

Book review

Taylor, A. (2013) *Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood*. Routledge, Milton Park.
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Within our 21st century world of global warming, increasing resource pressures and unprecedented technological advances, the idyllic and utopian natural worlds of rolling hills, helpful wildlife and perfect forests that are often seen in Disney animations and children's story books, seem worlds away. Yet children who grow up in these technology-filled, chaotic and mixed up realities are still often coupled with romantic ideas of Nature. Nature and children are often presented as perfect partners, both exemplars of purity and goodness. These ideas have become so engrained within Western educational, literary and scholarly forms, that they have naturalised and self-legitimised the nature/culture divide. Dualistic ideas do not allow for other notions of childhood or nature that do not fit within these romantic forms. It is exactly these inconsistencies that Affrica Taylor sets out to explore and rework in *Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood*. The compelling approach of this book encourages educators and scholars to loosen their grip on an idealised natural childhood that is sickly saturated with ideas of purity and innocence and embrace a "motley collection of less familiar and non-innocent on-the-ground-natures" (p. xv).

Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood is part of a series entitled Contesting Early Childhood that sets out to question the dominant discourses surrounding early childhood education. The value of *Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood* however extends beyond the education discipline. Taylor provides a much needed 'queering' of children's experiences with nature, that is useful for educators and scholars alike who wish to take seriously the messy and common worlds we inhabit. The multidisciplinary approach in this book utilises the work of human geography and sciences studies in reconceptualising what nature is and the implications for how we think about nature. The book uses these innovative notions to rethink ideas of childhood, particularly in relation to early childhood education studies and practices.

Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood is divided into two parts. The first part of the book follows in detail the establishment of the singularised notion of a pure Nature through exploring legacy of the Enlightenment philosopher, Rousseau and the English and North American romantic writers of the 19th century. Rousseau and the romantic writers position childhood as being directly linked to ideas of a singularised Nature. Children were seen as being essentially innocent, pure and good (as was Nature), until they were introduced to the corruptive forces of society. Taylor explores the compelling and seductive appeal of a singularised Nature, which is inherently distinct from and opposite to society or culture. She also urges the reader to question the stories of their childhood

through exploring how the romantic coupling of Nature and childhood is reinforced through representations in children's stories. These stories often see children's interactions with Nature as guiding them in becoming 'better' or 'improved' humans. Taylor however traces the historical and geographical spaces in which differing ideas of Nature and child relations were adopted and utilised to highlight the importance of situating and contextualising these figures. This effectively helps the reader understand as Taylor puts it, "the simple fact that things turn out differently in different places" (p. 16). Taylor shows that these notions of nature and childhood are essential to understanding the practice of early education as these notions "not only enabled particular ways of thinking about nature, childhood and education ... but also doing it" (p. 64).

Part One of the book offers the reader a thorough and accessible understanding of the establishment and use of the romantic pairing of Nature and Children in a historical and geographical context. It is however within the second half of the book where I see it's true merit lying. Part Two, is where Taylor really 'muddies the waters' of the Nature and childhood coupling and looks towards moving away from and challenging the 'natural' or 'normal' associations of childhood with nature as her way of doing nature and childhood differently.

Taylor proposes a "common worlds view of childhood" (p. 73) that is positioned as a way of exploring the 'elsewhere' of nature and childhood. The common worlds view takes into consideration "children's lives are inseparably bound up with all manner of other lives, other forces and other things" (p. 79). Taylor uses two Australian examples, one Indigenous and one non-indigenous, to highlight the very situated, contextually created, messy and imperfect nature of child-animal relationships. Children's common worlds can be stressful, disrupted and unusual, and do not fit neatly within Rousseau's notion of utopian idealised fantasies. Taylor uses these messy, non-innocent common worlds created by Australian children and animals to show other ways of doing nature, that position nature and children as entangled together in complex, asymmetrical relations with culture, to form what Latour calls naturecultures. Through exploring several child-animal common worlds, Taylor demonstrates the possibility and benefits of thinking "relationally about childhood and nature and to do childhood 'otherwise'" (p. 113). The thought provoking and novel approach that Taylor establishes in the second half of the book encourages early childhood educators to rethink how preconceived ideas of nature are engrained within daily practices of education.

In the concluding chapter, Taylor explores the role for and significance of a common worlds notion for developing non-generalised pedagogies. These new pedagogies widen the scope of inclusion and justice past the individual or self and include the more-than-human bodies, objects and forces with whom we share and create worlds. As stated by Taylor "[a]n early childhood pedagogy that emplaces children in their common worlds, and emphasizes their entangled relations within this world, would follow the principle of learning with or becoming worldly with the others in the collective" (p. 123). Taylor acknowledges that this is not a new way of thinking for a number of Indigenous groups both within Australia and throughout the world, but there is something that can be gained

through looking at early childhood education within a Western context, through a more-than-human relational lens that takes nature seriously.

The author rightfully does not seek to exhaust the possibilities of utilising a more mixed-up common worlds approach, but she fulfils the aim of the book which is to begin to explore, challenge, revert and queer the relationship of childhood and nature in ways that are sensitive to the more-than-human, material and situated common worlds where we reside. Like the author I hope this book will inspire others to explore what a common worlds approach would mean, not just for early childhood educational endeavours but how these ideas of messy more-than-human naturecultures can be productive in other disciplines and practices. In particular I would like to see the author's ideas of queer child-animal relations being expanded to children's relationships with other-than-animal-nonhumans, such as dirt and trees. And explore the questions of how children's lives are entangled with and mutually co-shaped through their relations and relatings with nonhuman who may not necessarily have a heartbeat, but often form unlikely 'queer kin' relations with children? How are these relations productive? And how are both children and their more-than-human, more-than-animal partners reshaped or changed through their relatings, how do they make each other different and how to they expand each other's worlds?

This book highlights that early childhood educators have a responsibility to take nature and childhood seriously and explore the messy multiple actions that confound the daily relations of children and their more-than-human worlds. While Taylor focuses on early childhood education any teacher or academic can use her common worlds approach as a tool for thinking differently about children's engagements with nature. The strength of this book lies not only in its insightful discussion of the development, use and problems of the romantic notions of Nature and childhood, but also in its ability to leave the reader questioning their own assumptions and practices.

Taylor's 'warts-and-all' (p. 115) reconfiguration of the naturecultures of childhood compels the reader to remove the 'romantic goggles' and look honestly at the real, mixed-up worlds of child and nature interactions in order to understand the queerly reconfigured, multiple, entangled common worlds that are produced.