1998; Le Guin, 2004; Myers, 2007). Fawcett (2002) further suggests that “forgetting” one’s affinity for animals with age is not a passive process: “[i]t is a common belief in Western culture that human maturity involves a critical separation from the animal part of us” (p. 133), and our educational systems have taken it upon themselves to aid in those maturation and separation processes (Bell & Russell, 1999).

We align ourselves with the latter perspectives, contending that the differences between children’s and adults’ affinity for animals are culturally situated and learned. We see the source of these lessons in dominant anthropocentric North American culture that positions humans as higher than, separate from,



Reading a ubiquitous “first animal” book, complete with regal-looking white baby dominating the cover.

and of sole importance in comparison to the more-than-human (Abram, 1996). Tying together issues of social and ecological justice, we draw from Plumwood’s (1997) ecofeminist liberation framework that links anthropocentrism to other types of “centrism” (e.g., androcentrism, ethnocentrism). From this perspective, we argue that, while it is impossible to be rid of one’s own human standpoint, it *is possible* and *desirable* to act with “sensitivity, sympathy, and consideration” (p. 331) for the welfare of more-than-human others. The effects of anthropocentrism are widespread and serious, ranging from personal, psychological feelings of angst and disconnection; to the loss of community, bioregional, and intergenerational knowledge; to the industrialization of food production, including factory farms; to extensive animal extinction and threats to habitats; and many more.

Moving away from anthropocentrism requires significant changes at many levels. Thinking and living through the complexity of these challenges, we have found that our experiences as mothers have helped to create and inspire some of the changes needed to move away from anthropocentrism in ourselves. In addition to the various acts of mothering being powerful reminders of our animal selves, we have found that it is our children who assume the otherwise “adult” role of teacher, helping us to rekindle a sense of joy, delight, and openness in recognizing the more-than-human in our lives. In this sense, we shy away from developmental notions of a child as a yet-to-emerge adult, one who is defined

more in terms of what s/he lacks than what s/he already is. Rather, we find greater alignment with those, for instance, in the new sociology of childhood, who assert the full humanity of children in and of themselves (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Acknowledging children's affinity for animals helps us to unlearn our own anthropocentrism and cultivate postures of attentiveness and openness to the animal others who are largely (and increasingly) invisible to adult eyes.

Nora: My son will see the squirrel before I do, and just as I'm locating it, he spies another and is already telling me a story of how they are friends. There is a difference between looking and seeing; my son continually reminds me to see.

"Why, Mama, Why?" Questions and Concerns

As parents and environmental education researchers, we have several questions and concerns about the implicit messages in young children's media. Does a book about zoo animals teach children to wonder about how long a giraffe's neck is, or does it teach them that it is normal and natural for humans to cage animals? When we jump on the bed and sing "five little monkeys jumping on the bed," does it teach children that they are connected to monkeys through a



A favourite sock monkey cozied up with Olivier's bedding depicting a blissful, frolicking menagerie.

similar wild spirit, or does it teach them that monkeys are careless and accident-prone? What myths about animal welfare and dominant food systems are we asking children to believe when they encounter the happy chickens and cows of their red-roofed toy barns? And, more broadly, when North American children are introduced to foreign, exotic, and charismatic megafauna (elephants, tigers, lions, monkeys, zebras, etc.), what implications does this have for their connections with animals in the short and long term?

As we attempt to nurture our children's potential for connection, relationship, and communication with animals, these questions and their associated issues continue to bring us frustration. We do not naïvely suggest that media messages communicated to children under four are a direct indicator of their future understandings of and relationships with animals; there are myriad influences that shape one's learning beyond the media encountered during the first years of life. However, we are painfully aware of the significance of early childhood environmental education: "The possibility of touching the Earth, this attunement, is rooted (perhaps also uprooted) early in life" (Jardine, 1998, p. 87). Children under four undergo some of the steepest socio-cultural and ecological learning of their lives (Ross, Medin, Coley, & Atran, 2003; Watson, 2006; Weil, 2004), and several authors have noted the serious marginalization of research on early childhood and environmental, sustainability, or ecological education (Davis, 2009; Elliott & Davis, 2009; Melson, 2001). While there has been a significant increase in theory and research on children and animals, particularly in the fields of literary ecocriticism (Apol, 2003; Dobrin & Kidd, 2004; Gaard, 2008, 2009; Schwartz, 1999), humane education (Selby, 1995; Weil, 2004), and in environmental education more generally (Bell & Russell, 1999; Fawcett, 2002), the youngest children discussed in this literature are four years and above; most texts discuss children and animals in the context of structured schooling or nonformal environmental education (Watson, 2006). Our work focuses on three concerns regarding animals in very young children's media and potential alternatives for each: place and placement, anthropomorphism, and subjectivity.

Place and Placement

Further to the notion that children are instinctively drawn to animals is a sense we have that it matters *which* animals our children encounter (Fawcett, 2002; Ross, et al., 2003). When walking through the forest or working in the community garden, we are largely comfortable with the "environmental lessons" we teach and explore with our children. But we are not always outside, and when we come home, the crows, squirrels, and earthworms are replaced with monkeys, elephants, toucans, alligators, dinosaurs, and big, bad wolves.

This disconnect between the animals our children encounter outside versus inside the home has led us to realize how animals in young children's media are profoundly mis- and dis-placed. First, animals are mis-placed in relation to one another, joined together in story, song, or image with animals from entirely



Fitting zebras, cows, bears, elephants, goats, and horses into their mis- and dis-placed slots.

different bioregions. Second, in relation to the child's own place, animals are frequently dis-placed. In the songs they sing, the books they read, the soft stuffies they cuddle with, and even the clothes on their backs, our children frequently encounter (and create relationships with) representations of animals that they may never come across in their lives. Third, animals are often visually shown in children's media as context-free, floating and detached from their habitats on blank, white backgrounds. If knowing and caring about place, interconnections, and bioregions is important, we worry that such media reinforces individuality, disconnection, and displacement.

Place-based educator Sobel (1996, 2005) suggests that children ought to first learn with and about that which they can encounter through direct experience; only with increased time and age is it appropriate to expose children to abstract, physically distant, and complex lessons about the world. However, engaging children in learning through/with media about their immediate environments is not always straightforward. For example, if we look at the notable presence of domesticated farm animals in children's media (e.g., toy barns and accompanying animals, farm animal books, and "Old MacDonald" farm songs) (Rollin, 1992), a complex set of considerations emerges. On the one hand, the rapid increase in urbanization perhaps necessitates familiarizing young urban children with farms and where their food comes from, *precisely because* they rarely encounter chickens, horses, cows, and pigs in their daily lives. On the other hand, the pastoral, romantic scenes of Eurocentric agriculture are not

accurate depictions of the industrial agriculture that sustains the majority of North American homes. Complicating the equation is Sobel's (1996) assertion that young children ought not to be confronted with complex, disastrous, and demoralizing ecological issues, such as factory farming. We value Sobel's assertion, especially for children under four, however it is sometimes difficult to determine what qualifies as a complex, disastrous, or demoralizing ecological issue (e.g., killing animals for food is "normal" early childhood education in many land-based communities, yet controversial for some urban families and educators). Moreover, others warn that children are learning about large-scale ecological crises at progressively younger ages (Cooke, Davis, Blashki, & Best, 2010) and positive, transformative, and empowering education around these issues can position young children as "significant players in the changes needed for creating sustainable futures" (Elliott & Davis, 2009, p. 71). Nonetheless, the example of farm-focused media illustrates that decisions about how to represent animals in their "lived realities" to children are not simple and straightforward.

We thus suggest it is beneficial for very young children's media to *primarily* (not exclusively) feature that which they experience in their daily lives in its full richness and ambiguity. It is also parents' and educators' responsibility to guide and support the questioning, critique, and resistance of animal stories portrayed in conventional media. Playing and working outdoors are, of course, essential for balancing young children's experiences of mis- and dis-placed animals and for encouraging children's imaginations to wander in response to their "Why, mama, why?" questions. Imaginative role-plays, creating our own picture books and artwork, exploring "real-life" videos of animals, and simply having fewer toys and less "stuff" in our homes are all options for re-storying and cultivating our own bioregional animal media. Based on kinship that values difference (Fawcett, 2002), these stories are filled with local animals, the cedar outside our window, the stars above our head, and the forest that surrounds us.

Anthropomorphism

Nora: A while ago, we were visiting a good friend whose daughter had a toy barn with several typical farm animals accompanying it: a cow, horse, chicken, sheep, etc. Each of these animals was made of plastic molded into the exact same rounded, bulbous shape; the only thing that differed among them was the way they were painted. Even so, the features of the animals were so anthropomorphized and cartoon-ish that I found it difficult to recognize which animal was which. The real shock came, however, when I asked my then almost-two-year-old son if he knew what animal the horse was. I asked with irony in my voice, knowing that this toy was so oddly shaped and painted that it would be essentially impossible for him to guess it... but the laugh was on me when his little voice spouted out: "Horse!"

Animals are extraordinarily anthropomorphized in young children's media. It is common to see depictions of animals standing upright on two legs, wearing human clothing, inhabiting human homes, reflecting social class structures, gender

identities, heterosexual norms, living in nuclear families, and sharing aspects of human physical form. In this way, much of young children's media reproduces and confirms racist, colonial, consumerist, heteronormative, and patriarchal norms (Gaard, 2009; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, & Tope, 2011; Sturgeon, 2004, 2010). This anthropomorphism is often accompanied by neoteny, a cartoonization of animals, distorting their features to make them look more childlike and overly simplistic: "Favorite features include prominent eyes and foreheads, a rounded body, short extremities, and vertical posture" (Kidd, 2004, p. 279). As the narrative above illustrates, this morphing of the animal will sometimes render it almost unrecognizable. And yet, our children have learned the game; they still recognize these anthropomorphized and cartoonized animals, likely adopting dominant social norms along the way.

Le Guin (2004) has written about a spectrum of anthropomorphism in relation to children's literature. The spectrum runs from:

purely animal to purely human: from books in which animals independent of human beings are central characters, through books where the focus is on the relationship of animal and human, to books in which animals exist principally as symbols of human qualities, behaviors, or desires. (p. 22)

This spectrum reminds us that anthropomorphism can have its benefits; indeed, children's literature often uses anthropomorphism to teach moral lessons about how to recognize the self in the other (Calvert, 2008). Furthermore, Fawcett (1989) argues that anthropomorphism is essential to how "we know ourselves as human" (p. 18) and it is one "example of the realization that we are an integral and continuous part of the living world: bodily, emotionally and mentally" (p. 20). However, even given the reflection and reciprocity of the self in the other, Fawcett (2002) also warns about the dangers of anthropomorphism, particularly the attribution of cultural abstractions to nonhuman animals.

What we see in young children's media most often falls within this danger zone; the attribution of human physical and social characteristics, accompanied by the cartoonization of animals, goes beyond a healthy recognition of self in other and instead reinforces hierarchies of human over animal. Additionally, anthropomorphism in media is generally uni-directional; that is, it is far more common to see the "mama bear" walking upright on two legs, fully equipped with an apron covering a human female's form, than it is to see a child with her head cocked to the side, listening intently with her coyote ears (e.g., Le Guin, 1990).

Honouring children's explorations of their animal selves necessitates more than morphing the nonhuman animal to our human selves; we must also acknowledge and represent the nonhuman animal in us. Cross-cultural artistic and literary explorations may create openings in this way; for example, west coast Native art and its intertwining human, whale, salmon, and raven forms offers a point of departure for flights of the imagination radically different than those that may emerge from various Disney media. Of course, cross-cultural learning

needs to be approached mindfully, considerate of mis/appropriations and social inequalities masked or naturalized in animal forms.

Subjectivity

With such extensive anthropomorphism in children's media, it would appear that animals are being portrayed as subjective beings, able to voice their own agency and express their intelligence and emotions. Particularly in children's literature, where stories of talking, thinking, and feeling animals are prevalent, there is more potential for a demonstration of animals' subjectivity (Gaard, 2009). Ecocriticism scholars—those who study “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii)—have increasingly turned their eye specifically to children's literature (Bai, et al., 2010; Cutter-Mackenzie, Payne, & Reid, 2010; Dobrin & Kidd, 2004; Gaard, 2008, 2009). Part of this increase is due to a growing recognition of the historical patterns of ambivalence to nature and animals in this literature base (Rollin, 1992) and the corresponding influx of children's books, songs, and electronic media that aim to counter this ambivalence by teaching ecologically responsible lessons (Dobrin & Kidd, 2004; Sturgeon, 2004, 2010). And yet, this scholarship, even in its celebration of “pro-environmental” media, reveals that animals' subjectivity is predominantly conceived of in “by humans, for humans” terms. That is, when Sesame Street's Big Bird comes to a place of acceptance after his conversation with a “real” bird (Dobrin, 2004, p. 241), the subjectivity he demonstrates is only present because of an adult human's intent to teach young human children about the human social value of acceptance (Calvert, 2008; Gaard, 2009). Acceptance is undoubtedly important, and perhaps animals are a fun, accessible vehicle for teaching values to children (McKenzie, 2005; Myers, 2007). However, we wonder where the actual birds' voices went. What happens when we cloak human intelligence, language, values, and desires in the dress of a charismatic nonhuman animal? As Fawcett (2002) says, “[We] are not interested in dressed-up animals that speak to children to teach them ‘right’ ways to be a good human being” (p. 135).

Sharply criticizing the tendency to understand animals' subjectivity in (solely) human terms, Sheridan and Longboat (2006) recognize nonhuman animals as the ones with the wisdom. Animals impart messages and teachings of their own accord and from their own experience—whether or not these lessons are “useful” or “wise” to humans does not diminish the intrinsic value of their subjectivity. Ignoring the wisdom of animals' unique subjectivity leads to further objectification and trivialization. Curious George's inability to learn from his mistakes, the five little monkeys jumping on the bed, and the squawking zebra nestled in its handbag remind us of how common it is still to perceive and portray animals as inferior, lacking emotion and intellect, and existing for the use and enjoyment of humans.



Animals are not always used to impart virtuous messages.
They can be used humourously with multiple levels of
problematic meaning.

Acknowledging, understanding, and representing animals' subjectivity by honouring the lessons they give us on their own terms is challenging on many fronts. Acknowledgement and understanding are made difficult by increasingly prominent anthropocentric stances that background and silence the more-than-human. Representation can, as Haraway (1992) suggests, potentially leave nonhumans, at best, looking like lesser humans. Russell (2005) likewise writes, "when one considers just how difficult it is to represent the voices of other humans, ... representing 'nature' seems well-nigh impossible" (p. 436). Attempts to represent animals' subjectivity inevitably bring up the notion of standpoint or perspective, suggesting there is no way for humans to know or represent the world in anything but human terms (Fawcett, 1989, 2002; Plumwood, 1997). However, even considering the pervasiveness of human standpoint, we cannot ignore or abandon the work of listening for and communicating about animals' subjectivity (Russell, 2005). Though this may occur in relation to our own human perspectives, there is recognition that "animals do talk and we do understand them" (Le Guin, 2004, p. 23), and further, that it is children who may have the greatest capacity to engage and understand them.

Environmental and humane educators have documented several children's books and learning activities to address the issue of animal subjectivity (Bell & Russell, 1999; Gaard, 2009; Schwartz, 1999; Selby, 1995; Weil, 2004). However, in addition to some of these falling prey to the subjectivity "of humans, by

humans, for humans” predicament, they are almost always geared toward older children in structured educational environments.

In our own choices as mothers, we continue to explore various ways of approaching the challenges of animal subjectivity in media. In terms of books, we have found that those with *only* illustrations (no text) or animal “croaks!” and “peep peeps” sometimes offer interesting possibilities for imagining, telling, and re-telling stories that express the subjectivity of the more-than-human. Related to Fawcett’s (2002) research, where she learned about children’s understanding of animal subjectivity by having them draw pictures and tell stories, we look again to the modalities of drawing, story telling, and role playing for enhancing young children’s own animality and their animal relationships. These creative and embodied experiences offer opportunities to re-story human and more-than-human subjectivities in ways that reflect our relational, mutual learning.

Our Itsy-Bitsy Spider: Implications for Parents and Educators

Julia: I remember nursing Olivier as a tiny infant and staring vacantly at his little pyjamas. Dancing around the white outfit were elephants, lions, and giraffes, and alongside these “exotic” animals were repeated the words, “Once upon a time...” Finally, something snapped in my mind: “Why these images and words on baby clothing? Why not write something interesting, provocative, beautiful, or useful for the mothers (and fathers, grandparents, sisters, brothers...) who can actually read these messages? Why assume that I want to tell my child *those* animal stories?”

As we have explored throughout this paper, young children’s media reinforces anthropocentrism by mis- and dis-placing animals, anthropomorphizing animals, and silencing animals’ subjectivity. It diminishes the possibilities for children to know and learn from/with the more-than-human before they learn to read, write, or even speak. Further, young children’s media also disciplines parents and early childhood educators, limiting their ability to create spaces for counter-hegemonic stories and experiences (Apol, 2003). All together, these issues raise serious concerns for environmental educators and parents committed to reversing the destructive human-animal relations of globalizing modern, consumer, and industrial societies.

We suggest there is no one group responsible or one “right” way for addressing these problems; this is something we must face personally and collectively. Asking parents and educators to censor all conventional anthropomorphic media is unrealistic, akin to suggesting that they create bubbles around children, policing their environment for harmful toxins (Steingraber, 2011). Rather, we must engage in more widespread, community-based strategies for addressing and redressing oppressive social and ecological relations in the media. For instance, McCabe et al. (2011) indicate that the publishing industry shifted its portrayal of gender in children’s literature after feminist research in the 1970s was widely circulated (p. 221). While gender inequalities in children’s literature remain

common, long-lasting changes *are* possible through research and activism targeted at media outlets such as the book publishing industry. As a community of educational researchers and theorists interested in the more-than-human, we can continue this process by generating critical media literacy skills for parents and early childhood educators and continuing work on how to ethically represent and interpret animals in young children's media. Taking cues from critical animal studies researchers, we too can "position other species as subjective stakeholders in our work and as beings for whom our research matters" (Oakley et al., 2010, p. 89).

When it comes to the choices of parents, the solution is not yet another chain of baby clothing, books, movies, or animal toys to seduce and bewilder "consumer" parents. Indeed, a push back against dominant consumer culture is well in order: children often do not need more than a pinecone and a wooden spoon to be happy (Baldwin Dancy, 2000). Ecological parenting as environmental education challenges us to shoulder the ethical responsibilities of food choices, animal advocacy work, and so on, through modeling, questioning, and re-storying alternatives to the anthropocentric treatment of animals in young children's media. Yet, we also cannot expect mothers (childrearing remains undervalued women's labour) to once again make, for instance, all their children's clothing by hand in order to escape corporate-controlled animal messages. Adding eco-critical media literacy to the prerequisites for being a good parent may simply increase the burden, isolation, and inadequacy felt by mothers and families struggling to do the best for their children. And so it is that, with all our own convictions and dreams, we live with our own inconsistencies, uncertainties, and contradictions.

In conclusion, we want to celebrate and build support for the difficult yet joyous labour of the silent and diverse women, parents, guardians, and early childhood educators who question and explore animality with very young children. On those days where we feel overwhelmed by the issues that confront us or tired by the daily tasks of parenting, we can nevertheless feel hopeful. As long as we remain open, our young children lead us out, in the true sense of the word, "to educate," and, together with the animal others we know and imagine, we cultivate alternatives to parallel, complement, and trouble the mainstream media that clutters our lives.

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