

# Unruly Raccoons and Troubled Educators: Nature/Culture Divides in a Childcare Centre

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**ABSTRACT** Current times of anthropogenically damaged landscapes call us to re-think human and nonhuman relations and consider multiple possibilities for alternative and more sustainable futures. As many environmental and Indigenous humanities scholars have noted, central to this re-thinking is unsettling the colonial nature/culture divide in Western epistemology. In this article, through a series of situated, small, everyday stories from childcare centres, we relate raccoon-child-educator encounters in order to consider how raccoons' repeated boundary-crossing and their apprehension as unruly subjects might reveal the impossibility of the nature/culture divide. We tell these stories, not to offer a final fixed solution to the asymmetrical, awkward and frictional entanglements of humans' and raccoons' lives, but as a responsive telling that may bring forth new possibilities for responsible, affective and ethical co-habitations.

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## Co-habiting and Inheriting

*At a childcare centre located in a mountain forest on Canada's west coast, an educator checks the playground for raccoons. The animals are one of several species indigenous to this forest, which is the setting for one of the country's major universities. As the university has grown, an ever-expanding network of high-rise condominiums, retail outlets, fast food restaurants, parking lots, and this childcare centre complex have been built alongside it, with each expansion encroaching on the raccoons' habitat.<sup>1</sup>*

*On this particular morning, the educator scours the playground looking for any raccoons that might be hiding in the trees, in the playhouse, under the slides, in the sand box, or in the children's garden. She approaches the shed that holds the children's bikes and*

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<sup>1</sup> The childcare centre complex comprises nine different childcare centres, each with at least three educators providing care for up to 25 children. The centres are clustered together at one end of a university campus, close to the forest. Each centre includes a classroom and a playground and borders at least one other centre, separated by a wooden fence. In this article we use the term childcare centre to refer to one or more of the centres in this complex.

scooters. Opening the door, she startles a mother raccoon and her cubs, who are sleeping inside. Startled herself, the educator jumps and stares wide-eyed as three pairs of eyes glare back at her. She slams the door shut and decides on the spot that the children will not ride the bikes and scooters that morning. Now she faces a dilemma. The children are required by law to spend time outdoors at least twice a day, rain or shine, and she will need to get the riding toys out of the shed by the afternoon. How will she coax the mother raccoon to take her babies out of the shed when she is clearly more afraid of the raccoons than they are of her?

Raccoons, children, and educators co-habit this colonized space on unceded Coast Salish territory. Raccoons lived here for hundreds of years before the university and childcare complex were built. Not only have raccoons adapted to the presence of humans in their habitat, they are active participants in the life of the childcare centres.<sup>2</sup> For the last six years, the playgrounds in this complex have been the permanent home of several raccoon families that have both entertained and troubled the children and educators.

We are early childhood educators and researchers who also live in colonized space on unceded Coast Salish territory. We are interested in ‘learning to respond’<sup>3</sup> to the entangled multispecies worlds that emerge in the spaces animals and children co-habit within the current time of anthropogenic change, and how we might take seriously the multispecies relations that are intricately woven through our colonial past-present-futures.<sup>4</sup> In this article, we trace and ‘story’ the actual, messy, unequal, and imperfect worlds that raccoons, educators, and children inherit and co-habit along with other human and nonhuman beings and entities in the mountain forest.<sup>5</sup> This entangled world is replete with charm, curiosity, and uneasy, asymmetrical, and tenuous relations. The co-relatings of these co-habitants are particularly fraught with frictions around perceived human binaries that separate nature from culture. Day

<sup>2</sup> On active participation see Lesley Instone, “Unruly Grasses: Affective Attunements in the Ecological Restoration of Urban Native Grasslands in Australia,” *Emotion, Space, and Society* 10 (2014): 79-86.

<sup>3</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

<sup>4</sup> Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, “Frictions in Forest Pedagogies: Common Worlds in Settler Colonial Spaces,” *Global Studies of Childhood* 4, no. 1 (2013): 355-65; Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, “Postcolonial Entanglements: Unruling Stories,” *Child & Youth Services* 33 (2012): 313-16; Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Lara di Tomasso, and Fikile Nxumalo, “Bear-Child Stories in Late Liberal Colonialist Spaces of Childhood,” *Canadian Children* 38, no. 3 (2014): 26-55; Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw & Affrica Taylor, eds., *Unsettling the Colonial Places and Spaces of Early Childhood Education* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Affrica Taylor & Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, “Learning With Children, Ants, and Worms in the Anthropocene: Towards a Common World Pedagogy of Multispecies Vulnerability,” *Pedagogy, Culture, and Society* (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Our use of stories (included in this article in italics) is purposeful. Stories allow us to develop broad, complex notions of how raccoons’, children and educators’ cohabitations unfold in the mountain forest. Our approach to using stories is informed by Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose, and Ruth Fincher, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum, 2015); Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Donna Haraway, “Playing Cat’s Cradle With Companion Species” [The Wellek lectures, 2011], accessed 15 February 2015, <http://people.ucsc.edu/~haraway>. We have theorized this work within our common worlds framework. See <http://commonworlds.net>.

after day at these childcare centres, raccoons cross boundaries, and day after day educators diligently labour to keep the boundaries intact and teach children to enact them.

Drawing on our multispecies ethnography, we narrate the ways raccoons cross boundaries and radically disrupt colonial nature/culture and human/nonhuman divides in three different ways: spatially, ontologically, and microbially.<sup>6</sup> We argue that, as boundary crossers, raccoons are constituted as unruly subjects because of their refusal to maintain the human/nonhuman divide. We then tell stories of how educators attempt to maintain, and in the process teach children to enact, these boundaries. These stories emphasize the impossibility of maintaining separations between humans and raccoons in our mixed-up, threatened world, and the importance of learning to inherit the messy and disconcerting space of raccoon-child-educator cohabitations in the playground through an ethical logic that transgresses the nature/culture divide. In the following section, we begin with a brief discussion of how the nature/culture divide that is enacted in the childcare centres is inextricably linked to today's pressing colonial and environmental challenges.

### Confronting the Nature/Culture Divide

The perceived nature/culture divide that the raccoons constantly challenge in the childcare centre is entangled in the inherited settler colonial histories of this mountain forest. According to some environmental philosophers, this divide is a significant factor in the anthropogenic environmental damage to the planet in current times, a period which a growing number of scholars refer to as the Anthropocene.<sup>7</sup> The mistaken Western Enlightenment belief that humans are somehow exceptional to and hyperseparated from nature and can modify, 'improve,' or exploit it with impunity is foundational to modern Europe, where the concept of nature emerged as both an object of scientific inquiry and a resource for economic progress.<sup>8</sup>

The presence of raccoons in the childcare centres is closely intertwined with the environmental damages we continue to accrue. While urbanization, climate change, and other devastating human actions in the Anthropocene have eliminated numerous species and threaten many more, some species, including raccoons, have thrived. As "urban adapters" raccoons are "one of the most efficient [mesopredators] at exploiting anthropogenic resources."<sup>9</sup> Despite extensive pelt trading, being hunted for meat, being killed by farmers for

<sup>6</sup> Our multispecies ethnography traces the common world relations of children, plants, and animals and attends to the specific ways these interspecies relations affect and co-shape children's common worlds. It unfolds in a wet temperate urban forest on Canada's west coast, where we collaborate with educators and young children. Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545-76.

<sup>7</sup> Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36 (2007): 614-21; Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*; Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Michael L. McKinney, "Urbanization, Biodiversity, and Conservation," *BioScience* 52 (2002): 883-90; Clare K. Bozek, Suzanne Prange, and Stanley Gehrt, "The Influence of Anthropogenic Resources on Multi-Scale Habitat Selection by Raccoons," *Urban Ecosystems* 10 (2007): 414.

attacks on their crops and poultry, and serving as a popular pet during the early colonial period, raccoon populations have grown, spurred by the animals' adaptability to living alongside humans.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, they are so adaptable that in *The Nature of Things* documentary "Raccoon Nation," host David Suzuki asks whether, in co-habiting with raccoons, we are actually "pushing their brain development and perhaps even sending them down a new evolutionary path."<sup>11</sup> Yet, in most North American cities, narratives abound of raccoons as invasive and feral species.<sup>12</sup>

Raccoons' intelligence has always been recognized in North America Indigenous cosmologies that assume the inseparability of humans and nonhumans and attend to how worlds are constituted through relations among humans, animals, plants, lands, and oceans.<sup>13</sup> Many First Nations (and Native American) children's stories and creation stories feature the raccoon, whose wily Trickster ways enact teachings about respect, cooperation, honesty, hard work, and humans and animals as relations, as well as many other lessons about living well together with more-than-human others.<sup>14</sup> There are also Raccoon clans in many North American Indigenous tribes. These relations with raccoons and other nonhuman species are far from the hierarchical orderings of human culture and nonhuman nature that have always been a foundational justification for the domination of nature as a resource for human colonization and exploitation. In settler societies such as Canada, the entwined cultural and environmental dimensions of colonization, which resulted in Indigenous dispossession and environmental exploitation and destruction, are one of many inheritances of the twin projects of imperialism and industrialization.<sup>15</sup>

Many scholars in the environmental and the Indigenous humanities call for an end to this tragic separation between humans and the environment, or between nature and culture,<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Michael Pettit, "The Problem of Raccoon Intelligence in Behaviourist America," *British Society for the History of Science* 43 (2010): 391-421; Ronald M. Nowak, *Walker's Mammals of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Raccoon Nation* (The Nature of Things, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Raccoon Nation*.

<sup>12</sup> Lauren Corman, "Getting Their Hands Dirty: Raccoons, Freegans, and Urban 'Trash,'" *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 9, no. 3 (2011): 28-61; Kelsi Nagy and Phillip David Johnson II, eds., *Trash Animals: How We Live with Nature's Filthy, Feral, Invasive, and Unwanted Species* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Marie Battiste, "Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education: A Literature Review with Recommendations," prepared for the National Working Group on Education and the Minister of Indian Affairs, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (Ottawa: INAC, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> John Elliott, "The Gift of the Day," *First Voices: Sencoten*, accessed 10 January 2015, <http://www.firstvoices.com/en/SENCOTEN/>; Edward Dossiter, 1893, cited in Boas and Hunt, *Kwakiutl Texts, 1905-6*, accessed 15 February 2015, <http://www.umista.org/kwakwakawakw/tribes.php>.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Braun, "Nature and Culture: On the Career of a False Problem," in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. James Duncan, Nuala C. Johnson, and Richard H. Schein (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 151-179.

<sup>16</sup> Battiste, "Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education"; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene"; Gibson *et al.*, *Manifesto*; Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures Cultures Spaces* (London: Sage, 2002).

urging us to refocus on the entanglement of human and more-than-human lives and fates,<sup>17</sup> to reconfigure nature and culture as inseparable “naturecultures,”<sup>18</sup> and to reassemble the collectives that make up our common worlds.<sup>19</sup> Our inquiries resonate with these scholars’ endeavours to find new and ethical ways of living and relating in the Anthropocene.<sup>20</sup> Like these scholars, we take the Anthropocene as a potentially transformational moment to acknowledge that humans have fundamentally altered the planet that sustains us by our short-sighted anthropocentric actions, and that human and nonhuman histories and futures are inextricably entwined.<sup>21</sup>

We accept these challenges by paying attention to raccoon-child-educator cohabitations, precisely because raccoons in the childcare centres confront humans with the impossibility of maintaining colonial separations between humans and wild animals.<sup>22</sup> Raccoons do that through their *unruly* behaviours. As Instone describes in discussing other wild urban species, raccoons are “a sort of troublemaker” who not only transgress the colonial separation of nature from culture, but produce anxiety and panic in the highly regulated childcare spaces. The educators are “confronted with naturecultures” that “confound human expectations and dominant norms of urban landscape appreciation and bodily orientations.”<sup>23</sup> As raccoons respond to our human ways of living, not only do they “interrupt” the regulated childcare movements, they also “force awkward encounters” (for educators) by thwarting human efforts to maintain the divide.<sup>24</sup> They provoke the humans in the childcare centres to become more aware of the world they are part of in the mountain forest. They demand from us.<sup>25</sup> Unlike other animals in the forest surrounding the complex, raccoons demand high levels of awareness of our human behaviours inside the childcare centres’ spaces.

### Unruly Raccoons Unsettling Divides

The raccoons who live in the childcare complex cross nature/culture and human/nonhuman boundaries in several interrelated ways. First, they *spatially* cross the nature/culture divide. Refusing to keep to themselves in the wild, they make incursions into human territories. They

<sup>17</sup> Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*.

<sup>18</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

<sup>19</sup> Bruno Latour, “Steps Toward the Writing of a Compositionist Manifesto,” *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471-490; Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Donna Haraway, 2013 IHR Distinguished Lecture, Arizona State University, Institute for Humanities Research [video], <https://ihr.asu.edu/news-events/news/2013-distinguished-lecturer-donna-haraway-reading-group>, accessed 16 February 2015; Gibson et al., *Manifesto*; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, “An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene,” 320-46; Jamie Lorimer, “Multinatural Geographies for the Anthropocene,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 5 (2012): 593-612; Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren, eds., “Unloved Others: Death of the Disregarded in the Time of Extinctions,” *Australian Humanities Review* 50 (2011).

<sup>21</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 197-222; Gibson et al., *Manifesto*.

<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is not our intention to provide a salvation story.

<sup>23</sup> Instone, “Unruly Grasses,” 83.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

enter the childcare playgrounds, barge into classrooms through open doors and windows, and make dens in the centres' storage sheds, as the story that opened the article illustrates. Here is another story of raccoons challenging dominant assumptions about their place:

*The mother raccoon climbs down from a tree with her two cubs. Crossing right through the sandbox, she enters a small tent in the playground, a favourite domestic play-space for the children. The cubs follow her. The raccoon family frolics in and around the children's tent. Entertaining five children who watch with widened eyes and open mouths, the mother moves two red cushions from the tent as if rearranging the furniture. Immediately after, her two youngsters sit on them. As charming 'home-makers,' they appear to be extremely comfortable in the space. The mother places one more cushion beside the cubs for herself and watches as her youngsters playfully manipulate the plastic plates, cutlery, mugs, and other toy kitchenware the children have left in the tent.*

As this story also reveals, the second divide that the raccoons cross is *ontological*—a gap between the civilized human world and the uncivilized animal world. Both their physical qualities and their behaviours are 'humanlike.' Their faces are uncannily human, with delineated eyebrows and mischievous expressions. Their paws have remarkable dexterity, which means they can open small containers, trash cans, and door latches, and even turn on taps to take a drink. These playful, inquisitive animals delight and surprise both the children and the educators.

*With her two front paws, the mother raccoon picks up the plastic bucket filled with water that the children left in the middle of the sandbox where they were building sandcastles. She carries the bucket to her cubs, who are waiting for her at the sandbox ledge. As soon as she puts the bucket on the ground, the two cubs dip their paws in the water and start splashing in the same way the children often do when they play with water.<sup>26</sup> The mother raccoon watches the cubs as if she is supervising them. After a few seconds, the cubs shift to what seem like much more intentional actions. Using their front paws, they appear to wash their faces.*

*Captivated by the raccoons' humanlike behaviours, a group of children and two educators watch this charming raccoon family through the classroom window. All of a sudden, the mother raccoon turns her head toward the window as if she is letting these curious humans know she is aware of them. Responding to this motion, one of the children places his hand on the window to gesture hello. The mother raccoon leaves her youngsters and approaches the window. Without hesitation, she raises her paw to meet the child's hand through the glass. Silently, the child and the raccoon gaze into each other's eyes. The other children and the educators look at each other with surprised expressions. No one moves until the raccoon walks away from the window and joins her youngsters.*

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<sup>26</sup> Raccoon's Latin name is *Procyon lotor*, which means 'washes with hands.'



**Figure 1.** Children watch the raccoons through the window. Author's photograph.

The children's and educators' curiosity about the raccoons is tinged with disconcertment. Humans in the childcare centres are taken aback by the raccoons' similarities to them. Recognizing themselves in these racoons, they are attracted to them. This process is akin to what Levinas calls an 'ethics of recognition,' where we see ourselves in the face of the other.<sup>27</sup> However, the educators are threatened by the raccoons' bold wild-nature / domesticated-urban boundary-blurring behaviours. Even more provoking for humans is raccoons' 'naughtiness;' they are tricksters and jokers who sabotage carefully planted garden boxes, vandalize trash cans, rearrange the playground, tap on the classroom skylights, and play with the children's toys. These raccoons defy authority, resist human plans, ignore divides, and deviate from the expected path. In other words, they live up to their reputation as 'masked bandits' full of mischief.

*An educator enters the staff room. She is famished because it is almost noon and she took the first work shift. She places four plastic containers holding her lunch in a basket on the kitchen counter. Before she sits at the table to eat, she opens the fridge and takes out a cold drink. As she approaches the kitchen counter to retrieve her food, she finds a large raccoon grabbing one of her plastic containers from the basket. Before she has a chance to react, the raccoon carries the container out through the window onto the roof, rips it open, and, with obvious enjoyment, eats the sugary cereal that was packed inside. The educator quickly closes the window.*

<sup>27</sup> We argue, following Rose (2004), that this ethics can be extended to human-nonhuman relations (see also Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012).

Raccoons' unruliness has presented a challenge to (settler) humans since they arrived in North America.<sup>28</sup> For instance, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, scientists spent decades debating where to place the animal in the natural order. The raccoon's intelligence, curiosity, acute sense of touch, and mischievousness presented much taxonomic confusion as to whether the raccoon was a wild animal, vermin, or companion. In the early 1900s, as part of a wide cultural transformation around domestication and animal sentimentality, settlers declared the raccoon to be an ideal household pet because of its 'charm' and ability to live with and adapt to humans; however, the raccoon's comfort around humans and constant pushing of human/nonhuman boundaries (e.g., opening doors, stealing food, escaping homes, eluding capture) quickly drove scientists to warn the public that raccoons "could never truly be granted their full 'liberty'" like other pets, such as cats and dogs.<sup>29</sup>

Raccoons' unruly intelligence was also the topic of heated debate in American psychology at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Psychologists became interested in studying the learning process in various species by focusing on animal intelligence through laboratory experiments. One group separated human qualities like mental imagery from animals' intelligence that simply involved "the accumulation of specific muscular associations."<sup>30</sup> According to this (Cartesian) behaviourist interpretation, "all animal behaviour was purely instinctual, uninformed by reason or learning."<sup>31</sup> A second group of psychologists, however, challenged these views after conducting experiments with raccoons. Recognizing the popularity of raccoons as pets, they introduced them as laboratory animals. Through their experimental studies, these researchers became convinced that "raccoons possessed ideas, a form of thinking more analogous to that of humans and other mammals," particularly their sense of curiosity and their capacity to learn through touch.<sup>32</sup>

Yet the raccoon never became a "model of intelligence"<sup>33</sup> among animal psychologists, not only because it challenged the dominant behaviourist perspectives at the time, but because of its perceived unruly behaviour and trickster reputation. Even those who initially argued for keeping raccoons in laboratories became overwhelmed with the practical challenges that raccoons posed for them. It was difficult to manage and maintain a colony of raccoons; one psychologist explained that "the creatures would gnaw the wood and tear at the wire of their cages trying to escape, biting him when he tried to contain them."<sup>34</sup>

In the same way that the 'unruly, trouble-making' raccoon resisted the colonial spaces of laboratories and made psychologists uncomfortable, the childcare centre raccoons produce anxiety and even panic among the humans who share the space with them.

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<sup>28</sup> Pettit, *The Problem of Raccoon Intelligence*.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.



A third way raccoons cross the human/nonhuman divide is microbially, by infecting. As pests and “trash animals,”<sup>35</sup> raccoons are perceived as infectious to humans (especially children) and their pets. Educators at the childcare complex have been advised, by both parents and childcare licensing officers, that not only are raccoons susceptible to carrying rabies, but their feces are infectious: humans might contract leptospirosis or salmonella by touching, digesting, or inhaling raccoon feces. The educators are particularly worried about raccoon worm. The raccoon is the primary host of an infectious worm known as *Baylisascaris procyonis*.<sup>36</sup> These worms develop in the raccoon intestine, producing millions of eggs that are passed in the animal’s feces. The eggs become infectious after a two to four-week incubation period, after which they can survive in the environment for several years. Humans are infected if they ingest fertile eggs—and, because dominant developmental discourses maintain that children frequently put objects, hands, and dirt into their mouths, children are seen to be particularly at risk of infection.



**Figure 2.** Raccoon in playground tree. Author’s photograph.

*After taking a drink of water in the playground, the mother leads her cubs toward the raccoon ‘latrine’—a shaded windowsill out of view of the playground that the raccoons have selected as their preferred site to relieve themselves. The youngsters follow their mother up a tall tree beside the childcare building. As the adult confidently moves from the tree to the*

<sup>35</sup> Zahara and Hird, “Raven, Dog, Human: Inhuman Colonialism and Unsettling Cosmologies,” in this issue.

<sup>36</sup> Patrick Gavin, Kevin Kazacos, and Stanford Schulman, “*Baylisascariasis*,” *Clinical Microbiology Reviews* 18, no. 4 (2005): 703-18.

windowsill, the cubs watch from a branch as she ‘goes number two,’ as the children like to say. She returns to the tree and the two cubs each take their turn. One of the childcare centre’s managers enters her office and notices a young raccoon on her windowsill. She yells at the animals to go away. The cub stares at her and continues with his business. The manager sighs. Once again, she is unable to open her window for fresh air. She picks up the phone and calls the childcare complex cleaners, who had been there only yesterday to clean up after the raccoons.

Infections circulate through “transfers, splicings, codings, and retroviral, opportunistic and occult becomings,” making them difficult to control.<sup>37</sup> A molecular process of relating between humans and raccoons takes place in these childcare centres, violating established boundaries and reminding the educators of the biological risks of their entanglements with other species. These ‘transfections,’ with infectious and implicated hosts, provoke us to think about the ethical-political challenges of co-habiting with other species that provoke these awkward transfers, particularly when these infections are anathema to human attempts to hygienically enforce nature/culture separations.<sup>38</sup>

With raccoons’ infectious feces, along with the worry of some parents and educators that they carry rabies, raccoons in the playground unsettle the inherited and normalized understandings of children’s spaces as free of bacteria and disease—especially as transferred from other species. Sanitization discourses of public health were introduced from Britain to its colonies, including Canada, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Valuing Western medicine, the settlers were concerned about public health and preventing the spread of diseases, including infections, to ensure their own health.<sup>39</sup> The focus was on maintaining the divide between the ‘pure’ settlers and the ‘wild.’ These colonial sanitization discourses continue today; they allow the construction of raccoons as unruly and infectious and justify the colonial projects of hygiene that are instituted in the childcare centres.<sup>40</sup> These colonial assumptions about cleanliness, about being safe from the ‘filthy’ and ‘infectious’ aspects of nature, shape the practices we deem so important in childcare centre pedagogies.

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<sup>37</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

<sup>38</sup> On infection see Lowe, “Infection.” As settlers in the mountain forest, we (children, educators, researchers) are inheriting these infectious relations through our implication in them. We displace raccoons as we invade/infect their habitats through degradation of the forest. Interestingly though, this infection leads to the concentration of raccoons in a given area, because raccoons respond by adapting to our invasion. We also modify ecosystems through raccoon cull programs in response to disease panics. Yet, studies show that this population reduction strategy “may be insufficient to control the spread of infectious disease in mesopredators.” James C. Beasley, Zachary H. Olson, William S. Beatty, Guha Dharmarajan, and Olin E. Rhodes, Jr., “Effects of Culling on Mesopredator Population Dynamics,” *PLOS ONE* March (2013). On awkwardness see Jamie Lorimer, “On Auks and Awkwardness,” *Environmental Humanities* 4 (2014): 195-205.

<sup>39</sup> Penelope Edmonds, “Unpacking Settler Colonialism’s Urban Strategies: Indigenous Peoples in Victoria, British Columbia, and the Transition to a Settler-Colonial City,” *Urban History Review* 38, no. 2, Spring (2010), accessed 17 June 2015, <http://www.erudit.org/revue/uhr/2010/v38/n2/039671ar.html>

<sup>40</sup> On sanitization discourses in urban places see Palmer, “Colonization, Urbanization, and Animals.”

### Troubled Educators Attempting to Maintain the Divides

In this childcare centre complex, educators feel ambivalent about the presence of the raccoons, and especially about the raccoons' insistence on crossing boundaries. The educators juggle their desire to develop the children's attachment to the raccoons with their duty of care to protect the children from the possible risks that exist when co-habiting with these animals. Mandated by British Columbia child care licensing regulations, they conduct regular playground inspections (including raccoon checks) to identify 'hazards' and 'non-conformances' against the playground standards. If necessary, they make adjustments to meet the mandatory requirements and provide a 'safe,' 'secure' environment for the children.



**Figure 3.** Raccoon in the playground. Author's photograph.

Despite their uneasiness about the raccoons, the educators recognize the value of the children's (and their own) relationships with them. While raccoons would be exterminated in many childcare centres to protect the children, in these centres the educators are seeking ways to co-habit with them by putting strategies (not always successfully) in place to deal with the raccoons' transgressions and mischievous behaviours. For example, special windows have been installed in each of the classrooms that automatically close when a raccoon touches them from outside. The educators are vigilant not to leave the classroom doors ajar to avoid potential danger, and the children are encouraged to watch the raccoons through the windows and skylights instead of from outdoor spaces.

*An educator calls the children to join her in the playground. She has carefully executed a raccoon check and did not find any animals in the playground. However, she warns the children not to go near the shed because the mother raccoon is inside with her babies. The*

children nod and move on to play. All of a sudden, a child yells, "Raccoon, raccoon, raccoon!" Three raccoons are climbing down the tree closest to the building. Before they can touch the ground, the educator clusters the children together on the opposite side of the playground, maintaining a 'safe' distance from the raccoons. Panicked, she leads them to the classroom door, but the raccoons reach the door first. It seems too risky now to enter the classroom, so the educator leads the frightened children back to the spot where they first gathered and announces that they will not be able to play or go inside until the raccoons leave the playground.

Inside the classroom, another educator is preparing the tables for the children to have lunch. She hears the commotion outside, and when she investigates, she sees the raccoons really close to the classroom door. She runs to close it and ensures that the windows are also sealed. Because the childcare centres are adjacent to each other and the raccoons can easily move from centre to centre along the fence, this educator calls her colleagues in the adjoining centre and warns them that the raccoons might move to their playground. The educators in that centre quickly gather the garden hose in case the raccoons come over the fence and they have to spray them with water to scare them away. The raccoons, though, are still in front of the classroom door, and the children remain huddled on the opposite side of the playground.

Childcare centres on Canada's earthquake- and tsunami-prone west coast routinely practice natural disaster response drills. Here, in this mountain forest, the educators have instituted a well-scripted routine to respond to another threat: the perceived risks the raccoons pose. Raccoon drills act as a state of alarm that is raised when the nature/culture divide between (civilized) humans and (wild) raccoons is breached. In other words, the raccoons' incursions into human territory are treated as natural disasters. The call of "raccoon, raccoon, raccoon!" and the phone calls to the educators in the adjacent centre are signals of imminent catastrophe. The act of leading the children inside is a way that humans reinstate the nature/culture boundary. Although we at the centres often refer to these actions as 'giving the raccoons space,' we wonder if we are rationalizing our anxiety. Are we pretending altruism as a way to disavow our fears about breaches to the 'natural' order?

This kind of contemporary moral panic echoes the early colonists' attempts, which continue today, to maintain the space of pure nature separate from culture. Braun traced the persistence of nature/culture division in colonial constructions of British Columbia's forests (by ecologists, foresters and environmentalists) and explored the significance of these boundaries for recent political struggles over forestry and decolonization by First Nations.<sup>41</sup> He writes that the nature/culture divide worked as a "purification machine, a place where [or through which] people 'become white.'"<sup>42</sup> Baldwin further argues that the subject position 'liberal whiteness' is also cultivated through coming to understand nature as provincial and national parks and

<sup>41</sup> Bruce Braun, "Colonial Vestiges: Representing Forest Landscapes on Canada's West Coast," *BC Studies* 112 (1997): 5-37; Bruce Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture and Power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Braun, "Nature and Culture"; Braun, "Colonial Vestiges."



taking up mythologies about the wild Canadian North.<sup>43</sup> The raccoon drill response is enmeshed with these inherited colonial attempts to distance settlers from unruly nature.

The fear of raccoons attacking the humans is always present at the childcare centres, but what makes the educators really anxious is raccoons' infectious feces. Despite the fact that, apart from the 'latrine' on the manager's office windowsill, raccoon droppings have rarely been found in the childcare complex playgrounds and additionally that no raccoons have ever transmitted rabies in British Columbia, the educators take very seriously the task of checking for raccoon 'poo' before the children go outside.<sup>44</sup>

Other ways that humans establish and police colonial nature/culture boundaries in the childcare complex have dire consequences for the raccoons. Destruction and death have always been aspects of the violence of settler colonialism and capitalism,<sup>45</sup> and it is certainly no different for this mountain forest's raccoons—their unruliness comes at a cost.

*One of the teachers arrives early to the centre to prepare the classroom. As she opens the first window blind, she makes a grim discovery. A raccoon corpse lies under the climber. Filled with sadness, the educator opens the classroom door that leads to the playground and sees two more raccoons, lifeless in a tree. She dreads the fact that she will have to let the children know that the entire resident raccoon family is dead. She calls facilities services to have the dead raccoons removed. Within minutes, the lifeless bodies are gone and the playground area is disinfected. Although the facilities worker tells the educator that he does not know how the raccoons died, she is convinced that they were poisoned. She remembers reading an article that noted that campus facility services would begin a program to 'maintain' the growing and unruly raccoon population.*

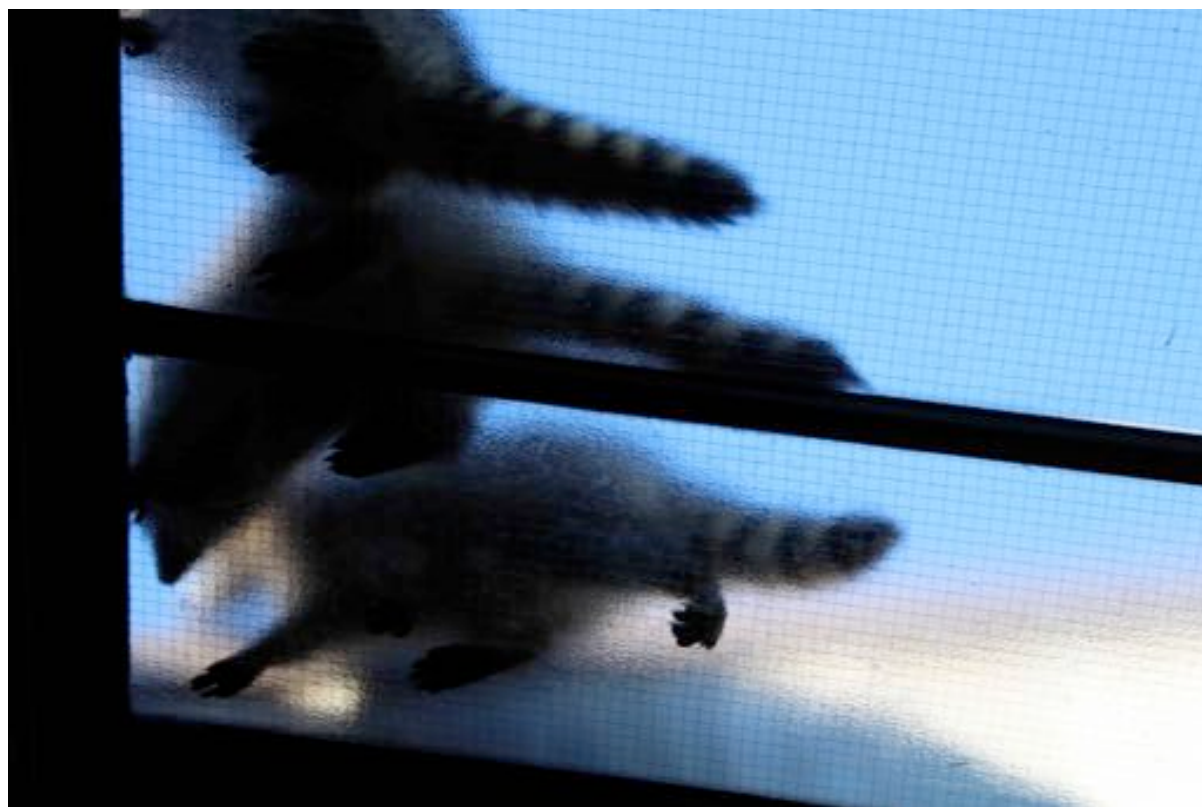
### **Entangled Raccoon-Child-Educator Worlds**

As alarming as these inherited and often deadly containment strategies are, they are insufficient to respond to the complexities of entangled lives in this playground. The raccoons remind us of this fact as they continue to challenge the human/nonhuman and nature/culture divides, despite all of the tactics the educators put in place. A couple of months after the deaths of the family of raccoons, a new, much bolder family moved in—one that seemed even more determined to challenge the boundaries. In one instance, the new family confronted an educator who attempted to close the door when the raccoons entered the classroom while the children were indoors having lunch. Interestingly, the dead raccoons are fondly remembered as 'respectful' and 'knowing their boundaries,' whereas the new family is seen to be 'pushing their luck' with their repeated attempts to enter the classroom.

<sup>43</sup> Andrew Baldwin, "Ethnoscaping Canada's Boreal Forest: Liberal Whiteness and its Disaffiliation from Colonial Space," *The Canadian Geographer* 53, no. 4 (2009): 427-443.

<sup>44</sup> British Columbia Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, "Rabies," accessed 18 June 2015, <http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/pet-care/health-safety/rabies.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Corman, "Getting Their Hands Dirty."



**Figure 4.** *Raccoons in skylight. Author's photograph.*

These raccoons always find a way to be present, to awe us, surprise us, disrupt us, and trick us. As tricksters, they happily display their charisma and intelligence, throwing us into ambivalence about their wilful behaviours. They constantly find ways to interrupt the routines and movements in the childcare centres, making it impossible for us humans to extract ourselves from both the 'natural' world (that raccoons 'belong to') and our colonial past and present (that raccoons materially and discursively inhabit). Their disruptive insistence on having a presence in the childcare space might remind us that 'nature' is not something we can manage—we are rarely in control of our ecologies. Over and above that lesson, the raccoons teach us that our raccoon-child-educator common worlds are mutually constituted and our lives entangled. It is impossible to enforce the nature/culture and human/nonhuman divides because these divides that the educators, through childcare discursive practices, attempt to impose are fallacious constructs anyway.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, these are exactly the divides that scholars in the environmental and Indigenous humanities want to question and undermine because these delusional separations have led us to the ecological and colonial messes of the Anthropocene.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

<sup>47</sup> Battiste, "Indigenous Knowledge and Pedagogy in First Nations Education"; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, "An Economic Ethics for the Anthropocene"; Gibson *et al.*, *Manifesto*; Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies*.

Therefore, we take these awkward raccoon-child-educator relations that nag at us and disconcert us<sup>48</sup> as both opportunities to challenge the prevailing Western binaries that separate nature from culture and animals from humans, and as possible openings (without guarantees or final truths) that might allow a new kind of relational pedagogy that follows 'affective and ethical logics.'<sup>49</sup> Our pedagogies might shift from controlling the divides that the raccoons disrupt toward attending to how we might affect and be affected by these raccoons. We have to learn how to stay with these awkward multispecies relations, that continuously make us ambivalent and throw us into grappling with the trouble of mutual flourishing in messy colonialist spaces. As Haraway (2010) reminds us, perhaps our pedagogies need to be more about 'staying with the trouble' in the contact zones of more-than-human relations.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** We are grateful for the invaluable comments that we have received from our colleague Affrica Taylor and the anonymous reviewers on earlier versions of this article.

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<sup>48</sup> Jamie Lorimer, *Wildlife in the Anthropocene: Conservation After Nature* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 15.

<sup>49</sup> Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene"; Gibson *et al.*, *Manifesto*.

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