

Airing Invisible Stories: Lively Storytelling in Early Childhood Education

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This paper is an attempt to approach the complexities of interdependent lifeworlds through an engagement with the multiple appearances and becomings of Air. Air's mysterious unknowability calls forth a sense of deep listening and attunement, including the ways in which elemental and more-than-human communities communicate or encounter one another. Seeking to practice ethical and political pedagogies within contemporary early childhood care and education, the authors orient this paper within a posthumanist theoretical framework while engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations with environmental humanities and postpositivist, poststructural, feminist writings. This paper employs lively storytelling in an attempt to decenter humancentric views and to create the possibility for others to be heard.

Key words: early childhood education; lively stories; place-conscious pedagogies; elements; entanglements; settler-colonial atmospheres; encountering damaged worlds; (un)common languages; Air

This paper draws from a project taken up and inspired by an “Outdoor Environments” course as part of an early childhood care and education degree program at Capilano University, situated in western Canada on Coast Salish lands. We, as early childhood educators, learners, and settlers on unceded Indigenous territories, attempt to take up the responsibility of acknowledging the histories of the lands on which we live, as well as the initial provocations we encounter during our project of attuning to and noticing places. Though this was a specific course project, this practice follows a reflective process known as pedagogical narration that is typically engaged in with children in early learning environments. Pedagogical narration is a term used in British Columbia to refer to the documentation processes educators use to work intentionally and collaboratively in creating meaningful curricula while making collective knowledge and learning visible. Working with pedagogical narration forces us to question what pedagogy means to us, and we wonder how “experimentation with different subjective processes and [the possibility of] alternative futures” inspires us “to find new responsibilities” (Vintimilla, 2019, p. 2) within our practices.

It is our hope in sharing our experiences of disentanglement from colonial and conventional ways of knowing that we provide a humble reflection of how our thinking and our practices have altered throughout the process

of this project. Drawing from a place-conscious perspective, and in an effort to restore relationships that have been damaged due to settler-colonial constructs and modes of existing, we wish to create generative spaces within our practices and early years communities that focus significance on place, elements, and the many diverse and dynamic multispecies relations we are part of. As a way to experiment with writing practices that aim to move from an anthropocentric perspective, we engage with lively storytelling as a way to provoke new thinking. Thom van Dooren's (2014) lively storytelling inspires us as a way of telling "familiar stories in a new way" (p.4) and challenging human exceptionalism.

Through the immersive discussions we continue to have together, we aspire to become more ethically sensitive and responsive to the times and places we live in by embracing a "spirit of openness and accountability to others" (van Dooren & Rose, 2016, p. 85). Therefore, we acknowledge that lively stories are situated and partial and also demand collective thinking in the presence of others. This collaborative thinking allows various voices to be heard and may contribute to unsettling dominant narratives. In the same way that Air touched us, bringing us into connection during our particular encounters and intimate experiences, we became curious about the pedagogical possibilities this could also bring to our classrooms and communities. Mainly, we hope to encourage alternative dispositions as early childhood educators and work toward creating collective spaces that value interdependency and kinship reflected in curricula rooted in more relational ways of being. This new disposition, for instance, helps us reimagine what a walk with children in our communities could be or become when we do not walk alone but our walk becomes a walk with others by attuning with curiosity and openness to the whispers of the wind, bringing us into connection with the layered complexities of our particular place. It could encourage us to wander off a linear path and imagine a new one that is welcoming and open to others and to the world.

The process of lively storytelling did not come easily to us at first. The pull of our own colonial and conventional academic practices and thinking often rooted us to anthropocentric styles of storytelling. Unlike a vast elemental breeze that knows few limits, it took time for us to meet Air with flexibility, felt sense, and new ways of representing language through stories. Yet through the challenge of decentering ourselves and rethinking our initial interpretations, slowly our ideas of how the world is and what it could be began to change. This is an ongoing practice requiring conscious effort, where our personal journeys are impacted through the imperfect processes of lively storytelling and *airing invisible stories*.

In thinking with Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), we write from a grammar of animacy, recognizing that our Westernized language is systemically rooted in a foundation of assimilation. Through "precise," "technical," and "distancing" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 2) descriptions, our written and spoken efforts risk grasping and claiming an understanding of the world around us and, sadly, sacrificing its mystery. Using English as our language to narrate these stories constrains us to its narrow possibilities of expressions, as "the words for *simple existence of a being* do not exist" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 56, italics added) in European languages. Choosing to pay attention to the active and agentic constitutions of the protagonists in these shared stories and experiences, we intend to try and "witness conversation in a language not our own" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 2). Rather than dismissing Air or making Air passive, we intentionally recognize Air as meaningful and impactful and therefore have chosen to capitalize Air. As settlers ourselves, we continue to discuss the implications of vernacular and textual limitations in the English language that are inherent to both colonial structuring and power dynamics. In doing so, we long to search for and embrace otherwise ways of knowing, communicating, and practicing.



Figure 1. Clouded.

With an orientation toward enlivening Air in such a way that provokes us to listen more closely to the silenced, the invisible, and the otherwise, we were led into atmospheric tensions that encompass the contextual lifeworlds we are among. This provoked us to make intentional and ethical choices about what we chose to write about and why. Through these decisions, Air's being is expressed as an unpredictable element and embodied storyteller, leaving us most often with more questions than answers, more possible outcomes than endings, and a humble stillness of appreciation despite our swirling and often scattered thoughts.

In our efforts to pay attention in “multiple ways” (Government of British Columbia, 2019, p. 5) as early childhood educators, we are called to reconsider our tendency to be only in the world as mere distant observers and instead become part of the world. This means that during our encounters, we were invited to be fully present and responsive to the abundant world and its power to make us wonder in awe. With a spirit of curiosity and a particular sensitivity and openness to the unknown, we started to consider how relationships of breathing Air and creating atmospheres bear new implications in today's world as we engage with the difficult work of noticing (Tsing, 2013). This challenged us to attend to the intricacies and subtle nuances of Air and the echoes imprinted

with(in) the different places we inhabit. The cultivation of this particular disposition in our work with children could open new possibilities of relating with elemental forces and more-than-human communities and could bring us in close contact with our respective places. Noticing, as an ethical attunement, is pivotal in our work. Through specific attention and focus, we can reframe our perceptions of Air. We have to recognize that this reframing is not easy, as in our personal experience at the beginning of this journey, we were intrigued as we tried to decipher the essence or true nature of Air, later coming to realize Air's unknowability. It was only when we started noticing Air as never fixed or predetermined that a new, enlivened presence emerged. Air as a storyteller allowed us to see particular histories of a particular place, and thus, we were both swept and suspended into narratives as we began to witness and become more sensitive to the complexities of living in settler-colonial atmospheres. Each of us found ourselves entangled in what at first glance might appear to be ordinary experiences with Air, yet upon deeper reflection became uniquely contextual and perhaps rather (un)common (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020) encounters with Air. Air's voice resonated strongly through the wilful Peaceful-Pacific, Squamish, and Chinook winds and awakened invisible and forgotten stories.

As modest witnesses, we humbly offer our writing with fidelity and response-ability (Haraway, 2016). In solid efforts to decenter human-centric views, we *air invisible stories* to resist the desire to speak for others. As we dwell with Air, Air dwells within us, and we are deeply reminded that "there is never no one here" (Somerville, 2020, p. 18). In the following pages, you will encounter our lively stories, including images we captured during the inquiry process. In sharing these lively stories, we hope we can challenge ourselves to think about what kind of stories we want to share with colleagues, families, and children and invite each other to learn how we could relate to Air and places differently.

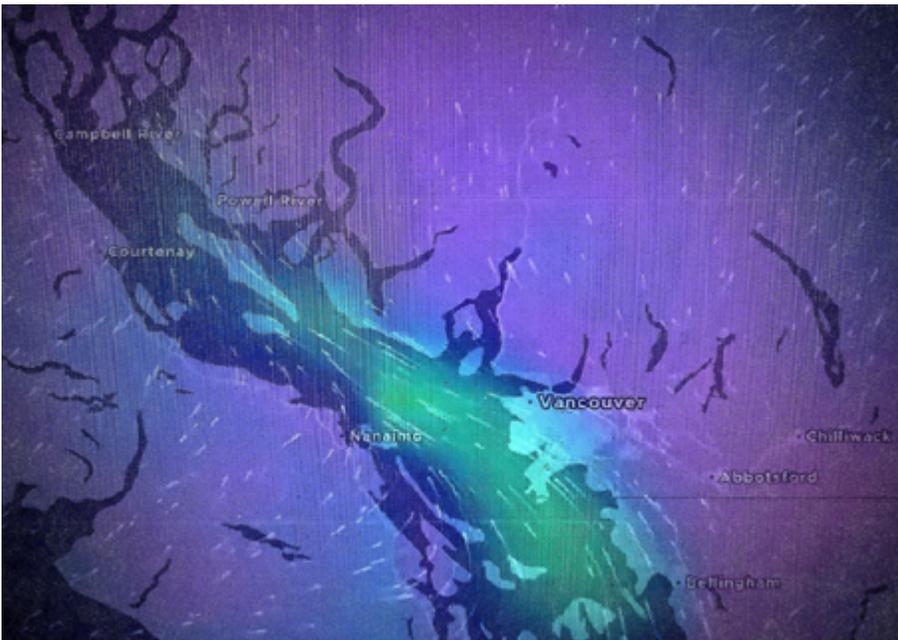


Figure 2. Ever-moving air system: Peaceful-Pacific. Screenshot of wind maps at Windfinder: <https://www.windfinder.com>

Colonial encounters and rhythms of remembering

Peaceful-Pacific drifts softly along the hard asphalt of the greenway, light and enlightening, making visible the weight of many entangled tensions among multispecies communities sharing an emplaced pathway. Slow, fluid

breezes flow through and along the edges of a modernized footpath, now referred to in settler terms as the Arbutus Greenway, which is situated on unceded traditional Squamish Nation territory. Windy gusts returning from the coastline may remember this place specifically as Senákw. Drifts continue, dancing into the leaves of the largest tree along this stretch of paved pathway, a flickering between familiar friends. For a moment, the urbanized ecotone, where more-than-human bodies and beings bump up against 21st-century technologies, seems secondary to the rustling excitement of element and entity. In a shared scenic language and a gesture of reciprocity, old Katsura tree carries wind, absorbing an elusive body into shivering blurs of sage. Shades of green and shadows flutter together, making their merging movements audible as leaves turn into starlings and breeze becomes a murmur. Old Katsura tree lived here long before any carefully tended tulips or neatly assembled lines of sweet peas spiralled up trellises of plastic threads cultivated by human hands. A brief conversation between boughs and breeze seems to shift from a warm welcome to a shared and somber “unspoken” understanding. For there are few remaining here, amid the “conditions of settler colonialism” (Simmons, 2017, p. 5), that have witnessed the extreme excavations and enforced evolution of this “hu-man-made” ecosystem.



Figure 3. Old Katsura.

Sh(air)ed entanglements

Many stories of situated relationships live here along the greenway. Although Air announces them as frequently as twittering trills beckon from a trailing network of telephone poles, they often remain unheard by humans. Just as the wind is widespread, so too is the colonial consciousness. However, it does not take a phone call rippling along the large wires above to share settler stories. The fumes of a freshly painted bike path, along with clouds of exhaust, mingle with fragrances of fertilized flowers. And Air, choking on a mix of modernity and invasive alien species, inevitably gives rise to each component it carries. More-than-human lifeworlds, Indigenous environmental knowledges, and elemental entities are not just overlooked but actively stilled and silenced in “strangled” (Simpson, 2014, as cited in Simmons, 2017, p. 5) settler-ecological relationships. Before any colonizers or pavement tried to stabilize and stifle natural rhythms and the original voices of this place, Peaceful-Pacific took shape in shimmering sage-coloured branches, a loss so heavy it still makes old Katsura shudder in response.

We are constantly encountering Air, starting with the first breath we take. However, it is not just the Air we breathe but also the atmospheres we are creating that we need to attend to. Current times showcase the complicated and “damaged worlds” in which we live (Kummen et al., 2020). As human beings we are cocreators of these worlds, and yet we feel helpless in the face of what we have created (Latour, 2019). Humans and more-than-humans are always in a state of becoming-with (Haraway, 2016), and in our encounters, we are accountable for these becomings (Rautio, 2013), to decenter ourselves and tend to relationships with an “infinite responsibility for the other” (Levinas, 1979, as quoted in Biesta, 2006, p. 50).

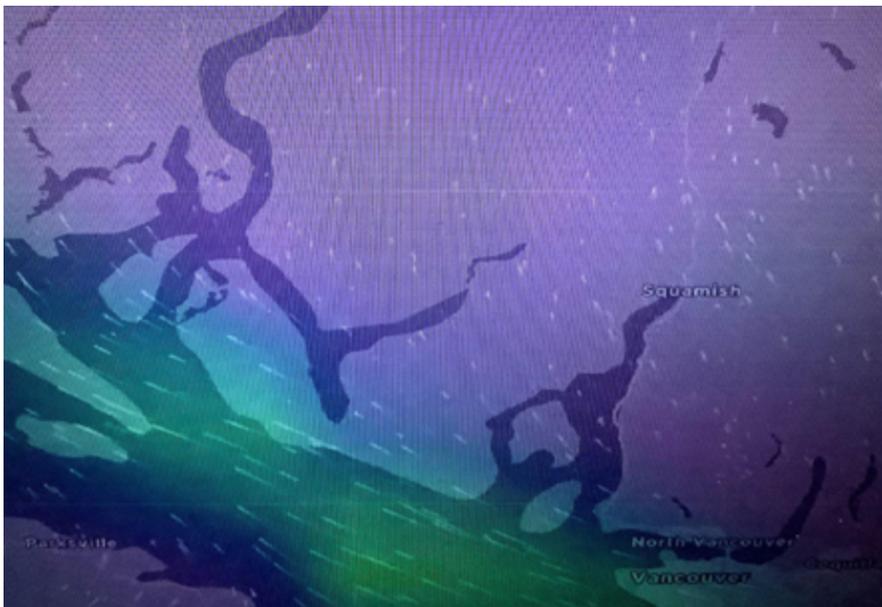


Figure 4. Ever-moving air system: Squamish. Screenshot of wind maps at Windfinder: <https://www.windfinder.com>

Embroiled atmospheres at Fairy Creek

Not so far away from Peaceful-Pacific, swift Squamish spirals, channels, and tunnels through cliffs and coves, straight into a clear-cut valley. Though these wilful winds, trailing in and out of sea and mountain, are well known for their misty, coastal freshness, any sense of clarity falls flat as a once-unsullied atmosphere and family of old-growth trees has become fraught with fury at Fairy Creek. Tension, thick as centenarian tree trunks, rises with a kaleidoscope of complexities. Boisterous Squamish is known for her lively, sometimes forceful energy as she travels

over mountains and fjords. Today she roams over Pacheedaht territory. The Pacheedahts' ancestors have lived on the west side of what we now call southern Vancouver Island for millennia. Today, the Air above Pacheedaht country is thick. It is thick with dust, dust from the logging road along with smoke from campfires, but also thick with words spoken and shouted among crowds of gritty humans. They are divided into two groups, one blocking the road, the other trying to gain access. The sphere they wish to enter is now known as Fairy Creek, one of the last stands of old growth forest, an unlogged watershed on Vancouver Island. It is a complicated situation. The rapids of Reid Creek below are splashing as if trying to settle the dust and the hot tempers above. Red cedar, *Thuja plicata*, "Maker of Rich Woman" are some of the many names Mother Cedar bears (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 208, 278). The venerated tree leans in, straining to make sense of the commotion. She towers at the edge of a clearcut mountainside. Cherished as "the tree of life" by her people, (Kimmerer, 2013), offering every single part of her, Cedar has upheld and carried Indigenous cultures in this place. Gifts she bequeaths are baskets and tools, clothes, house planks, totem poles, canoes, ceremonial drum logs, and more. Cedar is known for her healing and spiritual powers, and is thus held in highest regard by all coastal peoples. Over the past 50 years, vast numbers of Cedar's kin have disappeared. Grandmother Cedar (Figure 5) stretches to shade the hollow at her base where last winter Mother Bear made her home, giving birth to a little one. Both mother and cub huddle inside the darkened cavern, disturbed by the atmosphere nearby. Black-capped Chickadee and Golden-crowned Kinglet watch safely from high branches. Now the shouting becomes louder. Someone is drumming and chanting. Squamish picks up dust and carries it high, picks up the humming and drumming, carrying it across the valley toward an uncertain future.



Figure 5. Meeting "Grandmother Cedar" on a interpretive walk at Fairy Creek.

As a group, we talked about the animacy and liveliness of Air without dismissing the complexities of living and breathing in settler-colonial atmospheres. With this in mind, we wondered together about loss and extinction. We discussed not only the extinction of more-than-human species but also the profound resiliency of Indigenous

communities to hold on to cultures, languages, and knowledges situated here despite the ongoing deliberate and calculated strategies of colonization. Being cognizant of our role as colonizers makes us tread carefully when researching stories belonging to particular places with particular peoples; we know full well that caution is required because these oral traditions have high cultural values, are tied to the land, and listening to them with reverence is a privilege. Although we long to find ways to (re)story place in an attempt to renew our relationships to the land and its inhabitants (Nxumalo, 2019), we want to refrain from taking what is not ours and pay attention to following the protocols that some of the stories require, understanding that other stories are not ours to tell (Marker, 2018; Nxumalo, 2019). We honour spoken stories and languages that have resisted and fought disappearing into “thin air,” instead living among us in the past-present Air we breathe to this day. Considering oral traditions passed on through spoken word like a familiar breeze flowing through generations, we are curious as to how Air as a storyteller lingers and notices in ways that ignite “the possibility of presence, of visibility, of appearance, of voice” (Macauley, 2010, p. 32) for those whose voices have been silenced.

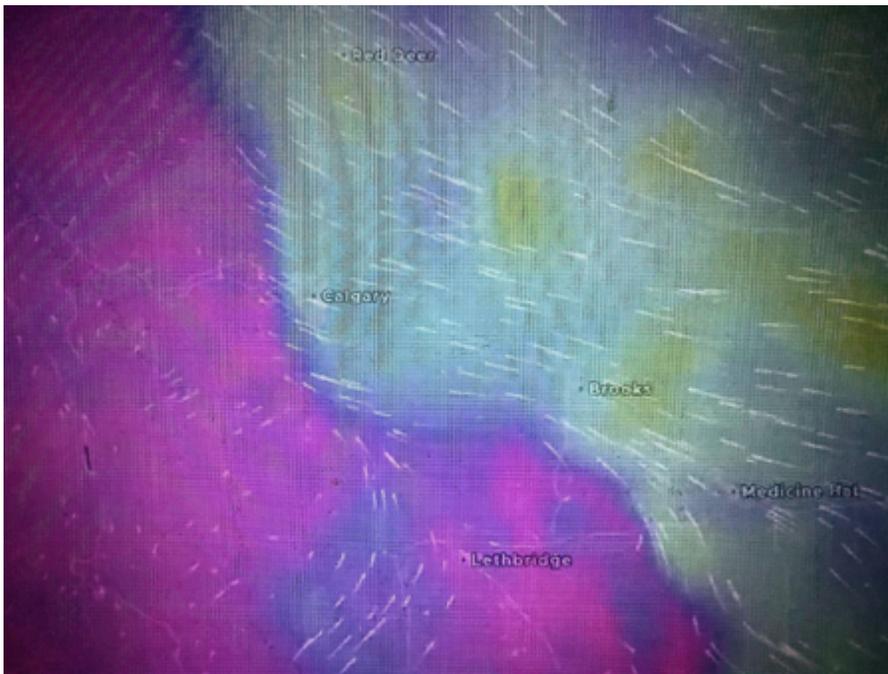


Figure 6. Ever-moving air system: Chinook. Screenshot of wind maps at Windfinder: <https://www.windfinder.com>

Though at times an agentic presence may seem to be suspended in stillness, Air knows nomadic life like no other. Travelling beyond any borders and boundaries imposed by human beings, subtle Chinook works ceaselessly, sweeping any anthropocentric notions of barriers between places, breaths, and bodies into intimately entangled exchanges.



Figure 7. Honeybee pollinator in a garden in Grande Prairie, Alberta.

Whirlwind in the prairies

From a knothole tree in a parkland area in Niitsitapi, the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy, a buzzing sound echoes in the Air, announcing the presence of a queen bee flying away from her hive to take part in a ritual that promises life survival. A seemingly clear sky becomes the backstage for a nuptial fly, creating the perfect atmosphere where queen bees are attracted to the odour of a group of drones waiting nearby to mate (Bastin et al., 2017). After returning to the hive, queen bees communicate and convey particular messages to other community members through a pheromonal (Mumoki & Crewe, 2020) scent composed of myriad chemicals produced in their bodies and transmitted through the circulating Air in the darkness of the hive. A few hours later, a queen bee's body starts changing and she lays thousands of eggs per day, renewing the cycle of life.

Early in spring, Chinook winds coming from the Pacific Ocean raise temperatures in the prairies east of the Rockies. Those warm days are a blessing for a hive in relentless activity. Inside, a busy atmosphere permeates the Air where thousands of bees collaboratively attend to their task. Outside, not far away, vibrant purple flowers with a fragrant smell lure a bee searching for food. A symbiotic relationship emerges: the bee, in her nomadic travel, collects nectar and pollen, and the plants flourish through pollination. Unlike this bee, many other bees are experiencing the impacts of humans' modern agricultural practices through pesticides, which compromise their

immune systems and make them more susceptible to pests and disease. A buzzing sound is disappearing in the Air, overpowered and silenced by industrial noises.

Noticing qualities and characteristics unique to Air often seems to create a contrast in consciousness. Air is full of paradox, ever present yet never occupying our fullest attention. Air is the space in-between, the physical and atmospheric element of “interconnectedness and interdependence” (Taguchi, as cited in Rautio, 2013, p. 401).

Close by, a sudden movement in the ground calls for attention. Timidly peeking from a small hole in the ground appears a Richardson’s ground squirrel, who, after assessing the surroundings, moves quickly to continue her arduous endeavour of collecting and transporting dry grass back to her hole. A crackling sound vibrates in the Air, and in a quick reflex, another ground squirrel catches a grasshopper who is the meal of the day. Underground, there are unseen tunnel systems with a different ambiance and atmosphere that usually go unnoticed, which Richardson’s ground squirrel calls home. These squirrels used to live mainly in the prairies; now, they find themselves in urbanized areas due to the expansion of farming that breaks down their tunnel systems and destroys their food sources. With no space to breathe, where will they go?

In a hidden pond in the park, Air feels cool and moist, and a particular smell of pine trees aromatizes the area. Plants with various verdant hues gather together in a place where lives meet. Resting on pebbles under sunlight rays, a vibrant yellow butterfly moves its wings delicately, resembling the rhythmic breathing of existence. Wind interacts playfully with white puffballs, and dandelion seeds slowly fly and float suspended up to several kilometres away with an itinerant movement. As Air travels, what other stories might Air have to share?

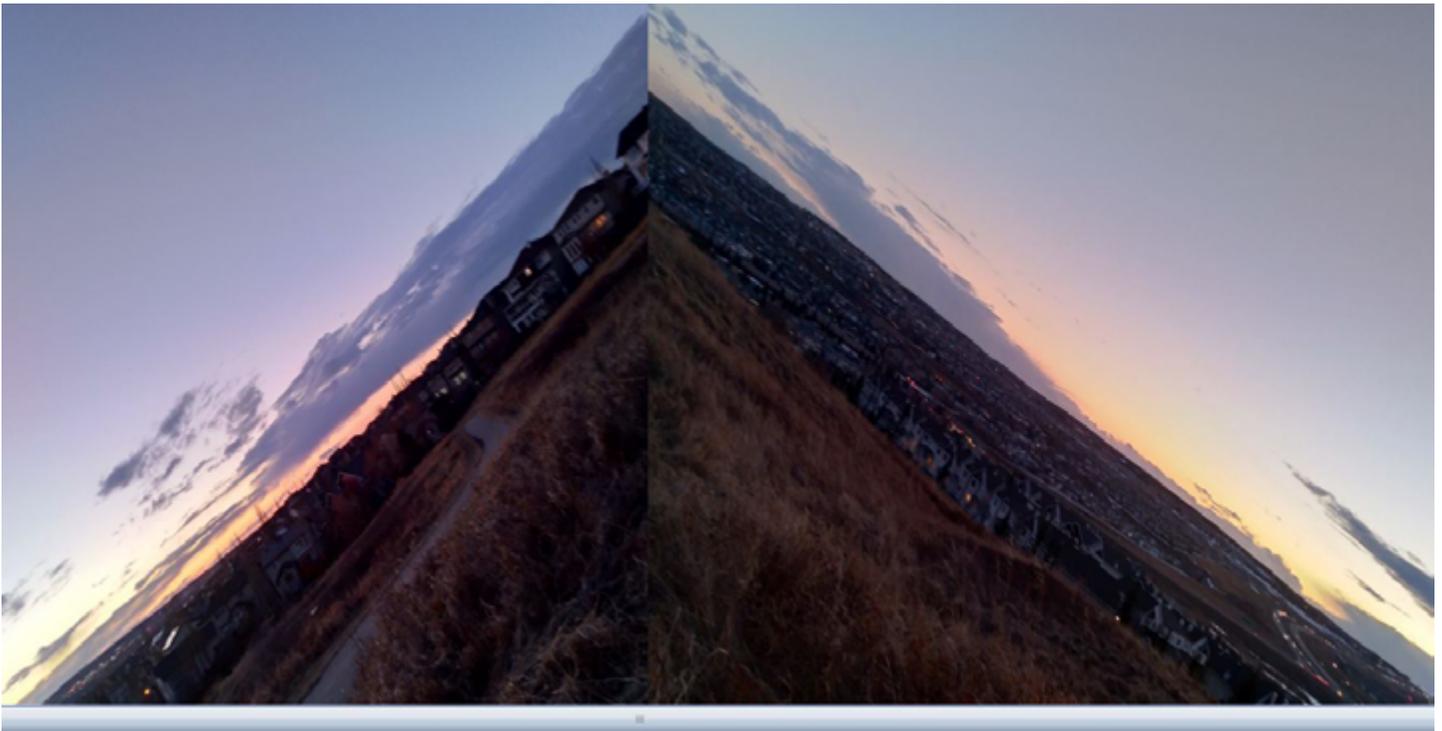


Figure 8. Atmospheric disruptions.

In our deep engagements and processes of lively storytelling, we found ourselves in the whirlwind of Air’s unknowability. Air was huge, and impossible to contain. Again and again, Air slipped through our fingers. How could we collide with something that escapes? How could we pin something down that vanishes into thin Air? For

many early childhood educators, to try and pin down or “grasp the Other” (Levinas, 1989, as cited in Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 77) is an enactment of oppression and a suffocation of the many languages and stories that are filled with unique nuance and profound subtleties that require new ways of listening, noticing, and responding. Instead, in attuning and orienting towards Air’s (un)common languages and our own powerful experiences, we were able to surrender to and embrace the subtle and unsubtle gestures of Air, which provoked us to turn towards otherness (Manning, 2007). Though our encounters were often grave, implicated, complicated, and turbulent, this gave way to more listening. In this way, Air, an unruly, ever-evolving, and seasoned storyteller, invites a second look: to pay attention to “what stories tell stories” and to acknowledge that “it matters whose stories tell stories” (Haraway, 2019, p. 1) and that stories create realities in our lifeworlds and everyday practices in our classrooms. Air winds up our thoughts, bringing frictions to the surface, demanding us to question whose stories are privileged. Whose stories are shared in subtle, or symbolic, languages? How do we attend to atmospheres entangled with tensions?

In the messy times we live in, it is critical to reflect on how we live well with others, what emerges in affectual lifeworld entanglements, and how to give presence to the Other. Therefore, we hope our lively stories give a voice to those marginalized, “invisible” realities and entangled human/nonhuman relations that “shape and reshape worlds” (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2019, p.118). As educators, we recognize that “what keeps theories alive is being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings” (Valtonen & Pullen, 2020, p. 517). In acknowledging our knowings and unknowings, we humbly offer lingering questions that we found meaningful to consider when engaging in curriculum making: In our work with children, are we supporting a space that allows for dwelling, decentering, and paying attention to multiple matters? How do Air mysteries invite children and educators to listen and connect in unpredictable ways? Could we invite children to draw stories with Air or dance with the movement and sensations of wind? When working with pedagogical narrations, what stories do we choose to share?

This journey continues to influence the way we meet, see, and approach early childhood education and curriculum. It allows us to see children in the complex and often complicated web of relations in which we are all a part, rather than from an individualistic or child-centered focus. Within this shift, our projects aspire for more relational ways of living together in the world. As settlers in “our” spaces, we lean into the wind with a sense of reverence, response-ability (Haraway, 2016), and respect. Air picks us up again and again, taking us afield, and we believe in the possibility that these stories and their processes have the power to open up troublesome or difficult dialogues and activate new ways of being and becoming within place.



Figure 9. Surrendering to Air murmurs.



Figure 10. Glimpses of colliding cloud formations.

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Air, the protagonist in this narrative, is known to be a shapeshifter, whispering in the gentle zephyrs and roaring in the tempest. We have all met Air. Air is present when we take our first breath and *is* the last breath when we part. Air embraces our whole earth, yet asks nothing in return. This homage to Air is a small token of gratitude the authors would like to offer.

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