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(Re)forming River-Child-Blowie Relations: Questions of Noticing, Caring, and Imagined Futures with the Unloved and Disregarded

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Derbarl Yerrigan is a significant river in Western Australia that has been part of a river-child-walking collective for approximately a year. Many multispecies encounters take place while walking-with Derbarl Yerrigan, but this story of (re)forming relations belongs to Blowie. Dead and dying Blowies, also known as the common blowfish and Torquigener pleurogramma, have been particularly important players in this project that is generating climate change pedagogies with young children. This creative essay works with questions of how young children are imagining, getting to know, and engaging with the often unloved and disregarded Blowie. It is an example of how hacking Anthropocentric sustainability narratives, or doing-it-together, with Blowies and young children is possible.

Doing-it-Together with Common Worlds

Affrica Taylor explains that "stewardship pedagogies do not provide the paradigm shift that is needed to respond to the implications of the Anthropocene" (Taylor 2017, 1448). Today, early childhood educators are inundated with sustainability resources and materials that push environmental stewardship models which perpetuate the bifurcation of nature and culture. These models, though well intentioned, "inadvertently rehearse the entrenched sense of human exceptionalism" (Taylor 2017, 1453) that dominates education. Our river-child-walking collective project is situated in a Common Worlds theoretical framing where research is viewed as learning with worlds and methods are created that attune to worlds. Building on the feminist common worlding multispecies ethnographic work of Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Affrica Taylor, and Mindy Blaise (2016), our methodological approach moves from a human centric to multispecies framework. In doing so, we follow multispecies relations and recognise that our encounters with the more-than-human are non-innocent, awkward, imperfect, and provide opportunities for bringing other worlds into being. It is here, in these moments of bringing other worlds into being, where climate change pedagogies are generated and enacted with young children. Our work in this project makes "visible in varying ways the ethics and politics of what is put into play through/with/in research practices" (Hodgins 2019, 5). We emphasise the importance of collective thinking with the world in order for multiple accounts of the world to be produced (Stengers 2018). Collective thinking with the world is how we are doing-it-together. This kind of work requires practice and dedication because it is all too easy to slip back into habits that focus on finding a solution. Instead of applying pre-determined procedural knowledge, we advocate for a more expansive and curious attitude, combined with off-the-beaten-path research practices (Haraway 2016) to hack the Anthropocene together with Blowie (also known as common blowfish and *Torquigener pleurogramma*). This creative essay works with questions of how we might imagine, get to know, and otherwise engage with the unloved and disregarded (Churlew and De Vos 2019; Bird Rose and van Dooren 2011). In particular, this

essay demonstrates how noticing, caring, and speculative imaginings with Blowie is necessary for (re)forming river-child-blowie relations and enacting climate change pedagogies. (Re)forming river-child-blowie relations is an example of how hacking Anthropocentric sustainability narratives, or doing-it-together, with Blowies and young children is possible.

Noticing the Unloved and Disregarded

While walking-with Derbarl Yerrigan and a group of young girls, we notice small, white, greyish, black lumps scattered along the shoreline. We are not quite sure what they are, but we are curious. We keep looking, glancing back, and moving closer towards these objects. Slowly it becomes clear. These small lumps are dead Blowies. Unlike our previous walks, when we noticed five or six dead Blowies, this week there are more. Every few steps we encounter another dead Blowie. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen...

Derbarl Yerrigan is an important river in Western Australia, running from the Darling Range down through metropolitan Perth towards its mouth at Fremantle, where it meets the Indian Ocean. In Noongar language derbarl means mixing (Nannup 2008) and this naming is relevant because Derbarl Yerrigan is a permanently open estuary that changes from fresh/brackish water conditions in winter and spring, to salty conditions in summer and autumn. In other words, in this river system, fresh and salt waters are always coming together and mixing. Derbarl Yerrigan holds great significance to the Whadjuk Noongar people as being created by and sacred to the rainbow serpent, Waugal. Noongar Elder Dr. Noel Nannup tells of how Waugal is the "giver of life" and "formed the mountain ranges and the undulating plains" and continues to live deep in the water (2019). Derbarl Yerrigan is approximately 175 kilometres in length and has been shaped and changed significantly since European settlement of the Swan River Colony began in June 1829. Today, Derbarl Yerrigan, or the Swan River as it is also known, is a place where Black Swans feed, migratory birds nest, dolphins play, and people boat, exercise, fish, and gather on the foreshore. Derbarl Yerrigan is a lively and significant part of the land where we research.

Derbarl Yerrigan has been part of our river-child-walking collective project for over a year. Our walking inquiry is part of a larger international research project that sets out to generate situated climate change pedagogies with young children and place. Approximately one morning a week, we walk-with this river and children and have become familiar with a particular part of Derbarl Yerrigan that we walk. This section of the river is within 500 metres of the childcare centre and a place where children and educators have been walking together before we began this project. Our walking practices have unfolded over time and emerge as we walk-with river at high/low tide, in wet/dry/cool/hot weather, and as we develop river relations. Walking-with Derbarl Yerrigan encourages us to be in relation with Aboriginal Country through practices of paying attention and being with the world (Blaise and Hamm 2020). Instead of trying to know all about the waterways in our local environment, we are inventing walking-with practices that are part of how we know the world directly, and this in turn relates to how we treat the world. In other words, how we are getting to know water matters, because it directly influences how we treat water (Neimanis 2019).

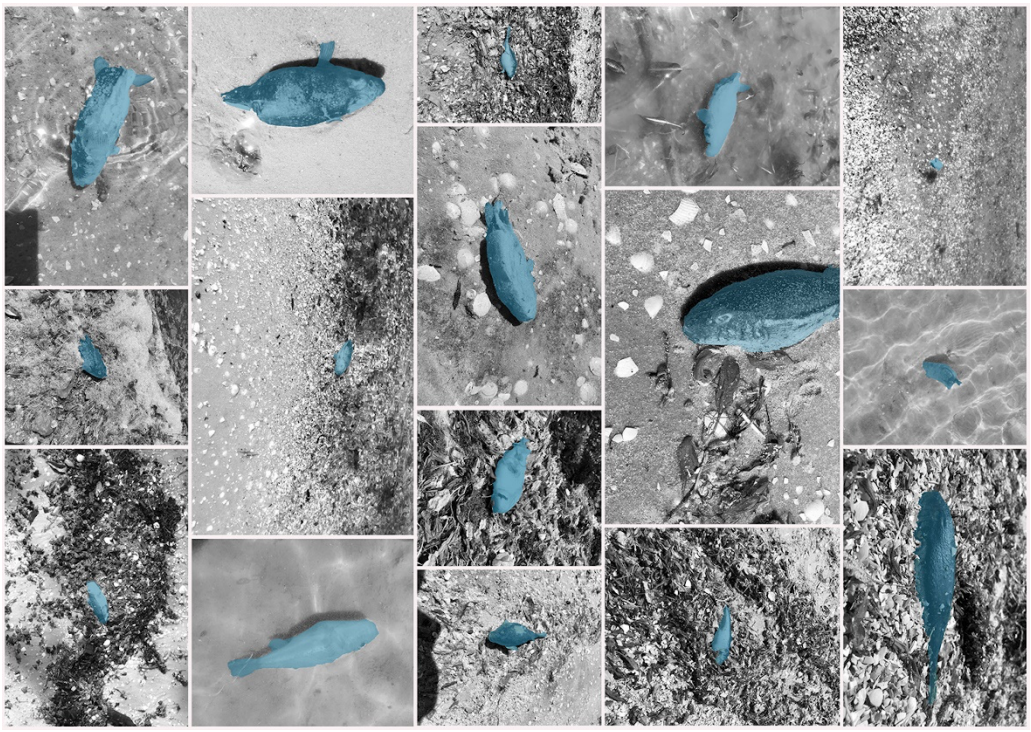

Figure 1: *Encountering Blowie*. Photograph by Mindy Blaise & Vanessa Wintoneak.

On this walk, we were not prepared for our encounter with a mass number of dead blowfish bodies (Figure 1). It took us by surprise. A mixture of horror, fascination, sadness, and hope prompted some children to pause and take a second, third, or fourth look at the Blowie bodies floating in water or cradled by seashells, sand, and seagrass. Gregory Seigworth (2020) reminds us that our task as researchers or teachers is about being open to what this one affective encounter might teach us. This is not about trying to figure out why there were so many dead Blowies or how we might save them. Instead, it is about what these unloved fish bodies can do and how they are calling us to notice, care, and imagine. Blowies are unpopular and considered to be a nuisance because they greedily eat bait, making it hard for fishers to catch other species of fish. Blowies are also abundant in estuaries because there is more food for them to eat and there is less chance of being eaten by a bigger fish, as compared with the ocean. It is common for these annoyed fishers to catch Blowies as bycatch, and then simply leave them on the jetties to die. Blowies are also susceptible to environmental changes, including low oxygen in the water (Government of Western Australia, Department of Fisheries 2011).

Dead Blowie bodies on the foreshore are so common that they go unnoticed. Children and adults usually walk over them, rarely looking at them twice. When they are noticed, it is usually because they have gotten in the way; their decomposing bodies smell, their presence makes the landscape ugly, or they concern dog owners. These fish are unloved by some because they belong to the family Tetraodontidae and the highly lethal toxin, tetrodotoxin, is present in their skin, flesh, and internal organs.

Instead of just walking and disregarding dead and dying Blowies, we intentionally open space to know, to care, and to speculate together. The low tide of Derbarl Yerrigan had a part to play by presenting children with the opportunity to be physically close to these Blowies. Children spent time getting to know these unloved and disregarded creatures by smelling, caressing, touching, looking, and imagining. But more was going on. Blowies were not swimming. Derbarl Yerrigan was rocking them and their bodies were decomposing at different rates. Children were attuning to death as they carefully bent down to see what was floating in the water and washed up on the shore. Then, with a combination of intention and hesitation, they would softly touch these small lumps of dead flesh. There were no shrieks of disgust. Rather, it was curiosity, care, and relations at play.

Caring for the Unloved and Disregarded

Figure 2: *Caring-with Blowie*. Photograph by Mindy Blaise & Vanessa Wintoneak.

A small group of preschool aged girls are sitting close to one another on the shore, in the sand, and looking out towards Derbarl Yerrigan. I settle down beside them only to realise that one of the girls is holding a dead Blowie (Figure 2). I try starting a conversation but am stumbling to find the words. I ask myself, "*Has she been carrying that dead Blowie this whole time?*" I am bewildered and in awe. I quickly scribble in my field notes: "*sharing dead Blowie!!??, stroking fingers, with tenderness, sharing*." I spend time taking photos. There were so many dead Blowies, laying along the shoreline, cradled by seagrass, and floating in Derbarl Yerrigan. Is this place taking care of Blowie? And then, as the girls sit together and take turns holding and

stroking dead Blowie, I realise that something special and important is going on together; with dead Blowie, with the girls, and with Derbarl Yerrigan.

On previous walks, I shared with the group what I had read about the toxin, tetrodotoxin, and the recommendation to return Blowies to the water, to prevent curious dogs from eating them. On this day, when the girls were sharing, holding, and caring-with Blowie, I asked them what they were going to do with the fish. One of the girls replied, "*We're putting him back in the water*." I agreed that this was a good idea; that it was best to place the stranded Blowies back into Derbarl Yerrigan. Soon after, with careful intention and regard, the girls took this Blowie, and also began picking up other Blowies, and walked them out to Derbarl Yerrigan (Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Returning Blowie to Derbarl Yerrigan*. Photograph by Mindy Blaise & Vanessa Wintoneak.

Speculative Imaginings with the Unloved and Disregarded

Not having a clear idea of what exactly to ask or how to speculate fish pasts-presents-futures with children, we stumble and work through these pedagogies while walking-with Derbarl Yerrigan. With a small group of girls we walk, we sense, we speculate; we are doing-it-together with Blowie (Figure 4).

> While pointing to dead Blowie, I ask one of the girls, "*What do you think happened?*" Blowie remains stiff while clutched in her left hand, covered in sand, their eyes wide open. She looks at Blowie and responds softly, "*He died. The jellyfish died him.*"
>
> Walking together through the shallow water, we come across another floating Blowie. Moments pass. I wonder out loud, "*Do you think that fish had a good life?*" The girl says nothing. She just looks up at us without answering. Blowie bobs up and down in the waves of Derbarl Yerrigan.
>
> The tide is out and the girls walk further. I ask, "*What are you going to do with that fish?*" One of them responds, "*Put it in the water….sharks will get him. He needs to get back to the water.*" Blowie gently slips out of her hand and turns belly-up, and begins floating away and out into the deep.
>
> And again, along the sandy shoreline, Blowie lays amongst sand, shells, and seagrass.
>
> Almost stepping onto blowfish, they pause, they sense, they notice. Something is happening, but what? Then, one of the girls looks up towards us and explains, "*That fish is all alone.*" I ask, "*So, what kind of life do you think Blowie had, when he was alive?*"
>
> "*He's still alive!*" a girl exclaims, while cradling Blowie so they can swim in the water. Blowie, resting in her hands, is wet and reflecting the sun with their eyes wide open. Carefully, she scoops Blowie up with her tiny hands and says, "*I like holding him. I am gentle with the fish. He died. He needs to get back in the water.*" Then another girl asks, "*Can I hold him? I want to hold him. I am gentle with the fish.*"

"So, what kind of a life do you think Blowie lived?", "What kind of a life might Blowie live once we put them back out, in Derbarl Yerrigan?", and "How might Blowie become?". These are the questions we repeatedly raised with children. It is within these moments that we find ourselves stumbling, asking imperfect questions that might allow for different kinds of worlds to be imagined. But what is of importance is not about asking the right questions, but rather that new relations are being formed collectively; with Blowie, Derbarl Yerrigan, and this group of young girls.

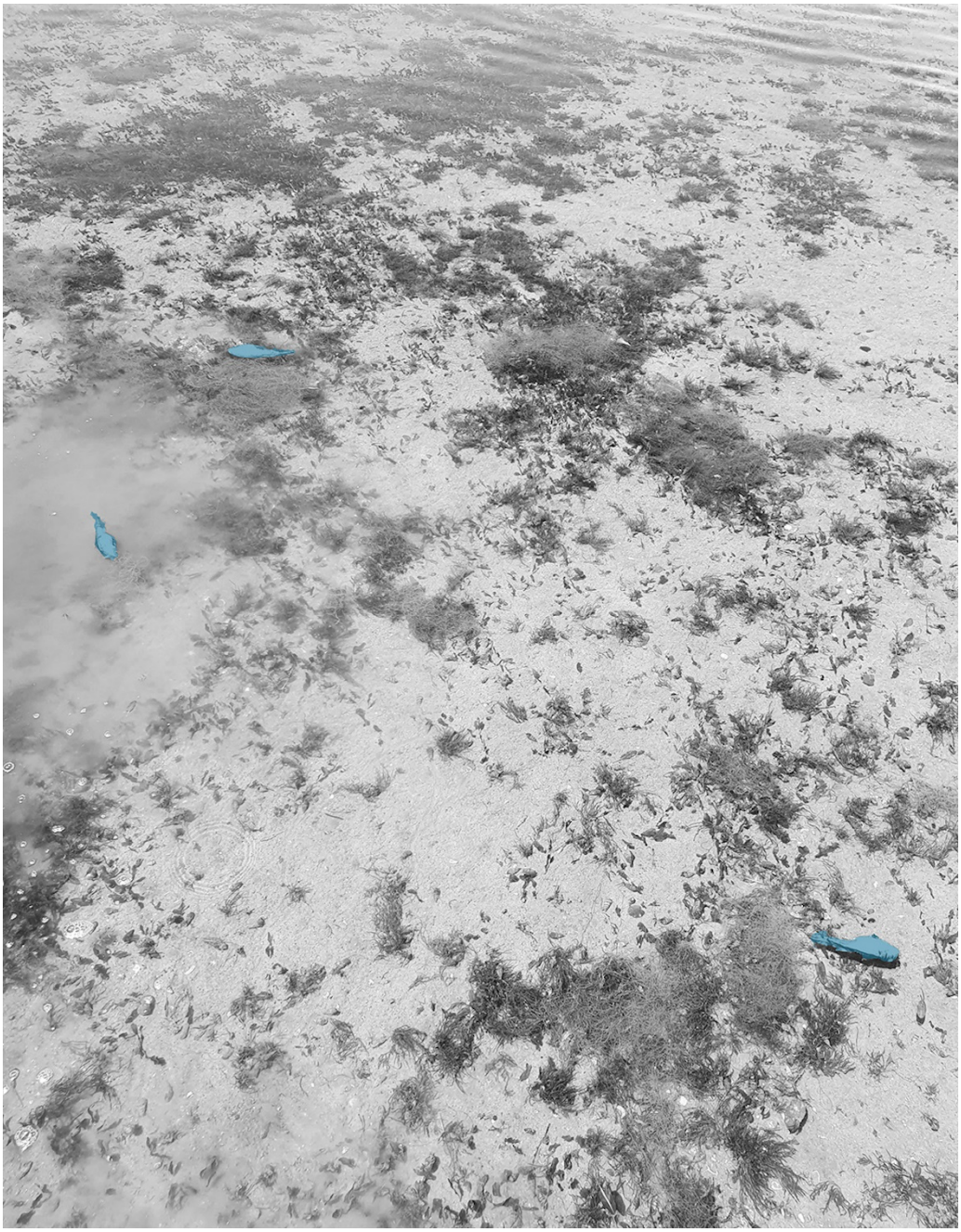

Figure 4: *Blowie's presence*. Photograph by Mindy Blaise & Vanessa Wintoneak.

Conclusion

Persistence is required for keeping speculations open. This speculation is made possible because of Blowie's presence and how these girls are carefully paying attention. They are open to touch, to death, to taking risks, and to being curious. These are pedagogical moments that are off-the-beaten path and are (re)forming river-child-blowie relations. All too often we have found that children's responses can easily turn into, "Blowie is having a bad life because he is dead". This is problematic because equating death with badness quickly shuts down any possibilities of (re)forming river-child-blowie relations. Therefore, taking risks and persisting with pedagogies such as noticing, caring, and speculating with Blowie is vital because they make room for (re)forming river-child-blowie relations. This is doing-it-together with Blowie.

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