

# The role of family dialogue in becoming response-able: a Common Worlds approach

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## Abstract

In this Viewpoints paper, I consider the role of family dialogue in shaping political agency and morality in relation to climate change and ecological destruction, drawing on insights from Common Worlds pedagogy. Common Worlds educators and researchers invite adults to attend to the questions children ask about the world as openings for unsettling dominant narratives of extractive settler colonialism (Nxumalo, 2018). Moving this approach out of the classroom towards other intergenerational encounters, I suggest that interactions between children and parents can offer ‘fleeting moments and dynamic relations’ (Kallio, 2017, 88) for becoming response-able in multispecies worlds (Haraway, 2016). Within a Common Worlds approach, Murris and Borchers (2019) point to childing as a process of becoming and suggest that adopting a process ontology within adult-child interactions opens up the possibility of adults, too, ‘becoming’ in the space-time of educational encounters. Drawing on conversations with my 5-year-old, I consider how encounters with the children in our lives can offer possibilities for re-casting ethical and political questions of responsibility.

## Keywords

Encounter, becoming, responsibility, parent-child learning, family, climate change

## Introduction

Within our contemporary conjuncture of overlapping crises, climate change arises as the socio-ecological challenge *sine qua non*, becoming ‘the key narrative within which all environmental politics – from global to local – is now framed’ (Hulme, 2009, 41). Here climate change may be defined as ‘the destabilization of ecological systems caused, to a significant degree, by the industrial emissions of greenhouse gases’ (Whyte 2020, 2). I use climate change and ecological destabilization/destruction interchangeably to refer to symptoms of extractive capitalism and colonial violence. So called ‘environmental issues’ are often framed as an issue of intergenerational justice which orients moral obligation towards the future, rather than attending to the historical and ongoing injustices waged in the name of protecting the present from impending crisis (Whyte, 2018). The problematic figure of the child as future horizon (Edelman, 2004) haunts the politics of climate change, from grassroots movements to global climate governance. Children and young people are increasingly centred within apocalyptic climate imaginaries, where they are simultaneously positioned (and position themselves) as future leaders and inheritors of a damaged planet. Meanwhile, the desire to secure a better future for ‘our’ children – whether a collective ‘child figure’ or living children we know, love and care for – has long motivated environmental activists, campaigners and grassroots movements around the world (Logsdon-Conradsen and Allred, 2010); where family bonds offer a powerful testimonial framing and strategy for reaching across cultural and political boundaries (Martin, 2014). *Extinction Rebellion* (2023) offers a contemporary example of future generations being centred within demands for ecological justice, with many activists stating that they are taking action for their children, grandchildren or other children in their lives (Jarvis 2019; MacDonagh 2021).

At the micropolitical scale, the construction of the current moment as one of end times which overemphasises the (white) child (Ashton, 2022) has material and psychological effects on

young people and those who care for them (Ekholm and Olofsson 2017; Hickman et al. 2021). The framing of climate change as an issue of intergenerational injustice, in which (future) children's lives and livelihoods are threatened thus powerfully articulates an epistemology of global crisis to the intimate sphere of family relations (Pratt and Rosner, 2012). Fears about the future of the planet become personal, not through the figure of the child, but through the lively and troublesome children in our lives who we love and care for.

My PhD considers the experiences families with children aged 0-11 in socio-cultural spaces, including exhibitions, festivals and political demonstrations which aim to engage and empower people in the UK to take action on climate change. I ask; (How) do parents and their children encounter, imagine and understand ecological crisis? What is the role of intergenerational dialogue in shaping agency and morality in relation to climate change and ecological destabilisation? As a mother of two young children, these questions intermingle with my parenting in practice; my research and family life shape one another. In this viewpoint I reflect on conversations with my 4/5-year-old daughter to explore themes emerging from my fieldwork. These vignettes offer a glimpse of everyday child-initiated dialogue in mundane spaces; fleeting, ad-hoc moments which can be difficult to capture within research encounters (Adams and Manning, 2015). I include them as example of how the entanglements of researcher and parent raise generative questions and tensions, whilst recognising the limits of my perspective as a middle class, white ciswoman parent/researcher in the UK.

Autoethnographic inquiry which implicates family members and/or other intimate relations raises challenges for consent and anonymity which require careful consideration. I have chosen banal anecdotes – they are interjections which could have been made by many other children my daughter's age. Although I have changed her name, this provides only a veil of anonymity since she is easily identifiable to those who know me. I consider the value of

sharing these low stakes encounters to outweigh the risks, however as all social relations are freighted with risk and uncertainty, deliberation on the ethics of conducting autoethnographic research from the dual position of parent and researcher must be an ongoing task (Matthiesen and Szulevicz 2018).

### Attending to the family

The family as a focus of social science analysis has been productively expanded through an emphasis on care, kinship and intergenerational relations to account for the diversity of caring relations and practices that make up our intimate geographies (Edwards and Gillies, 2012; Hall, 2016). Family settings and relations remain foundational to the lives of many young children and continue to be of importance to people as a distinct aspect of their everyday lives (Morgan 2013). Whilst not necessarily superior to other relations, families matter (Jupp, 2016), and how they matter is thoroughly political (Edwards and Gillies, 2012). An attentiveness to family offers one way to look beyond selves as relational individuals, instead considering how a deeper sense of connectedness is entangled in the ways we come to know and act in the world (McCarthy 2012).

Considering ethical and political responses to ecological destruction through the family enables a consideration of how the geopolitics of extractive capital and the cultural politics of climate change touch down in everyday lives in the UK (Martin, 2014). Attending to the ways in which families co-construct and (re)produce moral responsibility (Hall, 2016) and political subjectivity (Kallio, 2017) is vital to understanding how intimate relations between generations may sustain, frustrate or otherwise co-constitute child and youth climate activism. This is not to downplay the importance of understanding children as political agents in their own rights, rather to recognise how adults and children are engaged in intersubjective processes of political becoming in their discussions of the moral dilemmas associated with the causes of ecological destruction. This allows for consideration of how ‘fleeting moments

and dynamic relations' (Kallio, 2017, 88) of everyday encounters, dialogue and negotiations may offer possibilities of knowing, acting and being otherwise (Hodgins, 2019).

Interactions with family members form the backdrop of daily life for many young children, where learning and socialisation takes place across a range of everyday spaces; bus journeys, supermarkets, waiting rooms. Attuning to the 'babble' of children's voices in these spaces as opportunities for recasting ethical and political relations with the worlds around us draws attention to how children situate themselves within more-than-human worlds, constructing notions of nature which are already political (Nolas, 2021). The socialisation, learning and construction of moral values in everyday family life and interaction is not uni-directional (Hall, 2016), both parents/adults and children are subjects in process, always becoming in relation to one another and through interactions with one another (Murris and Borchers, 2019). Within a Common Worlds approach, such interactions may offer modest forms of recuperation in which we 'keep working at ways of becoming more worldly through focusing upon our entangled relations with the more-than-human world, refusing human exceptionalism and heroic narratives of salvation; instead valuing the 'generative and recuperative powers of small and seemingly insignificant worldly relations' (Taylor, 2017, 1458). Attending to 'children's babble' can offer opportunities for coming to know the world differently and attending to the ethical and political dilemmas of living and dying well in multispecies worlds (Haraway, 2016).

#### Making time for common world encounters

It's a damp April morning; I'm taking my children to their weekday childcare. We're on a tighter timescale than usual - after walking 20 minutes to drop my youngest to her childminder, my eldest and I walk to the bus stop. It is a slow walk punctuated with pauses.

As we get halfway towards the bus stop, she spots something. ‘Look Mummy a worm!’ Inwardly I roll my eyes. She has seen so many worms in her short life, and we are in a hurry. ‘Mummy look! It’s alive!’ Captured by her fleeting joy, I pause, turn back. We talk about how we often see worms when it has rained, and wonder where this worm, in the middle of the pavement, has come from. ‘Come on Miah’, I say, my patience starting to run thin. ‘No mummy, we have to rescue it first. It might get trodden on here.’ With great care and little caution, she bends down and picks up the worm, carrying it to a nearby garden. ‘Bye worm,’ I say, playing my part in her world; whilst trying to cajole her along. On the way to the bus we encounter more worms, but we can’t stop to rescue them all. For some, it is already too late.

As I tried to give my daughter time to encounter worms, I was thinking of Nxumalo’s (2018) pedagogical encounter with bees and bee deaths in an early years setting in what is now British Columbia, Canada, on unceded Coast Salish Territories. She draws attention to how children’s embodied, affective and responsive encounters with dying and dead bees in the early years setting are part of worlding processes, in which both humans and more-than-humans are active participants in learning. Such encounters matter, she argues, to questions of living and dying ‘in current times of environmental precarity’ (157). Nxumalo offers a compelling example of the Common Worlds approach to childhood studies and early years education, which begins from the proposition that our human lives are situated within ‘indivisible more-than-human common worlds’ (Hodgins, 2019, 4). The child is figured here as a relational entity deeply entangled in a web of ‘other beings, non-living entities, technologies, elements, discourses, forces, landforms’ (4), which are abundantly evidenced in everyday encounters. Common Worlds approaches grapple with the ways in which lives and livelihoods are embedded in neoliberal and settler colonial capitalism, within a commitment to stay with trouble (Haraway, 2016) of ongoing violence and the politics of life and death

when working with young children. Common worlds praxis includes attending to minor stories as a way of countering the grand narratives of Anthropocene (Taylor, 2020), taking seriously the questions children ask as opportunities for refiguring historical narratives of progress (Nelson, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo, 2018) and drawing attention to moments of encounter between human children and non-humans as moments for knowing and being otherwise (Taylor and Blaise, 2014).

Our encounter with worms was relatively banal, many parents with young children will have had similar interactions. However, it raised questions for me about what is required of and by adults - and children – in efforts to imagine and live ethically now and sustainably for future generations. Common Worlds offers one such approach, but it requires shifts in the rhythms of everyday lives – here I was able to temporarily pause my schedule to take seriously worms as a matter of concern for Miah; this is not always possible for us and may be even less possible for others. Where and how do we make time in our busy lives for Common Worlds encounters? I was also struck by the limits of my knowledge about worms and their ecological relations; did this matter? Should I learn more? Was I worlding with worms, or was I momentarily enchanted by Miah's curiosity and performance of care?

In a recent article in this journal, Malone and Crinall (2023) reflect on the ways in which worlding practices might enter into intergenerational encounters with living and dying in the world in an encounter with a beached sperm whale body. They suggest adults can hold a space around such encounters for moments of undoing, unsettling and unlearning *together*. Exploring the tensions held within worlding as an approach, they consider how such encounters can be disquieting, unsettling and uncomfortable. Rather than subsuming these affects into attempts to bring forth new worlds which may reproduce existing structures of privilege and oppression, they highlight the need to stay the trouble of these encounters as we imagine and live ethically and sustainably in worlds to come.



Becoming response-able

I'm walking along the River Wear with my partner and children. It's a warm autumn day, the leaves are beginning to turn. We cross over a bridge and pass down by the old boathouse. Here a weir has formed across a third of the river from fallen trees, a log jam of sticks and other debris, fortified by plant growth from the entangled mass. Below the weir, rubbish collects in a brown sludgy foam.

'THAT is the saddest thing I have ever seen' says Miah. She is five. 'Why?' I ask her.

'Because that rubbish can KILL animals' she replies. She recalls our visit to *Our Broken Planet* at the Natural History Museum undertaken as part of my PhD research; 'Those crabs have eaten plastic, now they have to be killed!'. I gently correct her, she is referring to a video exhibit of a Museum scientist dissecting a dead crab taken from the River Thames to see how much plastic it has ingested. 'That's why we need to use less plastic, and be careful of the way we dispose of our plastic, we need to use less and recycle what we do use. We certainly mustn't throw it into the river and the sea'. My explanation feels woefully inadequate, overly simplistic. 'Yes' She replies, and then her attention is caught by something else.

This interaction is suggestive of how stories of ecological destruction, as well as witnessing the material impacts, are entangled with the ways which young children in the UK make sense of themselves and the worlds around them. Of course, there were no crabs on the River Wear and her interjection 'those crabs have eaten plastic, now they have to be killed!' could have seemed nonsensical, part of what Sevasti Nolas has described as children's babble, (Nolas, 2021). As a parent of two children aged 2 and 5, I hear this everyday babble as nonsense words, unrelenting questions, giggles, screams, cries and often, jokes about poo. Attending to this babble can be overwhelming - Nolas writes, 'In everyday life, we both listen and not listen: we tune in, we tune out; we are attentive, we are inattentive; we are

present, we are absent' (2021, 328-9). Yet, it is through such everyday encounters and fleeting moments of intergenerational (mis)recognition that children (and, as I argue here, adults) become political subjects (Kallio, 2017). Following Kallio and Nolas, I ask, how can we as adults, researchers and parents attune to the babble of young children in fleeting encounters as opportunities for becoming *together*.

Despite decades of critique, an individualist sociology of change continues to powerfully shape and delimit discourse and the political possibilities of responding meaningfully to climate and environmental change (Bulkeley, Paterson and Stripple, 2016). Responsibility here is undifferentiated across actors (Rice 2016) and is enacted by rational, radically individual (abstract) human consumer subjects (Plumwood, 2002; Hobson, 2004). Responses to climate and ecological destabilisation have become synonymous with individual action and behaviour change through purchasing, transportation and lifestyle choices (Rice, 2016). This post-political consensus locates the problem with individuals and their choices rather than the politico-economic assemblages which delimit choice and actively engage in the production of desire to fuel resource consumption.

A recasting of responsibility which moves away from the radically individual human to a concept of relational beings in the more-than-human entanglements provides a different starting point to thinking about alternative modes of engagement which offer possibilities for responding otherwise. Response-ability is a consideration of what role we might play in promoting multispecies flourishing, taking account of the full ethical implications of how we are always-already entangled within webs of letting live and making die for our own comfort, health and survival (Haraway, 2016). As adults engaging in this process of (un)learning anew, recasting our relations in more than human worlds, how do we attend to children in our lives in this process of becoming?

The vignette demonstrates the limits of the attention span of young children, and the difficulties of constructing nuanced interventions that move away from a discourse of individual responsibility. Becoming response-able involves a reorientation of ways of knowing, being and acting in the world (Barad, 2007); it is not an easy or quick process. Drawing on indigenous epistemologies of coordination, which , ‘emphasize the importance of moral bonds – or kinship relations – for generating the responsible capacity to respond to constant change in the world’ (Whyte 2020, 2), indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte concludes soberly that the time and care required to restore kinship relations with ancestral and future relatives that constitute the complex web of life may take more time than we have.

## Conclusion

The ways in which children and their parents encounter and make sense of ecological destabilisation are inseparable from the co-construction of ethical and political agency. Intergenerational dialogue is enrolled in processes of becoming through learning or unlearning within a parent-child assemblage, opening up possibilities for becoming otherwise. Recognising the increasing responsibility placed on families within a framework of neoliberal governance, the moral panic associated with parenting practices and cultural discourses of intensive parenting, I am not suggesting this is an additional responsibility for parents to take on privately. Rather, it is to suggest that in family dialogue, moments of encounter arise that articulate the intimate, everyday to the global challenges of climate change and ecological destruction. Banal encounters, such as that between my daughter, myself and a worm, may offer opportunities to reflect on what we think we know, and how we might make time for learning otherwise.

Careful thought needs to be given to the ways in which narratives of crisis endow young children with agency to act in relation to climate change and ecological destruction, particularly those that place an undifferentiated responsibility of ‘choice’ onto individuals.

Children's babble and the ways in which parents tune in/out and respond or not are enrolled in the (re)production, negotiation, or contestation of what it means to act ethically in multi-species worlds. As such, nonsensical, noisy interjections and questions posed by children, such as those Miah posed by the plastic polluted River Wear, are part of understanding how ecological agency is constituted intersubjectively. As parents, educators and adults, our response-ability is to remain open to processes of unlearning, undoing and becoming *otherwise*; to carve out space to imagine possibilities for collective living in the ruins of capitalism (Tsing 2021), to tell new stories about nature-cultures which unsettle post-political consensus and to seek out and amplify moments of resistance (Cripps, 2023).

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