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Exploring Earthly relations through curiography

ABSTRACT

Recognizing that humans inhabit Earth with multiple others and that humans have worsened opportunities for life on Earth calls for a reassessment of the research practices through which the world is explored. The development of more-than-human methodologies is underway, as reflected in the emergence of more-than-human or multispecies ethnographies. However, leaning on *ethnography* as a methodological approach easily leads to the perpetuation of a human-centric worldview and directs scholars towards the conventional methods and views of scientific activity. We introduce *curiography* as an alternate mode of engaging with earthly relations, in a response-able and polite way. Curigraphy, stemming from curiosity, is a process of knowledge co-constitution valuing sensitivity, literal engagements, openness, politeness, and listening. It situates itself at the crossroads of post-qualitative and post-anthropocentric inquiry and is informed by relational ontology. This chapter explores, what happens when theorizing, knowing, and knowers are considered in the spirit of curigraphy?

Keywords: feminist new materialism, more-than-humans, relational ontology, post-qualitative inquiry, post-anthropocentrism, knowing

Curtains open

We are sitting in a sold-out theatre. The atmosphere immediately intensifies when Seela Sella, a famous Finnish actress, takes the stage. Her small body, simultaneously fragile and powerful, fills the space with an incredible energy even before she says a word. She is touring the whole country to celebrate her 80th birthday with a monologue called “The tiny animal” (*Pieni eläin* in Finnish). And now she is here, in our hometown, to tell a story about the deep changes that Earth is facing due to human action. She tells a story from the point of view of a tiny creature living in the forest; its role model is Piglet (*Nasu*), Sella’s favorite character in *Winnie the Pooh*. As the forests of the world continually diminish, is there any space left for the animals living there? Who has the right to their homes, and who is to leave? Who has the right to continue living, and who is to die?

After the show, we go to a local restaurant to reflect upon what we just experienced. We feel touched, energized, inspired, and simultaneously hurt and wounded. The pain and struggle of our era has entered our bodies. The world is absurd. Our species is crazy, arrogant, and selfish. Seela Sella put words to issues that we have been thinking about as scholars. She just did it much better than we have, much more powerfully. She did it differently. The play was written and performed from an embodied sense of wonderment and curiosity, from the point of view of a tiny animal. Although this character is obviously human-made, it still unsettles the human-centric way of viewing the world, highlighting as well the silent power inscribed in its tininess—both symbolically and physically.

The play, along with the way it was built upon a children’s story, leads us to memorialize the stories we liked in our childhoods, and our childhoods as such. We miss our child-selves. Why, then, don’t we start from there, from the child within us, with her curious skills and readiness for wondering? What, we think to ourselves, would be the most curious thing to us as scholars?

Between glasses of red wine in the restaurant after the play, the word “curiography” appears in the notebook at the table, and thus we take it up. In this chapter, we dig into the nature of curiosity and discuss its potential for academic inquiries that go beyond logically structured research agendas and questions that leave little space for the “surprises [that] are in store” (Haraway, 2016, 127). In particular, we discuss curiography as a philosophy for doing academic research that is bound to the relationality of life on Earth and defined by indeterminacy. As such, it is an orientation toward engaging with the lively murmuring of the world in a response-able and polite way. We suggest that curiosity—and its philosophical potential, as discussed and put into practice by feminist new materialist scholars such as

Donna Haraway, Vinciene Despret, and Anna Tsing—is a compelling starting point to finding alternative ways of exploring earthly relations.

Emerging multispecies and more-than-human ethnographies have explored the ways in which various creatures—animals, insects, plants, fungi, microbes, cells—interact and mingle with humans and human-made institutions (Davies & Riach, 2019; Dowling, Lyoyd & Suchet-Pearson, 2017; Hayward & Kelley, 2010; Tsing, 2015). These approaches encourage the decentering of the anthropocentrism proliferating in organizational assumptions and logics, as Davies and Riach’s (2019) study on bees exemplifies well. Yet, given the humanist legacy of ethnographic methodology—inscribed into the term with *ethno*—there is a risk that various creatures will simply be added to the research agenda and investigated via traditional, human-centric practices and methods, such as observations and interviews performed with the associated audio-visual recording technology and prolonged fieldwork stays at a defined “site” (e.g. Davies & Riach, 2019).

The core potential of the approaches that we are interested in, however, is that they invite—if not force—us to radically rethink and undo the categories of our analyses and our ways of doing research when exploring various modes of life (Hayward & Kelley, 2010, 562–563). This shift echoes the demands set by the current era, the Anthropocene, as scholars must develop new concepts and methods for the new earthly condition (e.g. Calás, Ergene & Smircich, 2018; Heikkurinen, 2017; Valtonen & Rantala, 2020; Zylinska, 2014). Furthermore, the spirit of the deconstructive approach developed in post-qualitative research (Gherardi, 2019; St. Pierre, 2019, 2021) encourages us to work towards relational conceptualizations that neither break away from humans nor center them, instead enabling researchers to move beyond the current conceptual order built into prevalent methodological approaches and to consider humans as only *a part* of the world that we try to understand. The process of thinking about research anew asks us to scrutinize how far we are able to—or should—refigure our conceptual baggage. As noticed by St. Pierre (2019, 12): “It is difficult to avoid words like ‘practice’ that, I believe, no longer work, but post-qualitative inquiry encourages us to invent new concepts that reorient our thinking and break apart the chain of concepts that structure a worn-out conceptual order”.

Hence, we are not dressing up more-than-human ethnographies anew; rather, we seek to take one step further by continually challenging and reassessing our own thoughts, doings, and habituated scholarly wisdoms concerning theorizing, knowing, and being “in the field”. In this process, we have become curious about, among other things, the taken-for-granted practice of asking questions. We are probably unable to explore the world *without* questions, a fact of which this book chapter is an apt example, but we should at least critically consider their *nature*. Being curious about our habituated research practices, and about the world we explore, and about the ethico-political consequences of our research, we thus set sail. In principle, our work resonates with Jennifer Howard-Grenville’s (2021) suggestion that in the

current planetary (and societal) context, we as organizational scholars should begin to think and act differently about our own work. In her view, we ought to direct our care to earthly issues calling for attention, have the courage to step away from familiar modes of inquiry and ways of theorizing, and use our curiosity to develop nuanced explanations about the complex nature of ongoing issues. We take a feminist new materialist path for thinking and acting differently in a more-than-human world.

While it is inspired by Seela Sella's monologue, our story is a dialogue: a dialogue between us, two scholars, and friends living in the North; a dialogue with feminist and post-humanist scholars, some of whom we have met, others whose works we have read; and with northern fellow creatures, both tiny and big. This chapter is also based upon our ongoing research project in which we envision a re-organization of tourism narratives in the Anthropocene via new materialism (www.ilarctic.com, see also Rantala et al., 2020).

Curiosity and the unexpected making of worlds

In the famous fantasy novel and film *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* Alice grew curiozier and curiozier. She wondered what curiosity actually means, where she was going, and where she has been. It was the world that made her curiozier – her dreams coming and going. Alice kept wondering *why*.¹ Why indeed? What is the “wild virtue of curiosity” that Haraway (2015, 5; 2016, 127) talks about when referring to Vinciene Despret's work? And what are our motivations for curiosity? Initially, “curiosity” is a drive for information gathering—a characteristic that unites the entire animal kingdom, or perhaps even all life forms on Earth. Gathering information is about forming an understanding of our own environment; our sensory organs have evolved to serve this need.ⁱ In the mid-14th century, to be *curious* (adj.) meant to be “subtle, sophisticated”. In the latter part of the century, its meaning changed to become negatively charged: “eager to know, inquisitive, desirous of seeing”.ⁱⁱ It also meant “wrought with or requiring care and art”, while the modern French *curieux* and Old French *curios* referred to something “solicitous, anxious, inquisitive; odd, strange”. According to Century Dictionary,ⁱⁱⁱ the words *curious* and *inquisitive* can each be used in both a good or a bad sense, but while *curious* “expresses only the desire to know” (thus having the potential to be good), *inquisitive* points to “the effort to find out by inquiry” (more often used in bad sense). *Prying*, for its part, means “the effort to find out secrets by looking and working in improper ways”, being the only one of these three words that is used solely in a bad sense. Regardless of the mainly positive logic of the word *curious* in contrast to its two counterparts, the word still holds interpretative qualities.

The words *curious* and *curiosity* lead us to a discussion of eroticism and pornography. While “exciting curiosity” in an “objective” sense is found by 1715 in English,^{iv} *curiosity* was used as a euphemism for “erotic, pornographic” in 19th century booksellers' catalogues (1877). Erotic

¹ See Alice's song in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland Film*, 13:26-15:12, Lyrics: Don Black, Music: John Barry

material was called *curiosa* (1883), and the word *curiouser* appears in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).^v The Latin roots of both words, *curiosity* and *curious*, guide us to the Latin word *curiosus*, meaning “careful, diligent, inquiring eagerly, meddlesome”, deriving from *cura*, “care”.^{vi}

These etymological and denotational characterizations of curiosity illustrate that, if we are to introduce a new epistemo-methodological concept such as curiography, we need to ask ourselves *how* exactly we are practicing curiosity. Are we doing so out of a desire to know, or are we *inquisitive*, making an effort to find out through inquiry? The latter can be easily interpreted as nosiness—even though there’s nothing wrong with paying careful attention to the world *with* our noses—but “to find out by inquiry” is correlated in the dictionary with “intellectual curiosity” or “natural curiosity”.^{vii} Furthermore, “to find out by inquiry” can also be considered the basis for any academic inquiry—right? Are we doomed to be “nosy”?

As academics, we set up research agendas and plans, and we act in order to “find out”, to “understand”. Curiosity, then, can be considered a “driver” of research. But are all our inquiries motivated by a “curious trait or aspect”? And are all our “research objects” always “curious traits”? Maybe not. More questions follow: is curiosity-driven research necessarily “intellectual”? And what *is* the “intellectual” in intellectual curiosity? How can we estimate whether or not curiosity is “natural”? If curiosity is a (natural? human?) desire to know, what does intellectuality have to do with it at all? *Is* curiosity a human nature part of humanity? Before getting too overwhelmed by these questions following each other, let us turn again to the world of films and stories—this time, to that of a classic film.

The Italian film classic *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) is based on a young Italian boy, Totò (Salvatore), and his curiosity about film and cinema. By peeking into the cinema room, Totò observes that the local priest censors all scenes from films that would suggest obscenity, such as kissing. The audience shows their dissatisfaction with action of deleting scenes. Curiosity arouses frustration, which later in the film triggers open masturbation in the audience during Totò’s screening of a film with uncensored erotic scenes. The film ends with a scene in which the now adult Totò, in tears, watches a film given as a present to him by the late film projectionist Alfredo—his mentor—after his death. Alfredo has assembled all the cut scenes that were piled up in the projection room into this film: beautiful embodied expressions of love between people kissing and touching instead of pornography. This film evokes a strong emotional reaction regarding how the “control of curiosity” can be thoroughly political and inhumane.

Experiences from the film illustrate how curiosity (and its definition, and how it is valued) are inevitably politically charged. We see this tendency already in our childhoods: parents, grandparents, and teachers from kindergarten onward evaluate and moderate children’s curiosity. What about us academics, then? Are our curiosities moderated by someone or

something? What is the curiosity that is “approved”? Approved by whom? Are there different types of curiosities within curiosity? Instead of “nosiness”, could cultivating politeness be a responsible way to practice curiosity in academic research?

Cultivating politeness in being curious

Haraway (2016, 126–33) describes in great detail how Vinciene Despret’s work embodies the “cultivation of politeness”, which Haraway identifies as “a curious practice”. Despret’s curiosity is equipped with politeness as its virtue, which Despret describes in her own words as a commitment: “a particular epistemological position to which I am committed, one that I call a virtue: the virtue of politeness” (Despret, 2005, 360). Haraway characterizes Despret as “allergic to denunciation” and “hungry for discovery, needy for what must be known and built together, with and for earthly beings, living, dead, and yet to come” (Haraway, 2016, 127). Such curiosity is probably not intrusiveness or negatively charged curiosity, but the opposite. Despret has an appetite for things “necessary” to be known and built together.

In our reading of Haraway’s description of Despret’s work, investigating “things necessary” to be known (through scientific inquiry) refers to taking responsibility for the myriad of matters our world is facing and the complex situations we ourselves are part of. This logic makes polite curiosity a type of ethical obligation (albeit not one built on moral rules), as proposed by Haraway (2016) in her idea of “making kin” and described by Ren and Jóhannesson (2018, 27) as “a mutual requirement of unexpected and caring collaboration” (see also Valtonen, Salmela & Rantala, 2020). Moreover, Despret’s work is collective and caring—work “with and for” earthly beings, a category not limited to the living but extending also to the dead and beings yet unborn (Haraway, 2016, 127). In Haraway’s interpretation, the human subject—for Despret—is not divested of the capability and the “right” to care for. That said, this right does not privilege the human subject as some type of a god-like character having the ability and means to “care for the world” (and as such, to control it).

Haraway writes that, in Despret’s work, “politeness does the energetic work of holding open the possibility that surprises are in store, that something *interesting* is about to happen, but only if one cultivates the virtue of letting those one visits intra-actively shape what occurs. They are not who/what we expected to visit, and we are not who/what were anticipated either” (Haraway, 2016, 127; see also Salmela & Valtonen, 2019). The “surprises in store” relates to Tsing’s notion of indeterminacy (2017, 50). For Tsing, indeterminacy—something un-limited, un-determined, un-defined—characterizes the growth of fungus, which “learns the landscape” (Tsing, 2015, 50). Indeterminacy is also present in Allen’s (2020) account on the feminist political ecology of air-and-breathing-bodies, which presents the ecological body as indeterminate, requiring “forms of knowing that fall outside and in excess of the demands of empiricism and its metrics” (Allen, 2020, 82). For instance, Hinchliffe et al. (2003) share their experiments, indeterminate by nature, when engaging with urban water voles. In the

process, “we, the site, and the water voles start to surprise each other and start to look differently from when we started” (646). As part of this process, “water vole writing” (sometimes—aptly—confused with brown rat writing) emerges (647). These forms of knowing surely require polite curiosity?

It follows that a research inquiry—and most certainly what we suggest as *curiography*—must go beyond the mere “thought”; it must act with politeness. Haraway explains that “Despret’s work is full of *literal* collaborations, with people and with animals, not simply metaphors of thinking with each other” (Haraway, 2015, 7, emphasis added). Thus, curiosity is to be practiced. The need for “literal collaborations” is also suggested by many other researchers sharing a curiosity towards understanding more-than-human worlds (Hinchliffe et al., 2003; Haanpää, Salmela, García-Rosell & Äijälä, 2019; Lorimer, 2010). Literal collaboration might require thinking about our ways of knowing anew. While our sensory organs have evolved to serve the need of gathering information, when we are forming an understanding of our own environment, the challenge that remains is how to be curious about the ways we are using these organs. Eva Hayward’s (2010) ethnography on corals introduces the notion of “fingereyes” to highlight the sensuous interplay of vision and touch in interspecies encounters (Hayward, 2010). Hinchliffe et al. (2003) also provide another example in their work with water voles:

We become noses, too, although that is possibly too grand a term.
Unlike the wine and perfume noses that Latour (2004) and Thrift (2003) refer to,
our bodies and noses seem almost ‘tuned’ or trained already to the smell of rat faeces.
Omnivores produce far more pungent faeces than the rush-eating water voles.
(Hinchliffe et al., 2003, 647)

To learn to tune oneself to the smell of water vole feces is what we could call embodied commitment to curiosity. Curigraphy could be—must be?—about becoming noses, fingers, and ears, in addition to eyes—to mention only some members of our sensory organs’ orchestra. This literal and practical curiosity always entails a necessary risk—that of getting “a bit too far off the path” (Haraway, 2016, 127), but as Haraway notes, “*that way lie stories*” (ibid., emphasis added). We all likely remember moments in our lives when we have gotten a bit too far off the path...some might also remember the eventual feeling of delight for having done it. Thus, being encouraged to take risks, there is yet another important question to ask: who is the “we” actually taking these risks?

What about ‘graphy’

Before elaborating on the aforementioned question, let us pause for a moment to consider the term following ‘curio’; that is, ‘-graphy’. In its most ancient form, it means “to scratch, carve”, but most commonly it is used to denote the “process of writing, recording or description” (www.etymonline.com/word/-graphy; The concise Oxford dictionary of English

etymology). This sense is reflected in widely used words, such as ‘biography’, ‘calligraphy’, ‘choreography’, and, of course, ‘ethnography’. If we consider ‘-graphy’ as something expressed by written characters or drawings—that is, ‘represented by lines drawn’—what would this mean when coupled with ‘curiosity’? Perhaps we could write in a curious way, letting the words and the very practice of writing teach us, lead us somewhere. As Laurel Richardson (2000) says, writing is a method of inquiry. Perhaps we ought to try to write in such a way that the readers’ curiosity is also fed, line by line, page by page. And what about drawing, then? We have experimented with drawing as a method of inquiry for our pilot fieldwork with the proximity tourism project in Pyhä-Luosto National Park, Finnish Lapland (Valtonen, Salmela, Rantala & Höckert, 2019). We went to the forest with pens and paper, sat down on a rock or bench, chose a thing, such as a blueberry twig or deadwood, took a close and focused look at it, and started to draw it without viewing what we were drawing. This technique, which a member of the group, Emily Höckert, brought to our team, sensitized us to the particularities and details of the earthly creatures with whom we were sharing the forest. It also forced us to slow down, to concentrate on the ‘thing’ and actually notice it: to notice the linkages and co-dependencies between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Thus, who are “we”?

The curious question—“who are we?”—must interrupt the lure of human exceptionalism^{viii} strongly inhabiting what we have come to know as ethnography. By asking “who are we?”, it becomes obvious that using the label of “human” as a center from which to see, name, and “investigate” other species and creatures without a recognition of the partiality of this position is ethically and politically problematic. Post-anthropocentric accounts have cogently problematized the privileged place of the human as a master of Earth and have highlighted the agency of various earthly beings, as well as the messy and porous relations constituting our existence (e.g. Haraway, 2008, 2016; Alaimo, 2008; Zylinska, 2014). We (must) have better alternatives to call our earthly companions than those concepts denoting somebody/ies that is/are “not” (as in non-human) or that “add(s) to” (as in more-than-human) humanity. We (must) have better alternatives to name-and-practice-anew the research methodologies dominating our academic work.

A number of conceptual suggestions for how to talk and write about our earthly companions are already available, some of which we have already mentioned and elaborated upon. Haraway’s conceptualizations of “companion species” (2008), “*cum panis*” or “messmates” (2008), and “oddkins” (2016) point to the processes of common worlding wherein “we” become “one”, like the “scientist–wolf” (2008, 15). The list is continued by concepts such as “earthbounds” (Latour, 2017), “biocultural creatures” (Frost, 2016), “holobionts” (Maarten et al., 2018), and “mortal critters” (Haraway, 2016)—the list goes on. Each of these notions stems from a certain theoretical tradition, and consequently highlights certain aspects of it. For instance, the notion of “multispecies” points to the number of species inhabiting Earth but does not necessarily cover complex relations with rocks (Valtonen & Pullen, 2020) or air

(Allen, 2020). However, trying to categorize one conceptualization as better than another is less important than making responsible choices and staying true to what these choices trouble and the consequences they bring about.

We follow the path paved by Haraway, considering ourselves indeterminate messmates whose bodies are co-constituted with a variety of earthly bodies. “I am a creature of the mud, not the sky”, states Haraway (2005, 3)—that said, we are also creatures of the air (Allen, 2020), of exchangeable bodily liquids (Valtonen, Salmela & Rantala, 2020), of minerals (Valtonen & Pullen, 2020), and of microbes, viruses, and genes carrying the past of our species (Frost, 2016). Importantly, we do not want to deny humanity’s difference from other creatures, since all creatures are different from others in multiple, complex, and often highly tangible ways (Frost, 2016). We acknowledge the role of cultural, social, political, ecological, and geological habitats in constituting us and our relations to the world, recognizing that we become “us” by being worlded in and with particular spaces, times, and beings.

Knowing

In academia, we have become accustomed to producing knowledge by asking questions. The logic of asking questions and answering them is so deeply inscribed in usual academic practices that it appears self-evident. Articles and dissertations include a research question that is answered in the study. In interviews, researchers ask questions and interviewees answer them. In seminars and conferences, the presenters are asked questions that they are supposed to answer. “That’s a good question!” is an often heard phrase in academia. No matter whether it is a polite phrase or a genuine opinion, it still exemplifies the status accorded to questions in scholarly work. This epistemic logic seems to be transferred to research inquiries exploring earthly creatures other than humans. Think of, for instance, the title of Despret’s (2016) seminal book, *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?*. She elaborates on questions, the nature of the right questions, and ways of asking questions—ways we have already pointed out in this chapter. But they are still questions. Curiosity is associated with the practice of asking questions. Alice keeps asking questions in Wonderland. Totò asks “why” adults behave like they do. Children are masters of asking questions. Why should we, then, seek to challenge this practice in the first place—should we?

One motivation for challenging the privilege of questions is the potential violence inherent in them: questions and answers can hurt both members of the academy and the subjects taking part in our studies, as well as inhibit the fruitful dialogue that all knowledge production and sharing requires. This is particularly true when this logic is enacted in the present-day masculine academia that renders everything a matter of competition (Lund & Tienari, 2018). As a result, seminars and conferences have become a battlefield for asking the best questions and giving the best answers. The content does not matter so much as *who* is speaking and

how. Conflictingly, arrogance matters, power matters. Those not complying with this academic game may feel deficient, ashamed, and socially and materially marginalized.

A few years back, we conducted an experiment to challenge the prevalent epistemic logic of asking and answering questions. In the feminist track of the 2017 Critical Management and Organization Studies conference, we gave a presentation dealing with alternative knowledge production practices (Meriläinen, Valtonen & Salmela, 2017). When beginning our presentation, we asked the audience to close their eyes and listen, followed by a request: “instead of asking us questions when we finish, please just reflect on what you have heard, *if* you feel like doing so”. We experienced the ambiance as remarkably different from other sessions in which we had participated before. Our request created a particular space: a confusing space, a curious space, a polite space. A space where no one interrupted others, nor offensively challenged others’ words, but where everyone was truly *listening* to what others said (this is, of course, our interpretation of the occasion!). Perhaps this practice, filled with politeness, enabled us to cultivate attentive ears: to forget the mouth, to learn from the knowledge already within us and in others (Höckert, 2020), and to let it “brew”.

Nonetheless, all questions are not equal, and the context of questions matters. We might consider children as masters of asking questions precisely because the questions they ask stem from true curiosity, not from the wish to comply to the norm or a desire to win the competition. As is to be expected, children’s questions are not always *polite*—but what does politeness mean, after all? A quote from Haraway (2015, 6):

Good questions come only to a polite inquirer,
especially a polite inquirer provoked by a singing blackbird.
With good questions, even or especially mistakes and misunderstandings can become
interesting.
This is not so much a question of manners but of epistemology and ontology,
and of method alert to off-the-beaten-path practices.
At the least, this sort of politeness is not what Miss Manners purveys in her advice
column.

What is “this sort of politeness”? Perhaps first and foremost it is the capability of the inquirer to be open to surprise? A capability not to lock things in too soon or, even better, never to lock them in at all. This is open-ended inquiry, open-ended research (Tsing, 2015). This openness to surprise is not only an openness to whatever (surprising) result *comes out of* carefully deliberated questions but also the curiosity about *what we could ask* as surprising questions in the first place (Tsing, 2015, 46). Furthermore, polite inquirers do not only ask verbal questions, but also silent ones—those stemming from their bodies and guiding their work.

Wouldn't it be curious to experiment what happens when the guiding principle of exploring the world, and hence knowing it, was not based upon verbal or literal asking-answering? A big part of our earthly animal kin make sense of the world with and through their bodies: with their hands, feet, ears, mouths, and noses. Do they ask questions with their bodies? As we have stated earlier, nosiness is a curious concept. It is often used in a negative sense, referring to—in our human vocabulary—people who are too curious about others' doings. Yet, taken away from this interpretation, nosiness exemplifies well how curiosity to know may require embodied closeness.

We tend to forget that we do the same: we explore the world through our bodies. One of us, when celebrating her second birthday, put her nose into the candles, and the result was a burnt nose and a sad face in the birthday picture. Perhaps the children-in-us would like to continue exploring the world with our bodies more rigorously—to jump into a puddle, eat snow, make cakes out of mud, roll on the grass, throw stones into the water, touch the trunks of trees, taste leaves, listen to the sound of raindrops falling on the window. This would be a curious, embodied form of experimenting, of knowing, and of theorizing.

Theorizing

Theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world's patternings and murmurings. Doing theory requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonders. [...] Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world. The world theorizes as well as experiments with itself. (Barad, 2012, 207)

Karen Barad's quote suggests that theorizing is not about producing detached, abstract, stable, and calculable constructions of the world, but rather something that happens when we engage in experimenting with the world through our open, response-able, and curious bodies. Creating theories that are living and breathing in the current era, where the "breath" of our Earth is experiencing suffocation, is a healing thought. The healing quality of theories is beautifully discussed by bell hooks (1991), who describes how she lived her childhood in an uncomfortable patriarchal atmosphere. She writes:

Living in childhood without a sense of home, I found a place of sanctuary in "theorizing," in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently. This "lived" experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis, became a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away. Fundamentally, I learned from this experience that theory could be a healing place. (hooks, 1991, 2)

The hurt and pain we experienced after Seela Sella's play emerged from realizing what was happening to the home of the tiny animal and to our home, Earth. Could theorizing help to live, and act, with this pain? bell hooks reminds us that "theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end" (1991, 2). While we ask theory and theorizing to direct us towards a more response-able life on Earth, we wonder whether this end, inspired by the tiny animal, is too big? Dare we think that big?

Timothy Morton (2010) describes how, indeed, "the best environmental thinking is thinking big—as big as possible, and maybe even bigger than that, bigger than we can conceive" (Morton, 2010, 20). But could we utilize the whole spectrum, from the tiny to the incomprehensibly big? Some theoretical journeys have started from tiny matters, be it a microbe (Kinnunen, 2017), a mosquito (Valtonen, Salmela & Rantala, 2020), or lice (Benali & Ren, 2019). This type of "tiny" theorizing may well end in theorizing about big issues concerning life on Earth and beyond. While Earth has been the focus of recent discussions on the Anthropocene, we do consider it necessary to extend the scope from the tiny, from the planet Earth, to something big, such as space. This change is a much-needed exercise, given the human desire to exploit other planets beyond Earth (Kinnunen & Valtonen, 2017). Moreover, a change of viewpoint (such as a space-based perspective) enriches thinking and facilitates "thinking big" without forgetting the importance of the element of care:

We can appreciate the fragility of our world from the point of view of space.

Thinking big doesn't prevent us from caring for the environment. (Morton, 2010, 24)

Care, and being in touch with the world, calls for embodied proximity. How does this relate to "thinking big" or starting with the tiny? Ren et al. (2020, 10) employ the term *critical proximity*, which implies "staying empirically close to the subject matter". Critical proximity requires curiosity—to see, sense, and attune to the unexpected in the seemingly familiar. This attunement is as much about proximity as de-familiarization (see also Despret, 2016 *U for Umwelt*)—closeness and distance, if you like. It is about considering our (proximate) others as strangers—something Despret deliberates on in her work. Following her line of thought, there is a requirement "...to learn to encounter animals as if they were strangers, so as to unlearn all of the idiotic assumptions that have been made about them" (Despret, 2016, 161). To unlearn something (potentially idiotic) requires distance from taken-for-granted assumptions. We ought not oversimplify things, however, and head towards either the assumption that distance is the only desirable goal or that distance would create a less affective relation with the world. As Morton puts it: "(D)istance doesn't mean indifference, and coolness (using reason) isn't coldness" (Morton, 2010, 24).

A question yet remains: who has the privilege of theorizing? Egleton and Payne suggest that:

Children make the best theorists, since they have not yet been educated into accepting our routine social practices as “natural”, and so insist on posing to those practices the most embarrassingly general and fundamental questions, regarding them with a wondering estrangement which we adults have long forgotten. Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. (Eagleton and Payne 1991, *The Significance of Theory*, x)

What if we let the children-in-us theorize? Would theorization then be genuinely led by curiosity? If there are not any strict research plans, would we have to (be allowed to) go with the flow, to be ready for surprises, to be attentive to surprising encounters? Taking such a position could perhaps enable us to develop novel “ways of noticing” that would go beyond traditional practices of seeing and observing (Blackman & Venn, 2010). As child-theorists in academic wonderlands, we might carry stones in our pockets as many children do until they are taught not to do it (Rautio, 2013), and we might better notice how our relations with “nature”, as taught to us through our education and upbringing, are possibly restricting us from acknowledging and valuing our relationality with the world. We could, then, perhaps ask the most curious questions, such as: Are plants theorists? What is collaborative knowing with rocks? And what does it mean to have a conversation with trees?

Towards curiography

In this chapter, we have introduced the concept of *curiography* as an approach to research that values plurality and many possible solutions. We have joined with a group of scholars that have set out to develop research orientations directing attention beyond humans to the complex relationality of all life. More-than-human and multispecies ethnographies are one example of this development. Yet, our purpose has not been to suggest a novel version of, or label for, these methodologies. Instead, we have taken “a curious peek” at the very foundations of *ethno-graphy* and have suggested that *curiosity* might provide the opportunity to overcome the problematics inherent in these existing conceptualizations, which either separate “us” from “them” (non-, more-than-) or recapitulate the categorization of earthly beings through the species discourse.

Setting out to explore various earthly creatures in organizational research exemplifies a down-to-earth movement towards creating an inclusionary research agenda. This project is in itself a good way to start agitating dominating, worn-out, human-centric scholarly narratives. Novel conceptual suggestions are also needed, though, since there is a risk that the proliferating “alternative forms” of ethnographies reinforce the colonial history of ethnography, potentially directing attention to creatures that are beneficial for humans, either socially or economically, or falling into the trap of the violent categorizations of life forms.

In developing our approach, we have been curious—with Seela Sella and the tiny animal, Alice in Wonderland, and Totò in the world of cinema and film—about where curiosity (a characteristic uniting, arguably, all life forms on Earth) stems from. We have taken a peek at the etymology of the word, scrutinizing the difference between inquisitiveness, “natural” curiosity, and “intellectual” curiosity, and discussing their role in research inquiries. We have explored the politically charged nature of curiosity and have taken a close look at what might be called “polite curiosity”, as well as how Vinciene Despret’s legacy works as an inspiration for the cultivation of the type of curiosity in research that is open to surprises—literal, practical, and embodied.

By asking “who are we?”, we have introduced the need for better alternatives to name-and-practice-anew research methodologies dominating our academic work. We have introduced some existing post-anthropocentric ways to talk and write about our earthly companions, and we have identified ourselves—as curiographers—as “indeterminate messmates”, our bodies being co-constituted with a variety of earthly bodies. We have continued elaborating on knowing by problematizing the status of questions in modern academia, opening up a path for polite and curious questioning that goes beyond words. This exploration led us to think about theorizing as an open and embodied form of experimentation. To commit to curiography is to commit to a theorization of “both-and” instead of “either-or” (see Despret, 2016) and to recognize the role of theories as a potential healing space for Earth.

What is, then, the “play” of curiography? (The curtains open...). The first act of the play illustrates the becoming literal and corporeal with curiography, requiring us to position and practically realize ourselves as worlded with/as messmates. The story of the privileged, detached human (researcher) must be over. By reworking human subjectivity (Clare, 2016), curiography unsettles the predominant ways that humans, including researchers, have considered themselves as planetary inhabitants so far. The second act of the play highlights the demand for an openness to surprise. Curigraphy is risky, as it requires a willingness to be changed and transformed by unexpected encounters. Without taking risks and embracing the not-yet-(if-ever)-known, we only end up reinforcing that famous “status quo”. In curiography, every encounter may turn out to be meaningful: curiography may happen everywhere, anytime—in dreams, in waking (Valtonen et al., 2017; Salmela, Valtonen & Meriläinen, 2020).

Openness is connected to politeness, the third act of the play. As Haraway states: “politeness does the energetic work of holding open the possibility that surprises are in store” (Haraway, 2016, 127). Polite curiosity makes curiosity much more an ethical obligation than nosiness; immersing ourselves in politeness, we can learn from Despret to become “needy for what must be known and built together, with and for earthly beings, living, dead, and yet to come” (Haraway, 2016, 127). Listening, too, is part of politeness, the fourth—but never final—act of

the play. To listen to the world's murmurings requires that one stays still and attunes oneself to the way life speaks, receptive to its rhythms and forms of communicating. Listening is as much an ethico-political act as story-writing. While "it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with" (Haraway, 2016, 12), it matters, too, *what kinds of stories we listen to*.

While academia tends to privilege storytelling over listening, they both are equally important as acts of knowing, worldmaking activities, and ethico-political acts (Höckert, 2020). Listening is as dependent on our standpoint, on our histories and our relationalities, as speaking (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 59–62). It serves us well, therefore, to pay attention to what kinds of worlds and relationalities are being co-constituted in the stories we listen to—be they fairytales or academic ones. We suggest engaging in listening to stories that do not offer normative, fixed lessons, but rather propose speculative, open, and uncertain ones, those with which one is able to engage in imagining possible relationalities—those that are yet to come (Höckert, 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). These are stories like the one Seela Sella performed, a caring story that restaged earthly relations with care. And we listened. (Curtains remain open).

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^{viii} ...although we are, indeed, exceptional acknowledging the crisis that our species have caused to the Earth...

