



Cultivating affects: A feminist posthumanist analysis of invertebrate and human performativity in an urban community garden

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ABSTRACT

In our everyday, multispecies worlds most of us encounter and sometimes sensorially interact with myriad invertebrate species, yet critical humanities and social science research tends to ignore humans' relationships with invertebrates more generally, and especially those involved in food production. Here, I begin by drawing on theories of animal performativity to foreground socioecological learning with invertebrates in a community garden space. I then describe the research site and methodologies employed to study the affective and performative dimensions of human-invertebrate relationships. Next, I examine how human material and discursive performances and invertebrate performances intersect in a suburban community garden in California, shaping affective relations between them. By focusing primarily on one undergraduate student's ontological shifts that include *some* invertebrate others, I demonstrate how the development of compassion and care for invertebrates is limited in complex ways by invertebrate performances interpreted as undesirable. I conclude by drawing out the implications of this research for educational studies, especially the interdisciplinary subfields of animal-focused education and critical food systems education.

1. Introduction

The opening of the 1971 award-winning documentary-horror film “The Hellstrom Chronicle” features stunning footage of a panoply of insect species and images of hot orange molten lava flowing across the screen. Several scenes later, to set up a theme that carries through the film, the narrator warns that it is not human beings who possess the capacity to survive the violence of the earth,

The insect, in a frightening tour-du-force of adaptability, proved that he could endure where man would ultimately fail. This and other evidence leads me to the following belief ... if any living species is to inherit the earth, it will not be man. Long before the time that hydrogen bombs and pollution have put an end to us, we will face competition for the earth itself, from a life form we arrogantly ignore.¹

Although such a winner-take-all version of evolution is extreme insofar as it positions a monolithic “man” in ongoing struggle with insects that *Homo sapiens* will ultimately lose (Murray and Heumann, 2016), the attitudes toward insects expressed throughout the film strikingly resonate with some contemporary western views of many invertebrate species, particularly those with morphological or performative characteristics that humans deem fearsome or undesirable (e.g.,

Boileau and Russell, 2018; Driscoll, 1995; Ginn, 2014; Lemelin et al., 2016; Looy and Wood, 2006; Wagler and Wagler, 2011). In the context of education, Wagler and Wagler (2011) found that external insect morphology negatively impacts pre-service elementary school teachers' attitudes towards insects and lessens the willingness of teachers to incorporate insects into learning activities. Indeed, typical garden or soil invertebrates are generally “unloved others” (Beisel et al., 2013; Rose and van Dooren, 2011), unless deemed “useful” for human endeavors, such as improving soil quality for food production or eliminating other invertebrates classified as pests (Driscoll, 1995; Gillespie and Collard, 2015; Rose and van Dooren, 2011).

In our everyday, multispecies worlds most of us encounter and sometimes sensorially interact with myriad invertebrate species, from the tiny aphids that “destructively” bore through flower blossoms to the honeybees that “lovingly” pollinate crops and the “dirty” houseflies that find warm excrement a delightful treat. Beyond extensive critical research on the honeybee, which is now the focus of multiple rescue campaigns due to its agricultural, ecological, economic, and educative importance (Cho, 2017; Green and Ginn, 2014; Moore and Kosut, 2013) and a vast natural science research literature studying insect pests and pollinators (e.g., Landis et al., 2000), critical humanities and social scientific research tends to ignore humans' relationships with invertebrates more generally (Gillespie and Collard, 2015), and especially

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¹ Problematic gendered narratives pervade the film; I do not analyze them here for the sake of brevity.

those involved in food production. This omission is significant given the vast body of work exploring relations with birds and mammals (Adams, 1990, 2014; Pedersen, 2013, 2015) enrolled in industrialized and small-scale agriculture.

As Ginn (2014) and Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) highlight, tending to everyday ethical relationships with seemingly insignificant beings (e.g. invertebrates) may appear indulgent or irrelevant among seemingly more acute ecological and social justice issues. Given the suffering of beings that animal cognitive science has demonstrated are sentient, like birds and mammals, it is unsurprising that feminist animal studies scholarship has largely focused on farm animals involved in food production and not invertebrates. However, new research in entomology shows that some invertebrates may also be sentient, possessing the capacity for subjective experience and the abilities to display forms of emotion (e.g., Barron and Klein, 2016; Perry and Baciadonna, 2017). Yet despite potential commonalities in capacities, there are key differences in the roles these species play in food production. Birds and mammals are forcefully enrolled in industrialized agricultural processes, with their bodies/bodily secretions serving as meat, dairy, or eggs.² In contrast land invertebrates, at least in western countries, tend to inhabit agricultural spaces (e.g., fields and community gardens) rather than serve as food themselves.³

Moreover, Oliver (2009) posits that animals (and I argue invertebrates) teach us about ourselves, including how to foster more flourishing relationships with living beings and nonliving entities.⁴ Trillions of invertebrates perish every year due to synthetic pesticides sprayed over agricultural fields or gardens, which Monbiot (2017) has deemed “insectageddon” to capture the gravity of insect deaths. Further, these practices wreak havoc on other species: farmworkers suffer disproportionate health effects from exposure to pesticides (McCauley et al., 2006), and aquatic organisms inhabiting waters tainted with pesticides experience multiple negative effects, including decreased reproductive success (Relyea, 2005). Whether individual invertebrates feel pain, a common criterion for moral consideration, is currently being debated (e.g. see scholarly discussion <http://animalstudiesrepository.org/animsent/vol1/iss9/1/>).

These issues raise important ethical questions about the intrinsic value of invertebrates. Such treatment begins with the anthropocentric premise that invertebrates do not have intrinsic value—but what would our relationships with them entail if we began with the premise that they are worthy of ethical consideration? As Ginn compellingly notes regarding human interactions with slugs and snails in domestic gardens, “Attending to an unloved domestic monster like the slug challenges our sense of ethical inclusivity: if certain gardeners can learn to care in complex ways for such a creature, might this not bode well for other creatures, too?” (2014, p. 541). Thus gardens, where a multitude of living beings and forms of matter commingle and blur the boundaries between “nature” and “culture” (Longhurst, 2006) present a unique opportunity to grapple with the affective dimensions of human relationships with some of the most invisible and unloved participants in food production—invertebrates (Gillespie and Collard, 2015).

This article begins by discussing posthumanist theories of animal performativity (Hovorka, 2015) and socioecological/ecological learning (Fawcett, 2005; Kyburz-Graber, 2013; McKenzie et al., 2013; Neves, 2009). I then describe the research site and methodologies

² Indigenous communities throughout the world often consume outside market economies and industrialized agriculture, even as traditional foodways are being threatened by myriad factors, including climate change (Daigle, 2017).

³ People consume land invertebrates across the world (van Huis et al., 2013), whereas in western countries aquatic invertebrates are popular food items (e.g., mollusks and crustaceans).

⁴ I use the term “animal” to refer to all members of the animal kingdom besides humans, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and invertebrates. The term “nonhuman” denotes living entities besides human beings. I recognize that “nonhuman” is open to debate, but I find other terms equally problematic and retain nonhuman for the sake of brevity.

employed to study the affective and performative dimensions of human-invertebrate relationships. Next, I examine how human material and discursive performances (e.g., care, empathy, disgust) and invertebrate performances (e.g., aerating soil, decomposing organic matter, consuming vegetables intended for human consumption) intersect in a suburban community garden in California, shaping affective relations between them. Given that education research has minimally engaged with the “condition of the animal” (Pedersen and Stănescu, 2012, p. ix; also see Fawcett, 2005; Russell, 2005), especially human-invertebrate relationships, this research explores the productions and tensions of attempts to foster more caring and flourishing relationships with invertebrates. Focusing primarily on one undergraduate student’s ontological shifts, wherein she embraces “a holistic concept of the self—that is in turn understood as always relationally and dynamically connected to the surroundings of which the person is a constitutive part” (Neves, 2009, p. 147) that include *some* invertebrate others, I demonstrate how her development of compassion and care for invertebrates is limited in complex ways by invertebrate performances interpreted as undesirable.

In this context, ontological shifts are embedded in the manifestation of affects and emotions, which translate into specific forms of action (Milton, 2002). They rely on the actions of invertebrates in the garden (including their actions on other bodies, such as plants), and human discursive constructions of what these bodily actions mean within wider political ecological arrangements. Although a review of scholarship on affect is outside the scope of this article, I understand affects here as “a subclass of the body’s ‘affectations’ that augment or diminish the body’s power of acting” (Singh, 2013, p. 191). Drawing on the work of varied theorists, Singh (2013) notes that a “body” can include animals, matter, sounds, ideas, social bodies, and collectivities. She also highlights that affects can be “negative” in that they result in domination or alienation or “positive” in that they empower (also see Ruddick, 2010; Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, 2016). Thus entering into a more ethical or holistic relationship with animals (Neves, 2009) does not emerge from direct or affective experience with the environment, but rather is complicated by messy, entangled, and mutable performances of human and nonhuman beings, what Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2016) call “mixed affects.” I conclude by drawing out the implications of this research for educational studies, especially the interdisciplinary subfields of animal-focused education and critical food systems education.

2. Socioecological learning and performativity

A feminist posthumanist lens is particularly salient here for theorizing becomings in socioecological learning contexts. As Cudworth and Hobden (2015) emphasize, although there are unifying precepts that unite posthumanist theories (e.g., reactions against anthropocentrism or humanism) it is important to consider the diversity in posthumanist thought. They identify three overarching approaches: new vitalism (e.g., Bennett, 2009); hybridization (e.g., Latour, 1993, 2009); and their own critical posthumanism, which relies on Haraway’s (2008) naturecultures, complexity theory’s co-constitution and co-evolution of social and natural systems, and critical theory’s focus on structure and agency. Cudworth and Hobden (2015) are critical of new vitalism and question how concepts like “distributed agency” might “be effective in unsettling humancentric politics” (2015, p. 138). Similarly, they critique Latour’s hybridization in that agency is inflated when ascribed to things. Instead, they argue that agency must be located within relations of complex systems and relations with system environments. They also note problems with “horizontalism,” the flat ontology of hybridity and vitalism, which assumes that relations are not nested within hierarchical power structures, developing their own critical posthumanism to account for how privileged groups of humans exercise power over a multiplicity of nonhumans, especially animals.

Although Cudworth and Hobden’s (2015) critical posthumanist approach is compelling, they omit significant Black, Indigenous, and

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