



Propositions for anticolonial belonging in Canadian early childhood environmental education

Childhood
2024, Vol. 31(4) 588–603
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09075682241289544
journals.sagepub.com/home/chd



Fikile Nxumalo  and **Preeti Nayak**

University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

This article puts forward modes of belonging that hold potential for enacting environmental education for socio-ecological justice. The focus is on orientations that can shift the experiences of young, racialized immigrant children living and learning in settler colonial Canada, where neoliberal multiculturalism has a strong hold on early childhood education. As an antidote, three interconnected pedagogical orientations towards belonging are offered: anticolonial place relations, multispecies flourishing, and affective micropolitics. The article concludes on both the challenges and liberatory possibilities of shifting environmental education for young, racialized immigrant children away from neoliberal multicultural inclusion and its reinforcement of settler colonial logics.

Keywords

anticolonial, belonging, Canada, immigrant childhoods, racialization

Introduction

In this conceptual article, we put forward modes of belonging that we see as holding promise for enacting environmental education that works towards “just, sustainable and culturally thriving worlds” (Bang, 2020: 434) alongside young, racialized immigrant children and their families living within the context of what is currently Canada. We are particularly interested in creating movement away from repetitions of neoliberal multicultural inclusion that reinforce settler colonial logics. We begin by situating the context

Corresponding author:

Fikile Nxumalo, Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning, OISE, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor St. West, Toronto, ON M5S 1V6, Canada.

Email: f.nxumalo@utoronto.ca

of current dominant forms of multicultural-settler colonial constructions of belonging in Canadian early childhood education, including environmental education for young children. We bring attention to how the construct of ‘racialized immigrant’ is a site of complex differentiated multiscale exclusions and erasures. While staying with this complexity, as racialized immigrants ourselves, we discuss why this construct is still for us, an important location from which to complexify meanings and practices of belonging in environmental education. We ground our theorization in understandings of ‘racialized immigrant’ becomings as ongoing material-discursive and geographic processes.

Our work enacts disruptive attentiveness to normative constructions of belonging, and their effects, within the complexities of what it means to become a ‘racialized immigrant’ in Canada. Through this attentiveness we arrive at a set of guiding ethical commitments in (re)conceptualizing belonging in early environmental education with and for young, racialized immigrant children within the context of what is now Canada. One commitment that threads throughout the paper is to seek possibilities to unsettle the colonial logics of neoliberal multicultural constructions of belonging. In addition, this work is part of an ongoing commitment to engage early childhood environmental education as requiring an ontological shift towards centering human/more-than-human relationality while attending to human differentiation (Nxumalo, 2020). As we discuss in this paper, this means not covering over the inherent asymmetric inheritances that are part of becoming a ‘racialized immigrant’.

Guided by these commitments, we work to enact a deciphering practice which is an anticolonial Black feminist analytic praxis that intentionally goes beyond describing or revealing the exclusionary and anti-Black effects of multicultural (un)belonging. Instead, decipherment, as an inventive analytic, works with these effects to imagine an otherwise that alters the axiological, epistemological and ontological orderings that these effects hold in place (McKittrick, 2021). In conversation with Spady (2017), Rinaldo Walcott reminds us “as scholars, we have to encounter the world, study, analyze, work with the world as it is, *but that does not mean we cannot imagine a future that is different*” (Spady, 2017: 104, emphasis added). This also applies to early childhood educators whose work is filled with potential to imagine and create liberatory worlds with and for young children. In enacting inventive deciphering practices in this paper, we craft propositions and their accompanying characteristics, as an otherwise to dominant multicultural constructions of belonging in early childhood environmental education with young, racialized immigrant children. These inter-related propositions are: *(re)storying anticolonial place relations*, *mapping multispecies geographies*, and *attuning to affective micropolitics*. As a brief introduction, (re)storying anticolonial place relations requires pedagogical attention to more-than-human relations across temporalities and nation-state borders including through (re)storying multiply emplaced practices of reciprocity. Relatedly, mapping multispecies geographies also engages with situated more-than-human relations with an emphasis on working with cartographic inquiries into real and imagined inter-species’ reciprocal relations across multiple geographies. Lastly, an affective micropolitics recognizes how feelings of belonging are co-shaped by political and historical configurations that prefigure how certain people are perceived (Ahmed, 2014). In the context of pedagogical inquiries with racially marginalized immigrant children, we speculate on

how environmental pedagogies can be a part of disrupting exclusionary affects.

Multicultural settler colonial belonging in Canadian education

Sunera Thobani (2018) powerfully describes the interconnections between Canadian multiculturalism, settler colonialism, and racialization, amidst rhetoric of cultural diversity and inclusion:

Canada, a settler colony like the USA, is founded on the genocide of Indigenous peoples and dispossession of their territories, and on the racialization of the nation's boundaries through the politics of immigration and citizenship....Canada's adoption of multiculturalism functioned as state recognition of the diversity within the population, but did so by recoding racial classification within the politics of cultural diversity and confining the economic and political struggles of people of colour to the realm of culture (pp. 169–170).

Early childhood education is clearly not outside of multiculturalism's influence. Dominant discourses of multiculturalism continue to shape the ways in which cultural and racial difference is addressed in Canadian early childhood education. This discourse prevails despite ongoing scholarship on the failure of neoliberal multiculturalism to address racisms in early childhood education (Daniel and Escayg, 2019). Of particular relevance to this article, is that dominant forms of multicultural early childhood education, while appearing to recognize difference through for instance celebrations of holidays and foods, are underpinned by an assimilationism that keeps in place normative colonial conceptions of Canadian belonging with deleterious impacts on the educational experiences of all children.

Childhood scholars have interrogated these assimilative effects on the educational experiences of racialized immigrant children and their families in Canada. While not specifically focused on environmental education, this work has shown for instance, that discourses of neoliberal multicultural inclusion in early learning contexts not only reify diverse and complex cultures, they can also act as cover for the normalization of white settler ontologies as the norm of 'Canadianness' (see e.g., Abawi and Berman, 2019). These discourses are also enacted through practices that figure responses to racisms as simply about teaching individual children about niceness and politeness (Daniel and Escayg, 2019). This work also shows that seemingly benign multicultural discourses and accompanying practices such as those that are discursively framed and enacted by educators being 'sensitive', 'flexible' 'accepting', and 'tolerating' in relating to racialized immigrant children are normative, exclusionary and disciplinary (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2007). It is not just racialized immigrant children and families that are subjectified in these ways, this also extends to the marginalization of racialized immigrant educators' ways of knowing and relating to children in their care (Massing, 2018). Importantly, there has been little change in multicultural approaches to engaging racialized difference in Canadian early childhood contexts. This contextualization serves to underline that neoliberal multiculturalism in Canadian early childhood education is implicated in enrolling racialized immigrant children and families into *settler colonial modes of belonging* that

through racial hierarchies of Canadian multicultural citizenship are simultaneously othering and assimilative.

Consequently, theorizing and enacting otherwise possibilities for education with and for young, racialized immigrant children necessitates an intentional orientation away from neoliberal multiculturalism and its attendant constructions of belonging. While relevant broadly to early childhood education, this disruption is also necessary within a specific focus on early childhood environmental education, where multicultural constructions of belonging are accompanied by a lack of research and practice that focuses on young, racialized immigrant children's curriculum-making in strength-based ways. This absence stands in juxtaposition to the plethora of evidence on the disproportionate impacts of anthropogenic environmental precarity on children that are intersectionally marginalized, including through immigrant status and racialization.

On (re)conceptualizing belonging in education

We also want to note here that while this paper focuses on possibilities for reconceptualizing belonging in relation to Canadian early childhood environmental education, belonging remains overall undertheorized in education. Belonging has been the subject of theorization and research inquiry in multiple fields of study beyond education. Despite this observation, what it entails to pedagogically build and nurture belonging to particular places and spaces in current times remains an open question (Wright, 2015). Our intent is neither to suggest that there is nor that there should be closure on this complex question. We are also not seeking to universally define what is an inherently slippery and situated concept. Instead, we aim to contribute to theorizations of children's belonging as an ethical, political, ontological and epistemological concern that centers the interdependencies and interconnectedness of human and more-than-human thriving. We see this contribution as enacting a part of what Megan Bang (2020), refers to as the urgency of "story[ing] anew nature-culture relations" (p. 440) that create ruptures, at multiple scales, of racial injustice and extractivist relations with the natural world. In this conceptual article, we enact this (re)storying of belonging by bring forward anticolonial and affirmative modes of belonging as interconnected propositions that can be put to work in conceptualizing and pedagogically engaging with the ecological relations of young racially marginalized immigrant children in Canadian early learning contexts.

We see belonging as filled with possibilities, when conceptualized and pedagogically encountered in intentionally affirmative ways in dialogue with the ecological relations of young, racialized immigrant children in Canadian early learning contexts. We situate our theorizing within understandings that what it means to belong to a place such as Canada as a racialized immigrant is always contested, situated, subjective, complex and filled with contradictions, ambivalences and spatio-temporal dispersals (Brand, 2023). For instance, Rinaldo Walcott (2021) attends to the specificities of Black migrant experiences in pointing to the ways which Canada's anti-Black immigration policies exist alongside discourses, practices and structures that construct Blackness in Canada as a recent phenomenon. In this work, he discusses the ways in which such practices and structures work to enclose Black Canada within the rhetorical gestures of neoliberal multicultural

inclusion in the nation-state. As we write this, the chasm between this rhetoric and everyday reality is ever more present in the place we inhabit, where we have recently witnessed multiple instances of what Ruth Gilmore (2022) calls organized abandonment where African asylum seekers have been left to sleep on Toronto streets with deadly consequences (Draaisma and Cheese, 2024).

The preceding discussion underlines that the complexity of what it is to be a ‘racialized immigrant’, including mediation through the contradictions of violent hierarchical exclusion and rhetorical inclusion in the nation-state. We are interested in what it might look like to hold the complexity of stratified (un)belonging in neoliberal multicultural Canada in ways that affirm racialized immigrant children and families and their complex and multiply situated land and water relations. At the same time, it is critical that environmental education is attended to as a socio-ecological matter of concern that unsettles colonial human and more-than-human hierarchies and inquires into possibilities for nurturing and building relations with the more-than-human world that are not premised on extraction or determined by human benefit (Bang, 2020). This also means that conceptualizations of belonging in environmental education should interrupt human centrism and human exceptionalism. Put another way, it is urgent to conceptualize and enact environmental education that attends to racialized injustice *and* disrupts the colonial bifurcations of the human from the more-than-human that are intrinsic to the formation, endurance and escalation of anthropogenically induced environmental damage. As one antidote, relational orientations towards belonging insist that a strong image of children is materialized through their situated place knowledges and relations, and through acts of collective ecological reciprocity.

Thus far, we have articulated commitments that orient our work to configure otherwise possibilities for nurturing belonging in environmental education with and for young, racialized immigrant children within the context of what is now Canada. These commitments include resisting the colonality of neoliberal multicultural constructions of belonging and, attending to complexities and hierarchies within meanings of ‘racialized immigrant’ while centering human/more-than-human relationality. Next, we put these commitments to work by conceptualizing how working alongside racialized immigrant children can undertake the difficult work of disrupting fixed identity categories without covering over or simply describing the onto-epistemic injustices of settler colonialism, racialization and human supremacy.

Restorying racialized immigrant becomings

It is important that we carefully attend to our insistence on racialized immigrant children as a necessary point of inquiry in Canadian environmental education despite the risk of subsumption into or interpretation as fixed identity categorization. We have intentionally selected a focus on the descriptor of racialized immigrant in relation to children of color whose parents are immigrants to Canada, including children who may themselves be immigrants. Our work is grounded in a commitment to disrupting fixed identity categories. Rather than as a fixed identity category, our use of the term ‘racialized immigrant’ is grounded in an understanding of subjectivities, including those shaping belonging, as

contextual, fluid, material-discursive, affective, situated and, always shot through with mutually constitutive relations of power that are constantly negotiated and storied in complex ways.

For racialized immigrant families and children these relations of power include the multiple ways in which marginalization occurs through interactions between their immigrant status and geographical location, race, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, dominant language discourses, gender, religion, sexuality, and ideologies of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ immigrants...and more. Such marginalization circulates and is reinscribed materially and discursively such as through descriptors like ‘visible minority immigrants’.

As discussed earlier in relation to observations on the specificity of anti-Blackness in relation to migrants, we want to further underline that the category of “racialized immigrant” holds complexity and specificity, including for children that are Black, Indigenous and Black-Indigenous; Indigenous to lands outside of Canada. The intent of this paper is to bring openness to pedagogical possibilities that engage with complex land relations. For instance, what becomes possible when educators encounter belonging in Canada or elsewhere as not something that is already predetermined? What kinds of ethical and pedagogical commitments emerge when in their context educators begin to think through how racialized immigrants, who may also be Black, Indigenous and Black-Indigenous, can experience marginalization in multiple and varying ways, while also becoming participants in Canada’s colonial project? What becomes pedagogically possible when immigrant children’s Canadian citizenship is critically encountered as a site of belonging in a nation state engaged in ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples and lands (Phung, 2011)? How might attending to immigrant Black children’s land relations *beyond* Canada also undo the erasure of past, present and desired future Black land relations *within* Canada? How might environmental early childhood education be a place to disrupt liberal discourses of multicultural inclusion such as those that perpetuate narratives of settler nations being built by immigrants while also attending to histories of enslavement and indenture in Canada? What happens when educators carefully attend to and notice how nation-building discourses can function as what Leigh Patel (2015) calls as a ‘malignant fiction’ that fosters conditions for racially marginalized people to be in competition with each other in participating in property-making practices? Importantly, the questions we raise here highlight that our orientation towards unsettling neoliberal multicultural inclusion is not meant to essentialize racialized immigrants and the ways in which they can participate in, and be subjected to anti-Black, colonial and capitalist human and more-than-human relations.

Importantly, we reiterate here our insistence that environmental education is implicated in hierarchized multicultural-settler colonial constructions of belonging (Nxumalo et al., 2022). Our intention is to theorize against taken for granted hierarchized constructions and their naturalization of environmental education as a way for schools to transmit knowledge from immigrant children to their families about Canadian pro-environmental behaviours (Blanchet-Cohen and Reilly, 2017). Rather than engaging in further extended critique of the ways in which becoming subjectified as a racialized immigrant in dominant environmental education approaches can become yet another source of erasure and

exclusion, we work from an insistence that racialized immigrant experiences cannot only be known through marginalization.

We are interested in highlighting what might be possible from working from an affirmative stance that is curious about the ecological relations and practices that racialized immigrant children and families already have and are remaking in both their current Canadian context and their previous contexts prior to immigration to Canada. This carefully attentive curiosity is also justice-oriented, meaning that while moving away from describing injustice, our knowledge making situates environmental pedagogies and curriculum-making within conditions of settler colonialism in Canada. In this regard, we are inspired by anticolonial Black feminist scholarship that unsettles the normalization of descriptive accounts of racialized injustice. For instance, we are inspired by Katherine McKittrick (2021), who thinking alongside Sylvia Wynter, discusses the potentialities of

a deciphering practice [that] imagines and enacts an aesthetics of black life outside the intense weight of racism. A deciphering practice is not a process of excavation and retrieval, it is not an absence followed by a presence, it is not a site to narrate and describe black oppression, but instead, is the work of creatively exploring and uncovering the ways black communities navigate but are not absolutely defined by racism and disavowal (p. 9).

In resonance with this articulation of deciphering practice, we are interested in imagining, narrating, and crafting an orientation towards environmental education with and for racialized immigrant children that is not defined by the weight of marginalization including that imposed under the guise of neoliberal multicultural inclusion. Importantly, our knowledge making is embedded, affective and situated. As racialized Canadian immigrants ourselves, our interest in imagining an otherwise to normative environmental education with and for racialized immigrant children is entangled with our own complex land relations and educational encounters across multiple temporalities and geographies.

Next, we imagine possibilities for enacting an otherwise to colonial, hierarchical and human-centric effects of multicultural belonging in environmental education with and for young, racialized immigrant children in Canada. We are particularly oriented towards possibilities that bring together ethics with ways of knowing and being. In other words, we work from the contention that disrupting multicultural belonging in environmental education requires ethical commitments that are not only about valuing otherwise knowledge and knowledge-making, but also about unsettling colonial human exceptionalist ontologies (Bang et al., 2022). Accordingly, we intentionally select orientations that entangle anti-colonial and more-than-human relations as axiological, epistemological and ontological interruptions that can reconfigure belonging. We discuss each of these interconnected propositional orientations next.

Proposition 1: (Re)storying anticolonial place relations

Bringing together analytics of decipherment with the focus on environmental education with and for young, racialized immigrant children brings an important question forward. What are some possibilities for materializing and conceptualizing, justice-oriented

pedagogical practices of belonging that are an otherwise to simply replacing epistemic and ontological erasure with representational presence? In thinking alongside this complicated question, we return to the invitation offered by deciphering as curious and anticolonial practices that (re)story relational knowledges across seemingly disparate genres, disciplines and multisensory modalities (McKittrick, 2021).

These anticolonial Black feminist practices of curiosity-driven knowledge-making as creative (re)storying across multiple forms, genres and disciplines fit well with conceptualizing belonging as embracing transgressive relationalities with place. Such relationalities subvert boundaries imposed by multicultural settler belonging. A focus on (re)storying place is also resonant with previous work that has engaged the world-making and liberatory capacities of transmodal storytelling in early childhood education. Such storytelling intentionally presences marginalized Black, Indigenous and Black-Indigenous place stories, notices the unjust human geographies of particular places, and inquires into the anticolonial effects of affective place pedagogies (Nxumalo, 2020, 2021). Here we want to stay with the centrality of stories and storytelling while extending this previous work to specifically respond to hierarchies of belonging in Canada that enrol racialized immigrant children into settler colonialism.

We contend that anticolonial orientations towards (re)storying place relations require affirmative pedagogical encounters with past-present-emergent and mutable relations—across time and place(s). Here attention to complex spatio-temporalities is an intentional orientation towards unsettling multicultural pedagogies that keep in place a static binary of ‘the time there versus the time here’. Instead, educators might ask what it might look like to engage with pedagogical inquiries that attend to the complexity of diasporic spatio-temporalities, including how the ‘here’ and ‘there’ are inter-connected, carrying over across lands and waters, and producing new material practices and relationalities. By inviting inquiry into the ways in which particular relatedness and kinship between plants, animals, waters, lands and humans extends across geographies, such pedagogical attunements have the potential to enact onto-epistemic ruptures in colonial modes of belonging that are defined by borders and nation states.

One possibility is to begin with inquiries that invite families and/or children to story relations with particular skies, plants, animals, lands and waters. Such story-telling could take multiple forms that express and activate tactile, auditory, visual and affective more-than-human relationalities. Importantly, this includes attention to relations with ecologically damaged lands and waters, and making legible how coloniality has produced such ecological precarity. Amidst ongoing and anticipated future climate driven migration, bringing pedagogical attention to childrens’ relations to ecologically damaged lands and waters ushers a necessary justice lens to environmental education with racially marginalized immigrant children. Such a lens also serves to challenge static and assimilative conceptions of belonging that are defined by the violence of nation-state borders. Put another way, the kinds of story-telling we are orienting towards recognizes that children’s worlds are not separate from current conditions of socio-ecological precarity across geographies. Such inquiries might experiment with possibilities to creatively entangle past, present and imagined future more-than-human relations in non-linear ways.

Taken together, through (re)storying anticolonial place relations, environmental education with and for young, racialized immigrant children can become *something else entirely* that purposefully and inventively eludes multicultural representation. This *something else entirely* is a challenge to static, hierarchical and assimilative modes of belonging. As “practices of otherwise worlds” (Vintimilla, 2023: 19) (re)storying anticolonial relations refuses prescriptive curriculum. This is a challenge to the broader field of Canadian early childhood education, which remains predominantly shaped by an orientation towards curriculum as child-centered application of developmental knowledge (Land et al., 2022). This conceptualization of anticolonial place relations in early childhood education is an antidote to multicultural belonging that embraces an ethos of emergence. However, this is not to suggest an ‘anything goes’ emergent approach. The kind of emergence we are interested in, is an otherwise to depoliticized, child-centered and neoliberal consumptive understandings of emergent curriculum (Nxumalo et al., 2018). As discussed throughout the paper, emergence here is shaped by particular ethical orientations— including stated orientations against human centrism and fixed representations of belonging.

In the preceding discussion, we have underlined that one part of a pedagogical commitment to anticolonial place relations with racialized immigrant children and families is to attend to the multiplicity and complexity of their more-than-human relations including the ways in which relations are present and emerge across time and space. Enmeshed within this conceptualization of anticolonial place relations, is a disruption to human supremacy that is grounded in Indigenous onto-epistemologies in enmeshing nature-culture relations (Bang, 2020). As Bang and Marin (2015) state: “the genealogy of intertwined reciprocal nature-culture relations and subsequent implications for subject-object constructions is rooted in Indigenous communities...” (p. 531). Put another way, learning alongside the more-the-human world through interconnectedness rather than encountering nature as an object of human knowledge-making interrupts coloniality. Pedagogically this requires responsiveness to both the particularities of the land relationships that racialized immigrant children and families bring with them *and* the particularities of the Indigenous lands on which the early childhood classroom is located in what is now Canada. One mode of such responsiveness is to centre practices of reciprocity. As Estes (2020) states in connecting Indigenous emplaced reciprocity with Black Geographies scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s concept of “freedom is a place”, such practices of bringing together “radical relationality, of bringing human and non-human beings into just, reciprocal, and accountable relations” are both liberatory and anti-colonial (para. 3). It is therefore important to consider possibilities for anticolonial place relations in environmental education as centering situated reciprocal rather than extractive more-than-human relations. In this regard, being on the look-out for and designing early childhood pedagogical practices of ecological caring that are grounded in Indigenous reciprocal knowledges in conversation with children and their families’ knowledges is a liberatory orientation towards working with racialized immigrant children and families.

Proposition 2: Mapping multispecies geographies

Mapping multispecies geographies is one possible site for enacting a relational ethics that carefully attends to local Indigenous and diasporic (including Indigenous diasporic) multispecies relations while disrupting the coloniality of nation-state borders. Here mapping is referred to in a broad sense to mean embodied practices of noticing and responding to multispecies relationalities in particular places and spaces of connectedness to racialized immigrant children. Here we build from the work of Veronica [Pacini-Ketchabaw and colleagues \(2016\)](#) on the potentiality of attuning to multispecies relations in early childhood education. Multispecies refers to more-than-human relatives of all kinds including specific lands, waters and their more-than-human inhabitants. We build on this work to specifically highlight the potential of mapping multispecies geographies as practices that notice and affectively respond with children, to the ways in which animals, plants and other more-than-human beings transgress and disrupt nation-state and human-centric conceptions of belonging. These modes of pedagogical attunement can refer to science stories based in children's 'real' worlds, as well as to speculative imaginaries that bring together any combination of past-present-future multispecies geographies. Importantly, these are not innocent or neutral acts, but are ways of sharing multispecies connectedness as anticolonial and non-anthropocentric practices. Mapping multispecies geographies signals intentional engagement with more-than-human life as enmeshed within socio-political and socio-cultural systems ([Kirksey et al., 2014](#)). Of particular importance here, such systems include discourses of multiculturalism that obscure/universalize/essentialize diasporic and Indigenous multispecies relations and environmental knowledges.

In thinking with 'multispecies' we are interested in pedagogical orientations that notice and respond reciprocally to human/more-than-human relations *and* relations within the more-than-human world such as particular plant-animal kinships. Mapping multispecies geographies can also be thought of as situated practices that work from an ethos of multispecies thriving as a necessary theory of change in anticolonial early childhood environmental education. In resonance with the spatio-temporal disruptions discussed previously, such reciprocal and reparative practices are situated within present ecologically damaged landscapes but are also open to speculative future conditions for multispecies thriving.

Mapping multispecies geographies embraces interdisciplinarity – including bringing the arts and sciences into conversation in designing collectively imagined, creative and practical (micro)interventions towards more livable multispecies communities. [Kirksey et al. \(2014\)](#) describe such practices of creative interruption amidst ecological precarity, as the work of holding onto the "potential of tiny actions...gestures of care to make the world a more livable place" (p. 49). These are complex undertakings that require educators to take up questions that offer no simple or pre-determined answers or unimplicated moral positions without compromise. For instance, this work foregrounds the question of what it looks like to enact forms of multispecies caring across geographies in early childhood education amidst anthropogenic death and extinction ([Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2016](#)). Environmental humanities scholar Thom [Van Dooren \(2021\)](#) provides helpful questions

that can enrich early childhood pedagogical inquiries premised on mapping multispecies geographies, asking: “What are the limitations and hazards of *caring for nonhumans in contexts of loss and degradation*? What is the potential of *caring beyond the human* for opening up (or disclosing) knowledge about other world-making practices and the possible ecological futures they may enable?” (np, emphasis added). These are the kinds of questions that are needed to open up early childhood environmental education beyond the striations of neoliberal multiculturalism.

As the discussion thus far suggests, while we are particularly interested in what pedagogies inspired by mapping multispecies geographies and (re)storying anticolonial place relations can open up for racialized immigrant children learning in the context of Canada, they are important for all children. From a broader perspective, these propositions fit with environmental education for young children as a site for building modes of belonging and pedagogical attentiveness that contribute to the undoing of hierarchical and conceptions of what it means to be human. This is also an insistence that human supremacist conditions (and accompanying ontological and epistemological stances) that normalize extractive relations with the more-than-human world are not separate from those that maintain white supremacy (Bang, 2020). Therefore, mapping multispecies geographies is also an entry into unsettling the subtle and overt racializing assemblages (Weheliye, 2014) in which childhoods are constructed and asymmetrically categorized through Canadian multicultural inclusion rhetoric that holds white supremacist logics in place. While they do not name their work as mapping multispecies geographies and work with children beyond early childhood, I see resonance here in the inspiring work of the Soil Camp with racialized displaced refugee children in Calgary, Alberta that brings together the sciences, arts and land education to nurture children’s soil ontological and epistemological relations across geographies (Dadkhahfard et al., 2024).

Canadian early childhood education, and particularly in its dominant neoliberal multicultural formations, is implicated in reproducing normative ways of being human that must be disrupted as a matter of socio-ecological justice (Nxumalo and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023). Recognizing interconnections between human supremacy, white supremacy and neoliberal multiculturalism suggests to us the necessity of inventions of altogether different ways of being human in environmental education with and for young children.

Proposition 3: Attuning to affective micropolitics

In extending further the previous discussion on mapping multispecies geographies as inventions of otherwise modes of being human in environmental education, we turn next to the interruptive possibilities of affective pedagogies. So, what does affect have to do with reconceptualizing belonging in environmental education with young, racialized immigrant children? Sara Ahmed’s (2014) conceptualization of affective politics grounds our practices of imagining what belonging might become in environmental early childhood education. Here expressions of affect include orientations towards and away from particular human and more-than-human bodies. Importantly these (embodied and discursive) orientations are world-making and are therefore political. Such affects include

one's own feelings of belongingness and out-of-placeness in specific spaces. These affects are also enacted in how others' belonging is perceived. Importantly, this "towardness or awayness" (p. 8) is influenced not only by moments of actual encounter in particular places and spaces, but also by what precedes those moments including pre-circulating histories, discourses and power relations (Ahmed, 2014).

In bringing together geographic and affective elements of belonging to reconceptualize environmental education with young, racialized immigrant children, we situate our work within trajectories of scholarship in geography. This work has underlined both the inherently affective and geographic dimensions of belonging (Mee and Wright, 2009). Attention to these dimensions means bringing attention to how belonging feels and underlines a need "to consider the work that belonging-as-emotion does in creating subjectivities, collectivities and places" (Wright 2015: 392–393). A geographic orientation also helps to uphold our focus on multispecies relations, where both humans and more-than-humans (places, spaces, objects, plants, soil, animals and more) are active participants in processes of affective belonging.

From this brief discussion, the multiscale connections between politics and affect can be inferred; both through the micropolitics of everyday interpersonal encounters and through cumulative material-discursive 'sticky affects' (Ahmed, 2014) that become fixed to certain groups of people such as those subjectified as racialized immigrants within neoliberal multicultural discourses and policies. Such sticky affective attachments include those disguised as the 'welcoming' discourses of inclusion and acceptance of immigrants that we discussed earlier in the paper. While such discourses and accompanying practices might enact positive affects, we are interested in disrupting their underlying and pre-configured exclusion-through-inclusion. Ahmed discusses intricate connections between affect and the pre-inscription of certain people:

The immediacy of bodily reactions is mediated by histories that come before subjects, and which are at stake in how the very arrival of some bodies is noticeable in the first place. The most immediate of our bodily reactions can thus be treated as pedagogy: we learn about ideas by learning how they become quick and unthinking. Somewhat ironically, perhaps, there is nothing more mediated than immediacy (p. 212).

For our work here in beginning to reconceptualize belonging for racialized immigrant children in environmental education, we are interested in potentials for disrupting 'sticky affects' that can circulate and be amplified in everyday pedagogical encounters. In this intent, we join others who have shown how affect can be a generative site for liberatory-oriented pedagogical questions and actions (see e.g., Franklin-Phipps, 2020).

There are several possible entry points in doing this work, particularly when conceptualized as entailing deciphering practices of invention and (re)imagination (McKittrick, 2021). Here, as part of ongoing processes of reimagining what affective pedagogies might entail in environmental early childhood education, our interest is otherwise possibilities to the repetitions of racializing, colonial and anthropocentric sticky affects that are entangled with neoliberal multiculturalism. Such affects can emerge through the practices that we described previously such as those that suture environmental

education with teaching ‘Canadian’ pro-environmentalism to racialized immigrant children. The purpose is not to claim that what is proposed will do away with dampening affective pedagogies. Instead, we suggest there is potential in shifting pedagogical attention to affective capacities that emerge when racialized immigrant children are invited to notice past, present and desired future multispecies relations across geographies. Put another way, we are interested in placing into young children’s curriculum-making worlds an enthusiasm for their own analytics of affective multispecies relations across geographies. This requires from educators a different pedagogical stance than one that starts with an identitarian and individualist engagement with young children, including racialized immigrant children. Affect is always already shaped by relational capacities to affect and be affected by human and more-than-human others (Stewart, 2011). In staying with affective relational capacities while shifting away from the sticky affects described previously, we wonder what could be generated from educator pedagogical attunement and responsiveness to atmospheric feelings, sensations, and sensorial activations (actual and remembered touch-sounds-smells-visualities-taste), and emotional responses as children engage in interdisciplinary and embodied encounters with multispecies geographies. This is not to assume that what is opened up by attuning to and responding to affective atmospheres is necessarily “positive” or “good” – it is important to be careful to avoid both colonial binaries. It is also important to emphasize movement away from early childhood education’s preoccupation ‘good’ and ‘nice’ feelings (Vintimilla, 2014). The subtle and overt control of feelings such as through expectations of “happy diversity” is implicated in the making of neoliberal-multicultural and individualist subjects (Ahmed, 2020: 375). As an alternative, the pedagogical attunements to affective micropolitics suggested here are open to and care-fully responsive to the messiness of affect; where for instance affects associated with connectedness might be entangled with those that accompany loss and displacement.

We theorize that such pedagogies of affective micropolitics enact a “proliferation of little worlds of all kinds” (Stewart, 2011: p. 446) that matter for doing environmental education that is otherwise to socializing children into neoliberal multicultural modes of belonging. As we have discussed throughout the paper this is also necessarily anticolonial work that is situated within the places and spaces of settler colonial Canada. Like others have done in contexts within and beyond early childhood education, we insist on careful attention to the ‘where’ of affect. This is already present in our foregrounding of place through multimodal mappings of (seemingly) disparate multispecies geographies. To that we would add that becoming situated through multispecies geographies and their affective accompaniments also includes attention to Indigenous lands and waters both where children currently are and where they have come from.

Towards anti-colonial belonging in environmental education

This article imagines possibilities for environmental education for racialized immigrant children, within the context of Canada to become otherwise to socialization into the settler colonial neoliberal multicultural nation state. We want to note here again that while these propositions are not unique to Canada and could be brought to co-theorize alongside other

contexts, we have conceptualized them in relation to very specific educational and socio-political conditions in Canada. This includes the previously discussed unique neoliberal multicultural and settler colonial structuring of Canada, and amidst public support for schools and educators to prioritize climate change education. As such, the socio-political climate in which Canadian early childhood environmental educators are situated is different than in other contexts, making these propositions particularly relevant to the current moment in Canada.

Thinking with belonging as a site of interruptive potential, we have considered modes of belonging that might orient pedagogical encounters towards enacting anticolonial place relations, multispecies flourishing, and affective micropolitics. We have focused on these three possibilities, to insist, as others have done, that anticolonial environmental education needs to foreground relational rather than individualized human-centric subjectivities. Centering relationality brings forward challenging but necessary questions on what pedagogies with racialized immigrant children for multispecies flourishing might entail in ecologically precarious times. At the same time, we are interested in relationality as part of an affirmative and political stance that does not gloss over the where of environmental education in responding to both the 'here' and 'elsewhere' of racialized immigrant children's belonging beyond superficial multicultural approaches. Such a stance also thinks through how attunements to the (micro)politics of affect (an inherently relational concept), during pedagogical encounters, can bring 'something else' into the world other than the re-inscription of static multicultural identities. There are multiple situated possibilities of what building 'something else' might become, signaling pedagogical orientations that are provisional, speculative and experimental rather than prescriptive or routinized. For instance, we have invited educators to become curious about what emerges in relation with situated pedagogies that intentionally attend to multispecies relations across multiple geographies. Such invitations that bring together complex concepts with pedagogical orientations, are also a refusal to reduce, marginalize or altogether dismiss the transformative potential of early childhood education in Canada to contribute to the making new socio-ecologically just worlds.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was funded by the University of Toronto Connaught New Researcher.

ORCID iD

Fikile Nxumalo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2039-9146>

References

- Abawi ZE and Berman R (2019) Politicizing early childhood education and care in Ontario: race, identity and belonging. *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education* 4(2): 4–13.
- Ahmed S (2014) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge.
- Ahmed S (2020) Multiculturalism and the promise of happiness. In: McCann C, Seung-kyung K and Ergun E (eds) *Feminist Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, 374–384.
- Bang M (2020) Learning on the move toward just, sustainable, and culturally thriving futures. *Cognition and Instruction* 38(3): 434–444.
- Bang M and Marin A (2015) Nature–culture constructs in science learning: human/non-human agency and intentionality. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 52(4): 530–544.
- Bang M, Marin A, Wemigwase S, et al. (2022) Undoing human supremacy and white supremacy to transform relationships: an interview with Megan Bang and Ananda Marin. *Curriculum Inquiry* 52(2): 150–161.
- Blanchet-Cohen N and Reilly RC (2017) Immigrant children promoting environmental care: enhancing learning, agency and integration through culturally-responsive environmental education. *Environmental Education Research* 23(4): 553–572.
- Brand D (2023) *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Canada: Penguin Random House.
- Dadkhahfard S, Kopparla M, Takeuchi MA, et al. (2024 April) Collective illustrating of socio-ecological care toward pluriversal speculations. In *Jen T (Chair) Speculative Science Education toward Socioecological Care [Structured Poster Presentation]*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA: American Educational Research Association's Annual Meeting.
- Daniel BJJ and Escayg KA (2019) But, I don't believe it's about race': challenging fallacies of race and racism amongst early childhood educators in Ontario. *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education* 4(2): 14–28.
- Draisma M and Cheese T (2024) An asylum seeker died after waiting hours for a shelter space. Advocates are demanding action. *CBC News*, Feb 22 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/asylum-seeker-death-mississauga-federal-funding-1.7123310>.
- Estes (2020) Freedom is a place: long traditions of anti-colonial resistance in Turtle Island. *Versopolis*. <https://www.versopolis.com/times/reportage/842/freedom-is-a-place>.
- Franklin-Phipps A (2020) Art encounters, racism, and teacher education. In: Dernikos B, Lesko N, McCall S, et al. (eds) *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education: Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge, 122–140.
- Gilmore RW (2022) *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*. Brooklyn: Verso Books.
- Kirksey E, Schuetze C and Helmreich S (2014) Introduction: tactics of multispecies ethnography. In: Kirksey E (ed) *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1–25.
- Kirksey E, Shapiro N and Brodine M (2014) Hope in blasted landscapes. In: Kirksey E (ed) *The Multispecies Salon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 29–63.
- Land N, Vintimilla CD, Pacini-Ketchabaw V, et al. (2022) Propositions toward educating pedagogists: decentering the child. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 23(2): 109–121.
- Massing C (2018) African, Muslim refugee student teachers' perceptions of care practices in infant and toddler field placements. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 26(2): 186–200.

- McKittrick K (2021) *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mee K and Wright S (2009) Geographies of belonging. *Environment and planning A* 41(4): 772–779.
- Nxumalo F (2020) Place-based disruptions of humanism, coloniality and anti-Blackness in early childhood education. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 8(SI): 34–49.
- Nxumalo F (2021) Disrupting anti-Blackness in early childhood qualitative inquiry: thinking with Black refusal and Black futurity. *Qualitative Inquiry* 27(10): 1191–1199.
- Nxumalo F and Pacini-Ketchabaw V (2023) Centering Black life in Canadian early childhood education. *Gender and Education* 35(2): 186–198.
- Nxumalo F, Vintimilla CD and Nelson N (2018) Pedagogical gatherings in early childhood education: mapping interferences in emergent curriculum. *Curriculum Inquiry* 48(4): 433–453.
- Nxumalo F, Nayak P and Tuck E (2022) Education and ecological precarity: pedagogical, curricular, and conceptual provocations. *Curriculum Inquiry* 52(2): 97–107.
- Pacini-Ketchabaw V (2007) Child care and multiculturalism: a site of governance marked by flexibility and openness. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 8(3): 222–232.
- Pacini-Ketchabaw V, Taylor A and Blaise M (2016) De-centring the human in multispecies ethnographies. In: Taylor C and Hughes C (eds) *Posthuman Research Practices in Education*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 149–167.
- Patel L (2015, September 17) Nationalist narratives, immigration and coloniality. *Decolonization Indigeneity, Education & Society*. <https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/09/17/nationalist-narratives-immigration-and-coloniality/>.
- Phung M (2011) Are people of colour settlers too? In: Mathur A, Dewar J and DeGagné M (eds) *Cultivating Canada Reconciliation through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*. Ottawa, ON, Canada: Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 291–298.
- Spady S (2017) Reflections on late identity: in conversation with Melanie J. Newton, Nirmala Erevelles, Kim TallBear, Rinaldo Walcott, and Dean Itsuji Saranillio. *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3(1): 90–115. DOI: [10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.1.0090](https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.1.0090).
- Stewart K (2011) Atmospheric attunements. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29(3): 445–453.
- Thobani S (2018) Neoliberal multiculturalism and western exceptionalism: the cultural politics of the West. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11: 161–174.
- Van Dooren T (2021) Mourning as care in the snail ark. *Theorizing the Contemporary, Fieldsights*, January 26. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/mourning-as-care-in-the-snail-ark>.
- Vintimilla CD (2014) Neoliberal fun and happiness in early childhood education. *Journal of Childhood Studies* 39: 79–87.
- Vintimilla CD (2023) Critique, estrangement and speculative envisioning: pedagogical thinking and otherwise educational worlds. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 30(1): 16–25.
- Walcott R (2021) *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Weheliye AG (2014) *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wright S (2015) More-than-human, emergent belongings: a weak theory approach. *Progress in Human Geography* 39(4): 391–411.