

Slaughtering a cow in early childhood education: Pedagogic meetings with destruction as change

Teresa K. Aslanian, Department of Educational Science, University of South-Eastern Norway, tea@usn.no

Anna Moxnes, Department of Educational Science, University of South-Eastern Norway, Anna.Moxnes@usn.no

Abstract

This article explores the concept of change in education through an examination of the entangled processes of destruction and creation made visible during a Norwegian kindergarten's tradition of participating in a cow-slaughter in its local community. The article offers a methodological exploration, activating the theoretical perspectives of relational ontology, plasticity and critical animal studies. We present the event as a narrative and analyze it through these three perspectives, with special attention paid to unintentional change and change as an ontological concept. The discussion illuminates how children grasped destruction as change through creativity and play, and how ethical complexities are entangled with education, animal-based food production, traditions, play, and research.

Keywords: ECEC, plasticity, slaughter, relational ontology, multispecies

Introduction

In this article, we explore how children and their environments are entangled in ontological processes of change that challenge assumptions about the distinction between destruction and creation. The article takes a diffractive, speculative approach, straddling the perspectives of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) via Helena Pedersen (2010a; b), and new materialisms via Karen Barad's (2007; 2017) relational ontology and Catherine Malabou's (2005; 2008; 2009) plasticity. These three perspectives help us explore intentional and unintentional change with a group of five-year-old children during an annual field trip to a family farm to slaughter a cow. The plan for the trip was in keeping with the stipulation in Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens that children should get to know local community traditions and gain an insight into food sources and food production (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (NDET), 2017, p. 50). We further explore how experiences in early childhood education and care (ECEC) that embrace the tensions between destruction and creation can contribute to children's sense of responsibility as agents of change, and how participation in this particular event has affected our sense of responsibility as researchers.

Our aim is to explore some unintentional changes that occurred at the slaughter event, beyond intended learning outcomes, and to speculate as to how ethical complexities are entangled with multi-species lives in education, human animal rearing traditions and food production, play, and research. The use of the terms 'human' and 'animal' mask our common animality. However, for the sake of readability, we will refer to non-human animals as animals in the remainder of this text.

The concept of change in education is typically addressed via the underlying philosophy of humanism, which includes democratic society's goals of equity, liberty and happiness (Dewey, 1916/2009). Education as vehicle for change involves both the transmission of society's ideals and values to the younger generation, and an acknowledgment of children's plasticity, their ability to learn and conform to their environment (Dewey, 1916/2009). Change in education has thus been conceptualized in relation to human growth and social goals through intentional practices that are meant to guide the plastic development of children, as they become citizens. In other words, education has been designed to cause prescribed change (Hogstad, 2020).

The concept of plasticity has been re-introduced within the field of education to re-think the idea of change as goal of education (Hogstad, 2020). Change and change-ability, or plasticity, is understood as an underlying state of being both biologically and ontologically (Malabou, 2008). While some change may be the result of intentional practice in education, change is also produced in unintentional (Dewey, 1916/2009) and in more-than-human ways (Haraway, 2016). The changing global climate has been one such unintended change that has troubled our humanistic framework that imposes a conceptual separation between humans and animals, as well as between nature and culture. As the climate crisis illustrates, unintended change often leaves a

bigger mark on the world than planned change. Unintended change occurs because change is ontological; it characterizes existence (Malabou, 2011). When change is understood as ontological, as a quality of existence, the idea of change in education becomes more complex and more salient.

Our approach to change as ontological embraces a posthuman view that challenges the idea of change as cause and effect trajectories (Barad, 2007, p. 180). Change moves in uncharted directions and produces more than that which humans intentionally make happen and can necessarily recognize. In other words, change is an aspect of both human and more-than-human agency. Barad explains agency as, “an ongoing configuration of the real and the possible” (Barad, 2007, p. 235). Change, for us, is connected not only to what we as researchers and educators intend to instigate or facilitate for children, but also to that which is produced through other agencies in play, that produce new configurations “of the real and the possible” and that involves the more-than-human world.

The Norwegian context

All children in Norway, from one-year to five-years-old are entitled by law to attend government subsidized ECEC. In recent years, a political will to prioritize ECEC has produced kindergartens in both urban and rural areas, nearly all over Norway. The Norwegian Kindergarten Act (Ministry of Education and Research (MER), 2011), utilizes the concepts of culture, heritage and traditions to describe an education that encourages respect for cultural traditions and the conservation of and respect for nature. The importance of a positive and responsible relationship to nature is given special attention.

Most Norwegians live in urban areas (Statistics Norway, 2019) which as of 2009 made up only 18 of Norway’s 356 municipalities (Andersen & Sand, 2011). In other words, quite large areas in the country are sparsely populated, and according to Andersen & Sand (2011, p. 28), rural and urban areas provides different contexts in which to act and think. In the rural part of Norway, as in most other countries, farming, hunting and fishing traditions are strongly rooted, and connected to values, culture and heritage. The implementation of the subject of Food and Health (NDET, 2017) in rural kindergartens often includes topics such as fishing and hunting, in contrast to their urban counterparts. ECEC is intended to provide children with the possibilities to become active citizens capable of effecting change in society. Getting to know local community traditions lays the “foundations for continued insight into and participation in a democratic society” (NDET, 2017). Children are expected to learn “through exploration, discoveries and experiences” that help children “familiarize themselves with their local community, society and the wider world.” (NDET, 2017). *Becoming* a part of the community is understood as an intentional process in which children are exposed to traditions and thus become *a part* of them. Furthermore, kindergartens are expected to offer children “knowledge and experience of local traditions, institutions and

vocations so that the children *feel they belong* in their local community.” (NDET, 2017, p. 55). For rural areas, those local traditions include both caring for animals and slaughter of animals.

The ontological position of animals used in schools is a non-issue in education research (Pedersen, 2010a), and as a result, the conflicting value systems transmitted through education of caring for animals and nature, as well as dominating and managing animals and nature remains largely uncommunicated and unexplored. Exposure of children to death and the function of death in ECEC offers first-hand experiences of life as a “relational web incorporating a variety of objects, subjects, and bodies along a spectrum of animation, vitality, and decomposition” (Russell, 2017, p. 76). Slaughter and hunting involve not only death and dying, but also intentional killing, rendering the subject even more complex in terms of the education goals of teaching solidarity and respect for nature (NDET, 2017). Participating in or witnessing animal slaughters in ECEC-institutions is a rare occurrence in practice and seldom researched. Farm kindergartens are popular in Norway, and though there is no data on the matter, slaughter has and continues to be included in the pedagogic practices of certain kindergartens, usually in rural communities (Cohen & Rønning, 2017), including Sami kindergartens (Storjord, 2008).

Theoretical framing and methodology

We have worked diffractively with critical animal studies (CAS) and a posthuman perspective to explore this pedagogic tradition and the ethical complexities it awakened for us as participants and researchers. CAS challenges ontological assumptions that underlie human-animal relationships that render animals’ relevance definable only from a perspective of human utilization. Pedersen (2010a) points to an unarticulated humanist understanding of the child and the animal, wherein the role of the animal is to provide learning experiences to children. This view is supported by the traditional role of animals as a resource in education for learning about life cycles, birth, illness, death, taking responsibility and, giving and receiving love and care (Meyers, 2007). A CAS perspective helps us take responsibility as researchers for our participation in the slaughter tradition through increasing our sensitivity to animal subjectivity.

Barad’s (2007; 2017) relational ontology draws on her diffractive readings of quantum theory with feminist and post-structural thinkers across disciplines, including Michel Foucault and Donna Haraway. Barad theorizes phenomena, not as independent entities, but rather as always mutually producing each other through entanglements or intra-active processes of becoming and responsibility. Change involves what Barad (2007) calls agential “cuts” that both separate subject and object, and brings them together in a new entanglement. Thinking with relational ontology, the environment and children in ECEC are not understood as distinct subjects and objects, but as ongoing iterations of distinctive and mutually entangled phenomena, that produce each other through ongoing “agentic cuts”. Any intra-action, therefore, is both creative and destructive, opens up and limits, and thus entails responsibility for what is enacted and what is not enacted.

Being responsible requires “taking account of the entangled phenomena that are intrinsic to the world’s vitality and being responsive to the possibilities that might help it flourish” (Barad, 2007, p. 396). An ethics of responsibility highlights the inseparability of space and time, as both harm done and care taken in the world today, shapes the world of the future.

Both CAS and posthuman theory decenter the human subject (Pedersen, 2010b, p. 247). However, while CAS take a clear position in support of animals and animal subjectivity, according to Barad (2003; 2017), a situation cannot be understood solely from the perspective of a ‘distinct subject’, but as an intra-action where all involved work together through their relations. As researchers, we have different personal experiences with animals and farming traditions that do not necessarily align with CAS’ aim to end animal rearing. We refrain therefore from embracing the explicit aim of animal liberation that underlies CAS and instead seek to understand the shifting subjectivities of humans and non-humans involved, without a normative aim. The use of CAS in posthuman research has been criticized for precisely this unwillingness to take a clear stand for animal liberation (Pedersen, 2010b). We nonetheless combine CAS with Barad’s relational ontology in order to consider normative dimensions to human-animal relations and subjectivities.

Malabou’s concept of plasticity draws on Hegel’s use of the term plasticity (Malabou, 2005), and understandings of neuroplasticity (Malabou, 2008), as well as Heidegger’s concepts of change (Malabou, 2011). Beginning with Hegel’s conceptualization of the human subject in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, in which the subject’s ability to change, or transform, through time is described as plastic, Malabou develops the concept of plasticity as the inherent malleability of subjectivity, which involves the ability to receive shape, to give shape and to destroy shape. Malabou (2011) draws on Heidegger to extend the plasticity of the subject to an understanding of being as “perhaps nothing but its mutability” (Malabou, 2011, p. 11). The concept of plasticity we work with is an ontology of ‘beingness as plastic’ or, ontological mutability. Beingness refers to what is common for everything that has *being* (Malabou, 2011, p. 38). Change is common to that which has being; and the ability to change and be changed emphasizes responsibility. It matters what we do and what changes we enact, because relationships do not only produce change (however temporary) and the possibility for subjectivity— but can also destroy subjectivities. Plasticity involves the ability to shape and be shaped; as well as to break and be broken (Malabou, 2008). Ongoing relations between phenomena produce phenomena (Barad, 2007), which are also always new possibilities to enact change. Both the cow’s and our ongoing materialization, involve a distinctive, subjective experience that is both malleable and vulnerable to destruction.

In this paper, it is not only change as the quality of beingness we are interested in, but the specific and ephemeral changes that occur in the constant production of beingness. It is the distinctiveness of form at any time that cause changes to matter, as they can lead to destruction of form that changes what the form does or can do. Form is “a site of self-dissolution and re-generation” (Colony, 2015, p. 104), and plasticity involves not only change, but also resistance to deformation

according to a “certain determinacy of form” (Malabou, 2008, p. 15). To destroy is to change a form or phenomena in a way that renders it no longer able to do what it did (despite doing new things). We are interested in change that manifests on the cusp of beingness as change and beingness as resistance to change.

We draw on Barad and Malabou to understand form as a continually produced *vehicle for doing* that produces effervescent subjectivities. We understand living and non-living matter as doings that can be engaged with and that produce new relations and subjectivities. Plasticity produces agency, or the *ability to do*. When new matter is introduced into a situation, agentic cuts are made, forms are made to change and what forms do also changes. Changes in shape that occur because of violence, sickness or accidents as opposed to other instigators of change are usually described differently, with violent change described as destruction or accident, and non-violent change as development or transformation. We relate the difference between violent and non-violent change, accidental and non-accidental, to subjectivity and the degree to which change is willed or desired by the perceiving subject. Some changes alter or hinder phenomena in a way that produces a subjective experience of destruction rather than development or transformation. Vulnerability to destruction can thus be understood in relation to particular subjectivities. Our concept of change embraces plasticity as a way of reimagining education as “an apprenticeship into the various modes of seeing and imagining” (Kouppanou, 2020). When we bring CAS and relational ontology together, we gain insight into human- animal entanglements, diffractions of violence and tradition, caring and feeding. We depart from a normative aim of animal liberation and are instead encouraged to build on Haraway’s (2016) efforts to “stay with the trouble” inherent in multispecies life on earth and by staying, we also aim to “become with the trouble”.

The empirical study

This study is based on data gathered for an ongoing project, in which the authors explore relationships between children and non-human animals in ECEC, and their pedagogic and ethical complexities. During the course of this project, Teresa, author 1, became aware of a local practice of teaching children how to hunt moose with wooden rifles and giving them pretend hunting licenses which the children had to earn through practice and learning. After discussion with Anna, author 2, Teresa contacted the head teacher of the kindergarten to inquire about the practice and was consequently invited to participate in a yearly tradition to participate in a cow slaughter at a local family farm. The empirical material for this study was collected with a smartphone camera and voice recorder as well as a dictaphone during this visit. A subsequent recorded interview with the head teacher of the kindergarten was also conducted¹. Permission to interview the head

¹ The recording was unfortunately lost due to a programming error of an institutional secure system. Notes taken during the interview were used instead.

teacher and photograph the event without identifiable humans was granted from the *Norwegian Centre for Research Data* and parents or guardians were informed about the study through an information letter distributed by the head teacher that included a signed permission slip. Only children whose parent or guardian has consented were photographed and recorded. Consent from children during the event was a continuous consideration and Teresa sought to be sensitive to anyone expressing disinterest or unwillingness to be photographed or recorded. The farmers involved also gave their permission to be involved and for photographs of their property and slaughterhouse to be used. We believed the event would offer an opportunity to engage with possibilities, paradoxes and ethical complications involved in relationships between children and animals in ECEC. Our engagement with CAS presented ethical challenges, since we were using CAS as a lens to understand the kindergarten's practice, which was clearly incompatible with CAS' aims. The head teacher was informed that we were interested in ethical complexities regarding animals, food production, slaughter and ECEC, while we also promised that data from the event would not be used to shed an overtly negative light on their practice.

After the slaughter, Teresa shared her experience with Anna. Anna transcribed Teresa's initial and immediate memories from the event. They then reviewed the photographs and sound recordings together, discussing the images and recordings in light of Barad's relational ontology and CAS. Anna, a Norwegian native, provided further analysis in regard to regional traditions and geographical agency involved in the slaughter experience. Teresa's written narrative of the event builds on her memories of the event, Anna's transcriptions, field recordings, photographs of the event and field notes from an interview with the preschool teacher conducted after the event. The narrative is in first person, but has acted upon both authors as we read, viewed and discussed our data, and while we revised this article, producing affects such as shock, wonder, disgust, admiration and desire, that intra-act with our analysis. In this way, the narrative itself became an intra-action upon us and a generative force in this article. Barad, Malabou and Pedersen's theorizing is read through the narrative in an interwoven discussion.

Slaughtering a cow in ECEC

"We're going to see the inside of a cow today!" The first words I heard spoken upon entering the ECEC center is from a preschool-aged girl who is telling her friends about what is happening today. The center is located in an area that revolves around hunting season. When October comes around, a rise in temperature in the local population can be felt- there is excitement in the air. Children spend the season learning about hunting and studying local prey animals, such as deer, moose and lynx. The local community's excitement spills into the kindergarten when a pedagogue who is also a hunter shoots a lynx and brings it into the kindergarten for the children to examine first hand. In the time before I was invited to accompany the kindergarten on a slaughter, the group had been learning about the deer family, including the moose who has the unofficial title of "king of the forest" in Scandinavia, reflecting a national romanticism in which nature plays a central role. Before the slaughter event, children were exposed to both idealized images of wild animals and carcasses of wild animals as they created representations of prey animals (figure 5)

and they examined a freshly shot lynx carcass.

We drove in several cars from the kindergarten to the farm. A five-minute drive further into the countryside, led us to a long dirt road that drew us further and further away from urban areas and after a few minutes led us to a white farmhouse with two red annexes. We parked on the lot and were met by the family elder, a farmer over eighty-years-old, and a decapitated moose head, lying on the grass beside the small slaughterhouse and a small dumpster filled with presumably moose bones and body parts. The children immediately gathered around the moose head (Figure 6) and began touching it, looking into the opening behind the head, into the visible brain. After a few minutes, the old farmer invited us into his annex. In the annex, the head teacher engaged the elderly farmer into conversation with the children about “the olden days” and the farmer’s experiences. We were shown a wall covered in well-organized antique farm materials (Figure 2) and two antique gramophones (Figure 1) from his own childhood, which he used to play records from his youth for us. The joyful music mingled with the moose head and our anticipation of the cow that would soon be brought to us for slaughter.



Figure 1



Figure 2

While still in the annex, someone heard the sound of the tractor coming, meaning a cow had been shot and was on its way to us. The children called out “The cow² is here! The cow, the cow!” The excitement of meeting the cow was buffered by a meeting with the farmer who approached the group of children with his carving knife (Figure 4, 5). He asked them if they were looking forward to slaughtering the cow. The children mostly stared silently at him, while a few answered faintly: “yes”.

² The children called the cow “bull” (okse), which reveals that they had the correct vocabulary to distinguish between cow genders. We choose to use “cow”, the name of the species, since we do not know whether the animal was a bull or an ox (the castrate).



Figure 3



Figure 4

After being introduced to the farmer, and learning that he was the son of the elderly farmer we had already met, the children were encouraged to approach the cow. They gathered around, with their teachers by their sides or behind them, quite silent, except for an occasional comment related to understanding and establishing as a group that the cow was dead. For example, a sentence that was repeated by several children, both about the moose head and the cow was: «It doesn't feel anything now». Interestingly, the "moose" and the "cow" are referred to as "it" that does not feel anything now. The "it" that the cow and moose were continue to be true to the children. It is still a cow, and it is still a moose, just not one that feels. Children stared at the cow carcass, noticing the blood on the cow and dripping on to the grass. Once the cow was turned over onto its back, feces poured out of the cow's anus and several children were focused on the excrement. They said it was "yucky", but continued to stare at it and continued asking about the cow's anus.

Most of the kindergarten children came from communities bordering on rural areas. The children were exposed to understandings of animals as wild and autonomous, both hunted and revered by humans. Animals were also understood as being in need of protection by humans. Pedersen (2010a) would remind us that each understanding about animals builds on an underlying othering of humans and animals, in which the humans hold power to protect, endanger, breed or hunt. The cow slaughter event occurred just after the children had taken pretend hunting licenses, learned about the deer family and examined a freshly shot lynx. The playroom was decorated with pictures and collages made by the children of deer and moose. The themed work (Figure 5) children engaged in during the fall brought them into relations with both cattle and the deer family and the practice of hunting in the community.



Figure 5



Figure 6

When the farmer began to cut into the cow, to remove the skin, children began cautiously asking why they were slaughtering it. The farmer answered; “we need food...everyone has to eat”. A teacher supported the farmer, adding: “remember we talked about where we get our meat from?” There was a constantly upheld atmosphere of certainty, positivity and normalcy, spread through confident attitudes or high and lighthearted tones of voice. Answers to children’s questions implicitly conveyed that this was a natural and positive thing we were doing, relating to the natural process of eating.

While the carcass was still lying on the grass, the farmer began to skin the cow. He asked the children if they wanted to try it and the child of a farming family who as the first-born child would one day inherit responsibility for the family farm, said yes. The other children watched as the farmer guided the boy’s hand holding the knife between the skin and the flesh of the cow. After the skinning was complete, the cow was hung up again and at this point, bile spilled out onto the grass, mixing with the smells of blood and feces.

The cow now had a gunshot wound through its head, was hanging head first on a tractor, swinging slightly, feces falling out of the anus and skin being peeled by the young children. The cow’s plasticity was in full view, its new form was not only a changed image of “cow” and “farm animal”, but the performance was new. The performance, while troublesome for some, is a common performance of meat production. Though most of the children had not made the connection to how meat finds its way to our grocery stores and dinner tables, both children and Teresa had eaten meat from slaughtered cow. The humans and the cow were already entangled with and performing this tradition through partaking in food traditions in our society, as Barad explains, ‘each history coexists with the others’ (Barad, 2017, p. 68). Our meeting with the cow and participation in the traditional method of slaughter became a manifestation of different times bleeding through one another’ (ibid.). The farmer’s family tradition reaching back hundreds of years bled in to Teresa’s eating habits and the children’s modern view of meat from grocery stores. Cow as innocent and happy farm animal transformed into a cow carcass growing ever-

different from the cow we came to look inside.

The Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens mandates children's participation in local communities to support formative development and become active members of their democratic society (NDET, 2017). As members of a community, the children (and the authors) became part of a tradition that matters to the farmers and families in the district and beyond, and that involves usually unspoken ethical complexities. The farmer and the teachers explained during the slaughter that the farmer who has cared for the cow throughout his life shot the cow. The farmer told the children that the cow had "lived a happy life on the farm". This "happy meat" discourse draws on the idea that the happiness cows may have experienced while alive, renders the slaughter and consumption of meat more ethical (Linné & Pedersen, 2017) than if the animal had suffered prior to being shot and killed for food. The complexity of the cow's past happiness and present condition seemed to concern the children, resulting in questions about why we were slaughtering the cow, and affirmative statements that the cow "didn't feel anything". Had the cow "felt", the situation might have been understood differently. *Feeling* seemed to be understood by the children as a way to matter.

The experience opened up for future discussions that could draw on the new images and performances children were met with and became involved with. Changes that had taken place regarded what they as children, as humans, could do and were doing, and what the cow could do and was doing. Such a discussion could inspire the children's formative education in a new and uncertain direction. Hogstad (2020) underlines the possibilities a plastic understanding of formative education holds, opening up for new ways of thinking ethics in response to present challenges. What ethical assumptions guide relationships between humans and animals today? What do we know about how humans and animals affect each other and affect global development? Could engagements with local community be a source of thinking otherwise, or are children to be exposed to traditions in order to replicate them in their future lives? How can we offer children a future that is at once safe, but also more radically open?

One child complained about feeling nauseous and walked away from the cow. A teacher responded quickly to her complaint and guided her into a small annex on the property that was set up as a living room. Soon after, I became nauseous as well, so I retreated to my car that was parked on the farm to gain my composure. After a short while, I went into the small annex to find a teacher sitting with the child who felt nauseous in her lap. I stood by the lit fireplace, feeling the warmth of the fire and trying to gain my composure. After a few minutes, I noticed new excited, high-pitched sounds and chirps coming from outside. Going out, I found a group of boys running around waving about pieces of skin from the cow (Figure 7). Some of them were laying them out on the ground, discussing how they needed to dry (Figure 8).



Figure 7



Figure 8

The children were no longer staring at the cow and asking questions. They were now running about, discussing and exploring their pieces of skin. I saw more children running around and walked out toward the cow to see what was going on. Children were walking around with hoofs (Figure 9). They looked a mixture of excited and perplexed, showing me how heavy they were and how the skin easily moved back and forth around the bone of the hoof. One child asked me if I wanted to hold it. I was curious as to the way the hoof felt, and did not want to put a damper on the atmosphere, so and I said yes. The hoof was heavier than I had imagined, and the skin rotated slightly around the leg bone, as if it was floating around it.

One boy started using the hoof as a tool to crush snow and ice on the ground. Another experimented with placing the hoof in different ways on top of the moose's head on the grass (Figure 10). Creativity and mastery took over observation and bewilderment. The destroyed cow was now cow parts that "did" something different what the cow did before it was broken, something new that the children could make it do. The children discussed among themselves and with staff what the different pieces of the cow were, what they could and would do with them and how they would care for them and use them. What once was death and destruction was now new possibilities for care, learning, creativity and play.

Becoming with: Reimagining cow, moose and human

The movement from the meeting with the cow to the children's experimentation with cow body parts marks an experience that involves making cuts (Barad, 2007, p. 145). The cuts performed a transformation of children's ontological conception of cow: from cow as autonomous animal in the world, to cow as mutable animal in the world or, 'animal for us' (Pedersen, 2010a). What once was at least a semi-autonomous being became pieces of flesh and bone that could be given as gifts to the children. Children became people who could receive parts of a cow to play with.

The farmers and the children arranged the body parts in seemingly new formations, new usages, and new ways to play. The new formations however were connected to old traditions and ontological assumptions about animals that the slaughtering of the cow invited the children into.

Children became humans who have through time, slaughtered animals and used non-edible parts of animals for decorations and other products (Alves et al., 2018). Unspoken, ethically ambivalent traditions re-infect, and re-invent the future as newness through the vehicle of tradition. Repetitiveness seeps through innovation, entangled together, changing each other and all that is in our reach. What room does early childhood education offer to consider our humanist values in relations with animals? What does solidarity mean in terms of our relationships with the more-than-human? Do our values apply equally to other animals? If not, why not?



Figure 9



Figure 10

The moose relaxing in the sunlight, befitting the title of 'king of the forest' (Figure 5), and the moose head (Figure 6) on the lawn beside a dumpster of its body parts and the music playing from the farmer's childhood on the old gramophone (Figure 1), were becoming together. New borders were produced before the children and the cow (Pedersen, 2013), drawn between them, as the children become onlookers and the cow, slaughtered only again to be transformed (Barad, 2007, p. 245), as the animals turn the children in to humans that use body parts as tools and decoration. When handed the hooves and skin pieces, the children who participated did not hesitate to turn them into something new. We have previously described children's play as agentic cuts, involvements with the world's vitality and its flourishing (Aslanian & Moxnes, 2020). Children played with body parts of what had been a cow, changing the cow's shape, even as the cow brought the children into new formations, from appreciative child awaiting a glorified cow and having learned about the moose as king of the forest, to dominant species manipulating pieces of cow and moose. What should children know about our society and to what degree should they participate? How can ECEC contribute to children's understanding of other difficult and death-entangled aspects of children's lives?

Blood in the water: plastic subjectivities

For Teresa, taking part in the slaughter was an intellectually and emotionally exhausting event that made a deep impression. The blunt horror of the moose's head, and the proximity to the cow being dismembered was grotesque and at times, to her surprise and shame, faintly beautiful. Her aesthetic appreciation for the bodily shape and lines of the hanging carcass that would give an entire family food, inspired us to ask what is right and what is wrong, what is grotesque and what is beautiful? Impressions began to stack and diffract upon each other, as emotions pushed and pulled in different ways. Teresa's body responded to changes made to the cow's body, with both nausea and admiration. Could the children also have found the hoofs and the pieces of skin both repulsive and beautiful? Did they feel conflicted while experimenting with what the pieces of carcass could do and become? For Teresa, the nausea mingled with a glow of aesthetic appreciation of the hanging, naked carcass. A sinking feeling of shame set in while admiring the carcass' beauty, aware of the cow's loss of life and demolition at the hands of kin and her sudden, sneaking desire to eat meat. Throughout the event, Teresa, the children and the narrative are focused on the cow *being dismembered*. Even though the cow was dead, it was the star of the show. The living farmer dismembering the cow was less interesting than the passive carcass made active through being intentionally changed.

Slaughterhouses keep this aspect of our food chain invisible to most people who though willing to eat the meat of slaughtered animals, do not want to be exposed or to expose their children or involve them in the act, let alone witness the act themselves. Can choosing to become *with* the trouble (Haraway, 2016) of animals and local community, as the kindergarten we followed chose to do, instead support children's formative education and inspire pedagogic meetings with destruction as change?

Concluding thoughts: Letting trouble into the future

In this article, we have explored unintended change related to ontological assumptions underlying children's engagements with a cow that has been shot and killed on a family farm and, together with the children, slaughtered in the context of ECEC. We have made an ethically challenging choice in analyzing this kindergarten's well-grounded learning traditions with CAS, and looking beyond pedagogical intentions with Barad and Malabou, for unintentional change. Participating in a local pedagogic tradition of a cow slaughter put us in contact with traditions that both provoked and fascinated us. Our discussion has shown how changing values exist alongside stable traditions. We found ourselves as researchers having to dare to see unexpected ways of understanding traditions we experience as provocative. Multispecies lives are not distinct from each other, neat or simple. We live with and continually produce conflicting values, because life is entangled in death (Barad, 2017) and demands both that we take from the earth in order to live and that we care for the earth in order to survive. Children's meetings with human cattle breeding traditions

shed light on how play, tradition, community, violence and death are entangled in human-animal traditions.

Invited into an age-old ritual of slaughtering an animal for food, children became temporary inhabitants of the cattle breeding community, a community they were already involved in through their food culture. The rural farming culture is a minority in a society that depends upon its practice to maintain its eating habits. The invisible difficulties that lay behind our shopping choices were exposed to us during the slaughter. Children's questions such as "why are we slaughtering it?", or shared thoughts like "it doesn't feel anything" can be understood as small openings that probe difficulties and doubts, produce speculation and wonder. The children embraced the slaughter not only as destruction, but also as an opportunity for play. The children's move from observers to players as the cow changed from living to dead reveals how death means more than the end of something, and how right and wrong are not simple or stable categories. When considering life and being as a state of change, our discussion cast a light on transformative potential in destructive material change, just as any other kind of change. The discussion illuminates how children grasped destruction as change through creative play and how ethical complexities are entangled with education, tradition, play, and research. In ECEC, the desire to teach and direct change rather than to explore change with children can occlude children's opportunities for transformative experiences that ignite children's sense of responsibility as agents of change. Such experiences require new modes of seeing and imagining (Kouppanou, 2020) as well as a conscious effort to stay with the trouble. The desire to control learning experiences or to limit what is learned to reproducing desired stories that protect children from what is dark or difficult, can rob children of understanding the world as agentic, and the opportunity to reflect on how they participate in the world as ongoing change.

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