

2020

## Enchanted animism: A matter of care

Jane Merewether  
*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013>



Part of the [Early Childhood Education Commons](#)

---

[10.1177/1463949120971380](https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120971380)

Merewether, J. (2020). Enchanted animism: A matter of care. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120971380>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworkspost2013/9671>

# Enchanted animism: A matter of care

Jane Merewether   
Edith Cowan University, Australia

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood

1–12

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/1463949120971380

[journals.sagepub.com/home/cie](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/cie)

## Abstract

Jean Piaget, whose work continues to be very influential in early childhood education, associated young children's animism with their 'primitive thought' claiming children remain animists until they reach a more advanced and rational stage of development. This article proposes a rethinking of the Piagetian view of animism, suggesting instead that children's animism be conceived as a 'matter of care' which may then offer possibilities for living more responsively and attentively with non human others. Drawing on two recent research projects involving two-to-eight-year-old children, the article contends that children's playful and speculative 'enchanted animism' can create a spaces for curiosity, wonder and immersion in and of the world. The author argues that enchanted animism has the potential to open children to their *worldly embeddedness* and can ignite possibilities for more responsive and attentive ways of living with an increasingly damaged Earth.

## Keywords

animism, care, developmentalism, early childhood education and care, matters of care, Piaget

## Introduction

Those who work with young children are likely very familiar with their propensity to animate their biotic and abiotic surroundings.<sup>1</sup> Children frequently ascribe sentience, intentions and motivations not only to animals, but also to so-called 'mindless' things like stones, wind and trees. Children's animist ways of thinking were documented in detail by psychologist Jean Piaget (1929), particularly in *The Child's Conception of the World*. In this work, Piaget associates young children's animism with their 'primitive thought', claiming they remain animists until they reach a more advanced and 'rational' stage of development. Piaget's analysis of children's animism informed his stage-based theory of cognitive development, which continues to be very influential in many Euro-western approaches to education (Burman, 2017; Cannella and Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Murriss, 2016). This article troubles the Piagetian view of animism and instead contends

---

### Corresponding author:

Jane Merewether, School of Education, Edith Cowan University, 2 Bradford Street, Mount Lawley, WA 6050, Australia.

Email: [j.merewether@ecu.edu.au](mailto:j.merewether@ecu.edu.au)

that children's animism, or 'enchanted animism' (Merewether, 2019a), opens possibilities for attentiveness to their surroundings. More specifically, the article argues that children's animism can be a 'matter of care' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), as it can create conditions for curiosity, wonder and a sense of *worldly embeddedness* that ignites possibilities for more responsive and attentive ways of living with an increasingly damaged Earth. The key word here, however, is 'can'; it is *how* animism mobilises care that is of critical importance.

To unfold this argument, I begin the article with a discussion about animism before moving on to discuss Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) conceptualisation of care. I then show how animism is a matter of care by drawing on data, or 'murmurs', from two recent research projects involving two-to-eight-year-old children. Next, I discuss how Piagetian views of children's animism work to perpetuate colonialist visions of Euro-western supremacy and a view of the world that positions non humans as inferior, separate and there for the taking. Finally, I round off by suggesting that reading children's animism through Indigenous logics opens possibilities for listening in and with the world.

## Animism

Animism was theorised by 19th-century anthropologist Edward Tylor (1841) and, according to Nurit Bird-David (1999: S67), it is 'one of anthropology's earliest concepts, if not the first'.<sup>2</sup> Tylor (1841) defined animism as a 'doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings' (21), attributing it to 'low races of Mankind' (377). Tylor's developmental view of human civilisation had it progressing from 'primitive' to 'civilised', and, as multispecies anthropologist/ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose (2013: 96) asserts, this and other anthropological work that followed 'sought to demonstrate an evolutionary hierarchy within the human family such that primitives could be defined in ways that radically distinguished them from civilised folk'. Animism, therefore, is a concept which arose from the colonialist project and was used to justify Euro-western invasion and domination of Indigenous lands throughout the world. Consequently, some anthropologists now avoid the term 'animism' altogether, believing that it is 'irredeemably compromised by the dubious role it played in early anthropological theorising and religious polemic' (Harvey, 2006: xii).

Nonetheless, a number of scholars are using the term 'animism' differently. In this so-called 'new' animism, the concept of 'person' is extended beyond the human. Thus, '[a]nimists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is lived in relationship with others' (Harvey, 2006: xi). In this reconceptualised view of animism, the centrality of relationships is key. Bird-David (1999: S69) calls this a 'relational epistemology . . . [which is] about knowing the world by focusing primarily on relatednesses, from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer'. It is this 'relational' view of animism that I take here.

This brings us to another contentious point – whether we think things are *really* alive/conscious/sentient or whether we think *as if* they are. Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood (2002) argues that merely thinking *as if* non humans have intentionality amounts to a kind of doublethink that fails to undo the justification for what she terms the 'Empire of Men over mere things' (236). She proposes an intentional stance which recognises 'earth others as fellow agents and narrative subjects [as] crucial for all ethical, collaborative, communicative and mutualistic projects, as well as for place sensitivity' (175). Science philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2012), in acknowledging the colonial roots of Science and the ongoing pejorative use of the term 'animism', is more cautious.<sup>3</sup> She refuses to define animism but is nonetheless supportive of anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's proposal that polemic terms like 'animism' are reclaimed. On the question of *really/as if*, Stengers (2012: 7) provocatively suggests that we take courage and learn from witches, who, when

confronted with the accusation that their beliefs are not really real, ‘would doubtless smile and ask us whether we are among those who believe that fiction is powerless’. It is not the intent of this article to debate the *really/as if* aspect of animism; what is important is what animism *does*. It is my contention here that children’s animism reflects a speculative way of seeing the world which can create room for responsiveness, attentiveness and caring-with relations in the world.

## Matters of care

Care has long been a concern of feminist scholars, a number of whom have explicitly theorised care through an ‘ethic of care’ (Held, 2006; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993). Joan Tronto’s (1993) ethic of care moves beyond one-to-one caring relationships and recognises the interdependence of humans, regardless of gender, who *all* need, give and receive care; this is reflected in the well-known definition of care written with her colleague Berenice Fisher, which states that:

caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’, so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto, 1990: 40)

More recently, feminist materialist philosopher Maria Puig de la Bellacasa has built on Tronto’s definition of care so that it is less human-centric and more readily accommodates non-humans:

care is everything that is done (rather than everything that ‘we’ do) to maintain, continue, and repair ‘the world’ so that *all* (rather than ‘we’) can live in it as well as possible. That world includes . . . *all* that we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 161)

These subtle changes to Tronto’s conceptualisation of care and caring broaden it out so that it is possible to include animals, plants, materials, forces, histories and so on, for, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 161) notes, ‘humans are not the only ones caring *for* the earth and its beings – we are *in* relations of mutual care’. Furthermore, in proposing ‘matters of care’, Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 2017) brings care into conversation with Bruno Latour’s (2004b) recasting of facts as ‘matters of concern’. While care and concern may at first appear to be synonyms, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 42) argues that concern alone is not enough: “‘to care’ contains a notion of *doing* that concern lacks’. Like matters of concern, matters of care are contingent on and emerge within an entanglement of associations, or what Latour (2004b) calls ‘gatherings’. As Puig de la Bellacasa asserts:

Care is embedded in the practices that maintain webs of relationality and is always happening in between. This meaning spreads the meaning of the ethical to the whole of a situation – to the agencies, materialities, and practicalities involved in the processes of caring. Here, the focus is not so much on the subjects of the so-called ethical action and decision-making but on how an ethos is fostered through relations and doings. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 166)

This framing extends care beyond the human-to-human obligations frequently associated with care. It moves away from anthropocentric conceptualisations of care and acknowledges that caring takes place within an interrelated more-than-human network. Although Puig de la Bellacasa draws extensively on Latourian theory, she is critical of Latour’s (2004b) ‘critique of critique’, which argues that criticism of science knowledge has led to suspicion of well-researched matters of fact, which has, in turn, fuelled climate-change denial and conspiracy theories. Latour (2004b) suggests that rather than seeking to dismantle matters of fact, researchers should instead attend to the network of concerns

that give rise to facts. Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 49) argues that, like facts, care also emerges within an assemblage of concerns, but for caring to flourish, marginalised voices are essential: ‘to promote care in our world we cannot throw away critical standpoints with the bath of corrosive critique’. It is this aspect of Puig de la Bellacasa’s work that is particularly useful for this article, which elucidates how Piagetian theory contributes to the dismissal and ignoring of the animist caring relations not only of young children, but also of whole groups of non-Euro-western humans.

In theorising matters of care, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) describes care as a triptych that simultaneously includes ‘an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation’ (42). As ‘an affective state’, caring is the call to be emotionally involved with another. As ‘a material vital doing’, care is practical labour requiring action. And as ‘an ethico-political obligation’, caring is a vital accompaniment to life. This is not to say that these dimensions are equally distributed or without tensions, but by situating care as affect-work-ethics, it can be extended ‘into the terrain of the politics of knowledge, into the implications of thinking with care’ (13). This approach, then, is a ‘feminist vision of care that can represent concerns with persistent forms of exclusion, power, and domination’ (49).

Before moving on, it is important to emphasise that care cannot be assumed to be innocent or ‘good’. In fact, care is fraught. As environmental humanities field philosopher Thom van Dooren (2014: 292) points out, ‘care for some individuals and species translates into suffering and death for others’. For example, caring for a patch of remnant bushland might result in death for weeds or snails. Caring for a waterway may mean removing deliberately released pet goldfish. Care, then, must involve a ‘practice of critique’, where we ask: ‘What counts as care and why? How else might care be imagined and practiced? In short, what am I really caring for, why, and at what cost to whom?’ (van Dooren, 2014: 293). Likewise, animism must be subjected to a similar critique, where we ask: What does animism activate and for whom does it matter?

## Play, enchantment, speculation and care

In my work with children both as a teacher and as a researcher, children’s animism is very frequently associated with a sort of speculative playfulness. I have called this ‘enchanted animism’, arguing that children’s playful-yet-serious animism provides a bridge between the immobilising emotions of hope and despair that dominate in a world of unprecedented challenges (Merewether, 2019a). ‘Enchanted’ animism, then, draws attention to what Jane Bennett (2010: 6) calls ‘*Thing-power*’: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle’; it also highlights the playfulness that children bring to their animism. The playfulness of enchanted animism creates spaces for creativity and experimentation; it is a *speculative* move that requires invention and imagination, but it is also deeply rooted in experience. The adjective ‘speculative’ has been deployed by feminist writers, such as in Stengers’ ‘speculative gesture’ (Bebaise and Stengers, 2017) and Donna Haraway’s (2013) ‘speculative fabulation’; it is also a consistent refrain throughout Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Puig de la Bellacasa’s speculative view of care invites us to imagine what caring, as well as possible, might involve not just for humans, but also for non humans, things and materials. Speculative care resists universalising conceptualisations which require conformity to predetermined imperatives, for, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017: 110) says, ‘the speculative refers to a mode of thought committed to foster visions of other worlds possible’. Committing to the speculative opens a space for thinking that does not rely on certainty or what is already known; rather, it requires a logic of uncertainty which is always up for review. Enchanted animism can offer such a space – a space which allows us to interrogate care and to imagine ways it might be done differently. Enchanted animism, then, is not just for children – as Bennett (2001: 128) reminds us,

‘without enchantment, you might lack the impetus to act against the very injustices that you critically discern’.

## Locating

This article draws on two consecutive empirical projects undertaken at two early learning settings in Perth, Western Australia – the first (Study One) an investigation of two-to-four-year-old children’s perspectives of outdoor spaces and the second (Study Two) an inquiry across six sites investigating two-to-eight-year-old children’s relations with waste. These settings are part of what may be considered ‘the field’ for these studies. However, for me, the field is much more than the site(s). This does not mean that the field includes everything, nor is it ‘an infinitely malleable thought experiment’ (van Dooren, 2018: 440), but it is not only limited to the ‘subjects’ or the ‘location’ of the research project. Thus, for these studies, the field not only included encounters and observations that took place at the sites, but also my many years of experience as a teacher of young children, the writing of research documentation and recollections, scholarly engagement with theoretical and philosophical literature, beach walks and possibly even dreams; these were all generative spaces and are therefore ‘the field’. The field, then, is a ‘situation that *pushes back* on our philosophising, that is able to *trouble* and unsettle our thinking’ (van Dooren, 2018: 440).

In terms of the methodological approach, both studies drew on the multimodal and multiperspectival strategies and processes of in-practice research called ‘pedagogical documentation’, developed by educators in the city of Reggio Emilia as a way of co-researching with young children (Fleet et al., 2017; Giudici et al., 2001; Rinaldi, 2006). These qualitative research approaches include conversation, drawing, playing, making, pretending, photographing and experimenting. The dialogic and emergent nature of the pedagogical documentation process enables researchers to collaborate with young children through sustained interactions, making space for the insights of young children, who are viewed as experts on their own experience, to enrich the research and contribute to its directions (Clark, 2017; Fleet et al., 2017; Giamminuti, 2013; Merewether, 2018; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015).

## Murmurings

In this section, I share data fragments, or what I will call ‘murmurs’, which arose from these projects. In referring to these as ‘murmurs’, I experiment with the ‘murmurative diffraction’ approach to analysis that I have deployed previously (Merewether, 2019b). This approach draws on diffractive analysis (Barad, 2007, 2014; Haraway, 1992) and likens the research in which I participate to a ‘murmuration’, a figure which usually refers to a ‘swirling, shifting mass of birds which moves in pulses of expansion and diminution; a dancing cloud of density one minute, diffuseness the next’ (Merewether, 2019b: 105).<sup>4</sup> For me at least, research is also like this – a swirling, always moving intra-active<sup>5</sup> (Barad, 2007) mass. Thus, the murmurs narrated here should not be construed as standing alone; they are always read diffractively or through one another, generating possible new realities.

Some of the murmurs that follow are constructed from verbatim quotes recorded when I visited the two research sites. They also include notes from my research journal. Other murmurs hark back to theories I encountered as part of my own pre-service teacher education and then subsequently taught as a pre-service teacher-educator. And other murmurs reflect Indigenous voices that have surrounded me all my life as a white-settler Australian, although I may not have always been attuned to them. These murmurs are all inherently partial but are included for their ability to provoke speculative care imaginings.

I begin with murmurs constructed from verbatim quotes recorded as I worked with children during Study One. These murmurs are a composite of multiple children's comments. Each sentence was uttered by a different child, but I present them this way to emulate the sense of being in a crowd, or a murmuration, and catching snippets of multiple conversations in an ever-moving throng:

I'm drawing a talking tree. It says hello, but it bees [*sic*] angry if you press really hard. It doesn't like to be pressed really hard. It says la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la . . . [to the tune of 'Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush']. The trees are friends with each other. I heard the tree screaming. Screaming cos she is happy. She's calling the children to play. She only gets cross when people get angry.

The next murmurs come from my research journal during Study One; they highlight the point when I realised that my reaction to children's animism was steeped in developmentalism, which, like every other Australian teacher, I had encountered in my teacher training. Developmentalism has long been critiqued (Burman, 1994; Cannella and Viruru, 2004) and, at the time of conducting this research, I was well aware of this. Moreover, as a long-time student of the educational project of Reggio Emilia, I had been called to look critically at 'how Piaget's constructivism isolates the child; . . . [Piaget's] marginal attention to social interaction; [and] . . . the lockstep linearity of development in constructivism' (Edwards et al., 1998: 82). I was also aware of more recent rereadings of Piagetian theory (Aslanian, 2018; MacRae, 2019) that lean on posthuman and new materialist theories to go beyond individual development to include the social and the material. So, I was surprised at how pervasively developmentalism had infiltrated my views about children's animism, as the following murmur from my journal reveals:

These children are animating everything! For them, trees, rocks, clouds all have intentions of their own. I have seen this many times before but I have suddenly become aware that my response to their animism – that is, my until now unconscious assumption they will 'grow out of it' – is grounded in developmental logics. What are the origins of this kind of thinking about animism? Is this the only way to think about animism?

In an attempt to verify the origins of my previously unconscious assumptions, I tracked down Piaget's (1929) *The Child's Conception of the World*, in which animism features prominently. Piaget is developmental psychology's best-known name, and Australian teachers are well versed in Piagetian theory. Few, however – including me – read the original source in their undergraduate studies. I was shocked by what I read and wrote the following in my journal:

In *The Child's Conception of the World* (Piaget, 1929), young children's animism is a central theme; it is clear that animism is key to Piaget's stage-based theory of cognitive development. It is confronting reading! In this book, Piaget describes animism as 'primitive thought' (132), which he associates with young children, animals and what he calls 'primitive' and 'savage'. Piaget's colonialist lens casts animals, children and Indigenous people in a deficit light – as incomplete and incompetent – and their animism is supposedly evidence of this. What if animism is seen differently? What if animism is seen as a way to 'read' the world? Could animism be a way of caring with and for the world?

Piaget based his research on an innovative semi-structured interview technique that he developed to counter the standardised assessments becoming popular at the time (Burman, 2017). This work is indeed impressive, and it provides a great insight into children's thinking. Nonetheless, Piaget's interpretation of the children's responses reflects his western cultural bias and the prevailing progress narratives of anthropology and psychology of the early 20th century, which equated the child with 'primitives', who were both in need of development (Burman, 2017). Consider, for example, the following exchange between Piaget and seven-year-old 'Mont':



Can the sun do whatever it likes? – *Yes.* – Can it stop giving light? – *Yes.* – Then why doesn't it? – *It wants it to be fine weather.* – Can streams do as they like? – *Yes.* – Could they go faster if they wanted to? – *Yes.* – Could the Rhone stop flowing? – *Yes.* – And why doesn't it? – *It wants there to be water.* (Piaget, 1929: 227)

Responses such as Mont's led Piaget (1929: 230) to conclude that children's animism 'is a primitive principle and it is only by a series of progressive differentiations that inert matter comes to be distinguished from that which is living'. Indeed, reading *The Child's Conception of the World* reveals the inherently racist orientations that Piaget brought to his theory of cognitive development, which served to champion notions of Euro-western superiority. As Cannella and Viruru (2004: 70) point out: '[developmentalism] constructs a position in which someone (whether children, females, people of color, or adults identified as primitive) is always judged to be lower – inferior – less worthy – at the bottom'. Hence, in the developmental view, the animist child and the 'savage' are positioned as inferior to those who are said to be more advanced. Thinking a child will grow out of their animism, or that animism is commensurate with a particular stage of development, belies an assumption that all animists are somehow 'undeveloped'. For me, then, the Piagetian view of animism is not tenable.

The next murmurs are more verbatim quotes constructed from my work with children during Study Two. In this study, listening to children's responses to waste materials was the focus. One group I worked with focused on waste paper; the other focused on the process of building demolition, which the children considered 'a waste'. The children's animism of what might otherwise be construed as inert matter was a feature of both groups:

I don't know where paper goes at night-time. Maybe it goes to its house, maybe in a tree trunk. If you draw a face on the paper, then it can see you. When they are new, all the papers [sheets] are best friends because they are all in a group. Paper likes to be a lollypop, aeroplanes . . . rockets . . . it folds itself! It doesn't like to be ripped because, actually, if someone came up to me and ripped me it would really hurt.

The building is sad as it used to shelter homeless people and now they have gone. It liked having the homeless people. And it likes the art on its walls [street art] but they are taking that away. And it is sad because it was also home to bacteria and rats and mice and cockroaches, and it used to have plants and now they have gone. It even had a big tree.

Land, I love you because you make plants grow and help the Earth. I didn't want the building to be knocked down because I care about it. I am really sorry for the tremors the workers make. Your creatures must be disturbed. We have been watching you, land.

These children's lively views of materials like paper, buildings and land resonate with Indigenous stories that surround me as a white settler living on land that was never ceded, in what is now called Australia. Australian settlers, like settlers in other colonised countries, live amongst Indigenous languages, stories, cultures, cosmologies and peoples. The liveliness of Australian Indigenous worlds is apparent at every turn, as, for example, in the next murmurs of Gagudju elder Bill Neidjie, from Kakadu in northern Australia:

Listen carefully this, you can hear me.

I'm telling you because earth just like mother

and father or brother of you.



That tree same thing.

. . .

That tree, grass . . . that all like our father.

Dirt, earth, I sleep with this earth.

Grass . . . just like your brother.

In my blood in my arm this grass

. . .

I love it tree because e love me too.

E watching me same as you

tree e working with your body, my body,

e working with us. (Neidjie, 1989: 4)

The children's murmurs also resonate with Rose's portrayal of the lively view of land, or 'country', held by Indigenous Australians she worked with:

Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with . . . People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy . . . country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. (Rose, 1996: 7)

For Australian Indigenous peoples, thinking of land as lively, powerful and creative opens a space where it can become a 'nourishing terrain, a place that gives and receives life' (Rose, 1999: 177). But Robin Wall Kimmerer, Indigenous biologist and member of the Potawatomi Nation, notes that such ways of talking about the world are eschewed:

. . . the language of animacy teeters on extinction – not just for Native peoples, but for everyone. Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion – until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a *who*, but an *it*, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying *it* makes a living land into 'natural resources'. If a maple is an *it*, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice. (Kimmerer, 2013: 57)

Haraway reminds us:

It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas . . . It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories. (Haraway, 2016: 34–35)

The animism of children in western contexts is frequently read through logics that reject or diminish animism, but if it is read through, say, an Indigenous logic, something very different is produced. We might ask, then, what might be put into motion by reading animism through Indigenous knowledges? What relations of care might emerge? How might an 'ethic of connection' (Rose, 1999) be created? This brings me back to the central theme of this article: that children's animism can be a matter of care. While the murmurs shared here are but a tiny part of the swirling murmurations emerging from the two projects, we can see that reading children's animism through Piagetian theory perpetuates not only colonialist notions that separate humans from non humans, but also those that separate Euro-western humans from other humans. On the other hand, reading children's animism through other knowledges – for example, Indigenous knowledges – leads us elsewhere. What if, instead of seeing children's animism as 'childish' or something to grow out of, we view it as a speculative matter of care, which 'is a strategy that makes room for relationality, or the ways in which humans and more-than-humans are integral parts of the universe' (Blaise et al., 2017: 39). As such, children's enchanted animism can work as 'speculative fabulation' (Haraway, 2013), which offers the possibility of an alternative caring involvement. I am not suggesting that this is easy; in fact, it can be difficult: 'To care is wet, emotional, messy, and demanding of the best thinking one has ever done. That is one reason we need speculative fabulation' (Haraway, 2011: 102). For the children in the studies I have related here, enchanted animism was an avenue for their affective engagement with non humans. It offered opportunities for them to

re-affect objectified worlds, restage things in ways that generate possibility for other ways of relating and living, connect things that were not supposed to be connecting across the bifurcation of consciousness, and ultimately transform the ethico-political and affective perception of things by involvement in the mattering of worlds. (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 65)

Children's lively views of the world therefore opened a space of caring human–non human and entirely abiotic non human relations. Children's playful and speculative animism – their enchanted animism – decentred the human and offered a way to see the non human world as more than mute resources that are there for the taking. Enchanted animism allowed the possibility of knowing non humans in ways that made them more than just the backdrop. I am not claiming here that enchanted animism will suddenly lead to 'learning to be affected' (Latour, 2004a) by the non human world; rather, I am suggesting that it can offer a space of encounter in which humans and non humans might come together in ways that 'invite the risk of response' (Haraway, 2011: 95) and opportunities for 'provoking political and ethical imagination in the present' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 24).

## Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed a rethinking of Piagetian and colonialist views of animism, which are deeply rooted in logics that seek to justify the superiority of Euro-western thinking. I have suggested that children's speculative and playful animism can be a matter of care, as it allows children to relate to the world in a spirit of companionship and kinship. It can foster a speculative commitment which can potentially disrupt habitual ways of perceiving, knowing and thinking. On the surface, this may seem an unusual approach, as Euro-western worldviews position humans, animals and plants as living things, while things such as landforms, bodies of water and planetary forces are positioned as non-living. By flattening these distinctions, children's speculative and playful animism – their enchanted animism – can create a space of doing and affect, and opens them to engaging in ethico-political relations. I am not proposing that animism is innocent; on the contrary, animism is never neutral and is mired in a 'web of associations' (Latour, 2004b: 237). In Euro-western educational contexts, Piagetian

theory is part of this web, and it perpetuates a simplistic view of not only children's ways of thinking, but also others who attribute liveliness to non human things. Reading animism through logics other than Piaget's is not a 'quick fix' for planetary crises, but it does create possibilities for attentiveness and responsiveness which open humans to their worldly embeddedness.

### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the children, teachers and families who participated in this research. I am also indebted to a number of colleagues for their support. I particularly thank Mindy Blaise for challenging and extending my thinking. I am also grateful for the anonymous reviewers who pushed my work into new spaces.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Jane Merewether  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5860-9255>

### Notes

1. Graham Harvey (2006: xi) states: 'Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is lived in relationship with others'. In this article, I take animism to mean attributing animal-like characteristics, intentionality, sentience or desires to biotic and abiotic objects, things, matter, bodies, masses and so on.
2. Indigenous people of course do not use the term 'animism'. As Harvey (2006: 81) saliently notes: 'Animism is an outsider's name'.
3. Stengers (2012: 2) writes: 'Science, when taken in the singular and with a big S, may indeed be described as a general conquest bent on translating everything that exists into objective, rational knowledge . . . Scientific achievements, on the other hand, require thinking in terms of an "adventure of sciences" (in the plural and with a small s)'.
4. Drawing on the way waves behave when they combine, theoretical physicist Karen Barad (2007: 71) describes diffraction as 'an apt metaphor for describing the methodological approach . . . of reading insights through one another in attending to and responding to the details and specificities of relations of difference and how they matter'.
5. Barad distinguishes between interaction and intra-action. Whereas interaction assumes that separate entities or agencies exist prior to interaction, intra-action involves the 'mutual constitution of entangled agencies' (Barad, 2007: 33).

### References

- Aslanian TK (2018) Recycling Piaget: Posthumanism and making children's knowledge matter. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50(4): 417–427.
- Barad K (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barad K (2014) Diffracting diffraction: Cutting together-apart. *Parallax* 20(3): 168–187.
- Bebaise D and Stengers I (2017) The insistence of possibles: Towards a speculative pragmatism. *Parse* 7: 13–19.
- Bennett J (2001) *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bennett J (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bird-David N (1999) 'Animism' revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology. *Current Anthropology* 40: S67–S91.

- Blaise M, Hamm C and Iorio JM (2017) Modest witness(ing) and lively stories: Paying attention to matters of concern in early childhood. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 25(1): 31–42.
- Burman E (1994) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- Burman E (2017) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Cannella GS and Viruru R (2004) *Childhood and Postcolonization: Power, Education, and Contemporary Practice*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Clark A (2017) *Listening to Young Children: A Guide to Understanding and Using the Mosaic Approach*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Dahlberg G, Moss P and Pence A (2013) *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation*. London: Routledge.
- Edwards C, Gandini L and Forman G (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*. 2nd ed. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Fisher B and Tronto J (1990) Toward a feminist theory of caring. In: Abel EK and Nelson M (eds) *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 35–62.
- Fleet A, Patterson C and Robertson J (2017) *Pedagogical Documentation in Early Years Practice: Seeing through Multiple Perspectives*. London: SAGE.
- Giamminuti S (2013) *Dancing with Reggio Emilia: Metaphors for Quality*. Mt Victoria, NSW, Australia: Pademelon Press.
- Giudici C, Rinaldi C and Krechevsky M (2001) *Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners*. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children.
- Haraway D (1992) The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In: Grossberg L, Nelson C and Treichler P (eds) *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 295–337.
- Haraway D (2011) Speculative fabulations for technoculture's generations: Taking care of unexpected country. *Australian Humanities Review* 50: 95–118.
- Haraway D (2013) SF: Science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, so far. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* (3). DOI: 10.7264/N3KH0K81.
- Haraway D (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Harvey G (2006) *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Held V (2006) *The Ethics of Care*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kimmerer RW (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed.
- Latour B (2004a) How to talk about the body: The normative dimension of science. *Body and Society* 10(2–3): 205–229.
- Latour B (2004b) Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225–248.
- MacRae C (2019) The red blanket: A dance of animacy. *Global Studies of Childhood*. Epub ahead of print 5 March 2019. DOI: 10.1177/2043610619832899.
- Merewether J (2018) Listening to young children outdoors with pedagogical documentation. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 26(3): 259–277.
- Merewether J (2019a) Listening with young children: Enchanted animism of trees, rocks, clouds (and other things). *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 27(2): 233–250.
- Merewether J (2019b) New materialisms and children's outdoor environments: Murmurative diffractions. *Children's Geographies* 17(1): 105–117.
- Murris K (2016) *The Posthuman Child: Educational Transformation through Philosophy with Picturebooks*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Neidjie B (1989) *Story about Feeling*. Broome, WA: Magabala Books.
- Pacini-Ketchabaw V, Nxumalo F, Kocher L, et al. (2015) *Journeys: Reconceptualizing Early Childhood Practices through Pedagogical Narration*. North York, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Piaget J (1929) *The Child's Conception of the World*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Plumwood V (2002) *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge.

- Puig de la Bellacasa M (2011) Matters of care in technoscience: Assembling neglected things. *Social Studies of Science* 41(1): 85–106.
- Puig de la Bellacasa M (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rinaldi C (2006) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Rose DB (1996) *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: Australian Heritage Commission.
- Rose DB (1999) Indigenous ecologies and an ethic of connection. In: Low N (ed.) *Global Ethics and Environment*. London: Routledge, pp. 175–187.
- Rose DB (2013) Val Plumwood's philosophical animism: Attentive interactions in the sentient world. *Environmental Humanities* 3(1): 93–109.
- Sevenhuijsen S (1998) *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care: Feminist Considerations on Justice, Morality and Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Stengers I (2012) Reclaiming animism. *e-flux journal* 36: 1–10.
- Tronto J (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. London: Routledge.
- Tylor EB (1841) *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*. London: Bradbury, Evans, and Co.
- van Dooren T (2014) Care. *Environmental Humanities* 5(1): 291–294.
- van Dooren T (2018) Thinking with crows: (Re)doing philosophy in the field. *Parallax* 24(4): 439–448.

### Author biography

Jane Merewether is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. Jane's current research deploys feminist new materialisms and the educational project of Reggio Emilia to focus on children's relations with more-than-human worlds in the light of Anthropogenic climate change.