

# Becoming-crocus, becoming-river, becoming-bear: A relational materialist exploration of place(s)

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## Abstract

The article draws on qualitative research from reflective journals of a group of university students based on their experiences from a month-long outdoor and environmental education journey in the Canadian Rockies. The article is concerned with the stories that are communicated through an embodied engagement with place(s), particularly the Brazeau River and the surrounding regions. The “relational materialist” approach (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010), combined with a focus on the entangled topics of skill, place, and journey provides a framework for empirical materials collection and analysis. Findings suggest that a decentring of humans in favour of mutual and relational engagements with matter and the more-than-human, in combination with place-stories and outdoor skill development that involves reading the land from embodied learning with/in its natural-cultural history, opens up new possibilities for embodied relations to place(s).

Keywords: relational materialism, place, skill, journey, Deleuze, Guattari

## Introduction

During the last 25 years, a growing body of critical outdoor education theory has developed questioning the philosophical underpinnings of outdoor education practice (e.g., Beames & Brown, 2016; Brookes, 1993, 2002; Loynes, 2002; Nicol, 2002; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). According to Lugg (1999), there was a significant discursive shift in outdoor education research, initiated by scholars such as Brookes (1993) and Martin (1993) from Australia, as well as Cooper (1994) and Higgins (1996) from the United Kingdom (UK). Lugg (1999) argues that the discursive shift proposed by these scholars is a move away from an activity-based personal and social development discourse, in favour of educating for an environmentally sustainable future as the primary goal for outdoor education. Increasingly, an emphasis on the role of place in outdoor and environmental education has been given attention by researchers and practitioners (e.g., Baker, 2005; Brookes, 1994, 2002; Gruenewald, 2004; Raffan, 1993; Stewart, 2008; Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

However, despite the growing dialogue regarding place in outdoor studies, Harrison (2010) found that there was surprisingly little research apparent within the UK at the time. A similar claim was made by Schantz (2011), who argued that place as a conceptual framework has been largely overlooked in Swedish outdoor education theory and practice. Baker (2005) suggests that it may be assumed that the environment plays an integral role in outdoor education simply because outdoor practice commonly occurs in “natural” places. Baker fears that place(s) often become no more than a backdrop for people-centred activities in the outdoors. Furthermore, Baker states that as outdoor educators it is “incumbent upon us to assess whether our students are becoming

actively engaged in the landscape or merely passing through it” (p. 269). Proponents of place-responsive theory and practice in outdoor and environmental education are concerned that practices centred on personal and social skill development promote and reinforce anthropocentric worldviews, rather than challenge them. An alternative to a people-centred practice, focusing on personal and social development outcomes, may be found in using place as the focal point for learning in outdoor and environmental education. The focus for this article is exploring modes of relating to place(s) using a “relational materialist” approach (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). To guide the research process, the following research question was formulated: What modes of relating to place(s) may emerge from a decentring of humans in favour of mutual and relational engagements with matter and human–nonhuman encounters? We begin the article by providing an overview of the conceptual and theoretical framework used in this study. We then present a brief background of the region where this journey took place to ground and situate our research; this is followed by a description of the research process. Next we share the analysis and present our findings.

## Conceptual and theoretical framework

Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) argued for what they call a relational materialist approach as a way of challenging anthropocentrism and for the decentring of humans “to engage with affective physicality, human–nonhuman encounters and a keen interest in what emerges in mutual engagements with matter” (p. 526). This resonates with Somerville and Green (2012) who describe place as a conceptual framework offering a material site for the development of an empathetic relationship with outdoor places: “Place connects us through its materiality, a materiality

which is dynamic, constantly changing, shaped by daily cycles of seasons and weather, and the activities of all the living creatures, including humans" (p. 5).

Drawing on the work of relational feminist posthumanists, primarily Barad (1998, 2008) and Haraway (1997, 2008), Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) suggest that by embracing more-than-human perspectives, all other nonhuman forces and matter itself are granted active agency and considered "mutually agentic in transforming discourse, discursive practices and human subjectivities" (p. 526). Similarly, Nicol (2014) suggests a framework of "ecological ontology" to embrace the conception of the relational human being and "that the nature of human existence is one of relationships" (p. 451). To view the world in this way requires a shift from the people-centred worldview of anthropocentrism, where human beings are seen as apart from and having power over the *natural*<sup>1</sup> world, and therefore are entitled to use it and control it, to a perspective of ecocentrism where human beings are viewed as part "of" the *natural* world. However, Nicol (2014) argues that when viewed from the standpoint of ecological ontology, and to avoid falling into the dualistic trap by viewing ecocentrism as the dualistic alternative to anthropocentrism, these ideas should be understood "not as opposites but in their relation to each other" (p. 451).

Hultman & Lenz Taguchi (2010) suggest that in thinking with Deleuze, the relationship between bodies (human, nonhuman or any kind of matter) "needs to be read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being" (p. 529). DeLanda (2002) propose the concept of "flat ontology" as a critique of anthropocentrism and it offers a visual idea of posthuman ontology. Haraway (1997) suggests that when viewing the world as a flat ontology, no single aspect has primacy over another. Therefore, nature is no more original than culture, and the social aspect is no more important than the material. Hence, from a relational materialist/posthumanist perspective, there are no distinctions between "nature" and "culture" as they are already co-existent and enmeshed in one another. Rather, there is only "natural-cultural" (Latour, 1993) or "naturecultures" (Haraway, 2003).

Increasingly, there is a growing interest in posthuman research in outdoor studies, especially concerning the work of Deleuze and Guattari and the roles of place (Gough, 2008; 2015; Mannion, Fenwick, & Lynch, 2013; Stewart, 2008, 2012), and contemporary animism and new materialisms (Clarke & McPhie, 2014, 2015; McPhie & Clarke, 2015). This growing body of research recognises the co-constitutive effects between the material and discursive, simultaneously formed by "semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25).

## **Deleuze and becomings**

The theories and concepts presented above challenge dominant taken-for-granted ways of seeing and knowing the world in different but compatible ways by viewing human beings as relational and mutually agentic, rather than having power over, or being superior to the more-than-human. While employing the relational materialist approach, we particularly adopt Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of "becoming" in exploring modes of relating to place(s). For Deleuze, all "becomings belong to geography, they are orientations, directions, entries and exits" (Deleuze, 1987, p. 2). In their attempts to challenge and disrupt many fundamental concepts of Western thought, such as the anthropocentric dualisms between human and nonhuman life and fixed hierarchal orders of being, the French poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and his cowriter Felix Guattari (e.g., 1987, 1994) wrote extensively on philosophy, literature, and the arts. Deleuze and Guattari were not interested in concepts in order to determine what something is; that is, its essence or being. Rather, they were interested in the concepts as a vehicle for expressing a dynamic event, or becoming (Stewart, 2012).

Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 1994), Stewart (2012, 2015) suggests that rather than asking what a concept means, it is more rewarding to think about what it produces, and what new thoughts the concept makes possible. An aspect of becoming is that it must take as its aim the nondominant, or minoritarian. MacCormack (2001) argues that for Deleuze and Guattari, becoming involves questioning cultural hierarchies, power, and the majoritarian. Becoming is as much about becoming nondominant as it is becoming something else.

For Deleuze (1990), all bodies in an event are understood as causes. Semetsky (2006) argues that the process of becoming is always placed between two multiplicities, yet one term does not become the other; the becoming is something between the two, for example, "becoming-river." Therefore, becoming in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) thinking does not mean becoming or imitating the other, but "becoming-other." Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-other supports and sits well alongside the relational materialist approach because it attempts to come to terms with Cartesian duality — it is about developing an antidualist "ethics of integration" (Semetsky, 2011, p. 143).

## **The research**

This research project was designed in the form of a commonplace journey, in which the researchers were situated alongside the research participants

and within ongoing practice (Mullins, 2011, 2014). Mullins (2014) suggests that the commonplace journey is conceptually situated within a set of mobile methodologies, which recognises that human relationships “to each other, space, time, and place, are mediated by our movement through the material and the social world” (p. 568). Through journeying together with participants and employing the commonplace journey methodology, we, as researchers, were able to participate in the relational intra-actions between different bodies, between the participants, and the more-than-human as conveyed through our analysis. However, the event of reading and becoming-with the empirical materials,<sup>2</sup> when engaging in a relational materialist approach, was not about uncovering the truth behind what actually took place. As researchers, we understand that we are a part of and performative agents in these becomings. Thus, our reading of the empirical materials will always be influenced by our understanding and interpretation of it, however relational and decentred we strive to be.

### **Participants**

Participant selection was done using convenience sampling by inviting each of the 15 students enrolled in the course to participate in the study (Bryman, 2015). A total of 14 students agreed to participate in the research project. Ten research participants were female and four male ranging in age from 20 to 25 years old. The participants came from a variety of academic disciplines including biology, modern languages, physical education, and architecture, each of them bringing their different experiences and expectations to the journey course. Three of the participants were from outside Canada: one from each of Denmark, Norway, and Taiwan.

### **Collection of empirical materials**

This research employed multiple methods, using journal writing along with focus group discussions and observation to gather empirical materials. The empirical materials were gathered during a month-long outdoor and environmental education journey in the Canadian Rockies in May 2012. The group was composed of 15 students and a leadership team of five (including this article’s two authors) who journeyed together and experienced the land by canoe and by foot. Students’ participation in this research was voluntary and the project was approved by the Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. In accordance with the ethics board approval, the first author (JM) collected the empirical materials during the journey and the second author (MA), who was the course instructor, was not present when students responded to the research prompts and did not have access to any of the empirical materials until course grades had been submitted. Following the course,

the empirical materials were analysed and the paper written collaboratively. As a result, when reference in the paper is made to “the researcher” (singular), this refers to the first author’s perspective when collecting the empirical materials. All student names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Informed by Mullins’ (2011) commonplace journey methodology, six prompts were asked of the participants at three different stages of the journey: on day 11 after the skill development portion, on day 17 after the Brazeau River canoe trip, and on day 25 on the last day of the backpacking trip. On day 11 after the canoe skill development, the participants were asked to respond to the following two prompts: (1) When have you felt “out-of-place” or “in-place”? (2) What role does skill play in your awareness of and relationship to the natural world? On day 17 after the Brazeau River canoe trip, the second commonplace cycle was conducted and participants were asked to respond to the following prompt: (3) What stories have you heard on the journey and how have they influenced your awareness of and relationship to the natural world?

The third and final commonplace cycle was conducted on day 25 on the last day of the backpacking trip and two days before the course was completed. At this stage, the participants were queried about the following three prompts: (4) How have changes in our activities such as paddling and river rescue instruction, portaging, canoe tripping, backpacking, and small vs. large group living impacted your awareness of and relationship to the natural world? (5) Describe the significant places during our journey and why they were significant to you and how they influenced your awareness of and relationship to the natural world? (6) How do you see navigation or route finding influencing your awareness of and relationship to the natural world? After the participants responded to the prompts, each of the three commonplace cycles was concluded with semistructured focus group discussions (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011).

### **Procedure of analysis**

When designing this research, the six prompts we wished to query were grouped into three guiding topics. Prompts (2) and (6) queried the topic of skill, prompts (1) and (5) the topic of place, and prompts (3) and (4) the topic of journey. To engage in a relational materialist approach means adopting a diffractive way of seeing “with” empirical materials (Barad, 1995, 2007; Haraway, 1997). Jackson and Mazzei (2011) suggest that reading diffractively is not about what is told or experienced, rather, “it is about the ways in which what is experienced is formed in the intra-action between the material and discursive” (p. 130). In the first phase, the participants’ journal entries were read

multiple times to become familiar with the empirical materials. This intra-action “with” the empirical materials by the researchers also involved reading our own research journal notes as well as our notes from focus group discussions and participant observations.

In the second phase, the researchers installed themselves as being part of and a performative agent in an event of “becoming-with” the empirical materials. For Deleuze (1990), the event of becoming-with the empirical materials is an effect of affecting and being affected where thinking exceeds us as subjects. Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) refer to this as “activating all of your bodily affective perceptions when intra-acting with the data” (p. 537) in order to understand something about the entangled relationships and mutual transformations taking place in the event being analysed. In this phase of the analysis, the focus was on reading the empirical materials looking for qualities that emerge “in-between” the different bodies involved in the event. We approach the moments of becoming-other as emerging from the intersection between human/nonhuman and experiences/bodies, to understand how matter functions in the intra-actions of the participants, as remembered and told in their journals.

## Setting and context

The month-long journey course had the following outline: four days of preparation and theory on campus, seven days of canoe skill development, a five-day canoe trip, one rest day, followed by an eight-day backpacking trip, and one wrap-up day. The goals of the course are many layered including outdoor skill development such as white-water canoeing, river rescue, navigation, and bear safety. As a means for promoting place-responsiveness, one strategy used during this journey was regularly sharing place-based stories. One of those place-stories, the story of Chief Smallboy, seemed to have affected the participants as nearly all of the participants wrote about the story of Chief Smallboy in their journals. Therefore, we include a brief overview of the story in order to provide context for our analysis.

### The story of Chief Smallboy

As we neared the beginning of the portage trail leading to the Brazeau River, we passed through Smallboy’s camp. In 1968, Chief Bob Smallboy, a prominent and respected leader of the Ermineskin Cree Nation, led a group of 140 people from the Ermineskin Native Reserve in central Alberta to Kootenay Plains in the Alberta Rockies. Smallboy opposed the then Canadian government’s attempts to assimilate First Nations people and cleanse them of their traditional cultures and practices.

Seeing the harmful effects of reserve life where alcoholism, child abuse, unemployment, and suicide were far too common, Chief Smallboy sought to reconnect his people with a more traditional and culturally authentic life (Botting, 2005). After a few years and much success at Kootenay Plains, Smallboy moved his encampment to its present location. In 1984 at the age of 86, Chief Smallboy passed away. Sadly, as we passed through Smallboy’s camp, there were many reminders of the difficult times that First Nations people had, and continue to have in Canada today.

## Analysis

This section is structured by the three guiding topics – skill, place, and journey – from the research design. We view these guiding topics as entangled, and as such, having no clear boundaries and therefore moving in and out of one another. To guide the research process, the following research question was formulated: What modes of relating to place(s) may emerge from a decentring of humans in favour of mutual and relational engagements with matter and human–nonhuman encounters? As researchers, we have selected journal entries from each guiding topic where a relational materialist reading enabled us to notice moments of becoming-other as emerging in-between the different bodies involved in the event.

### Skill

Outdoor skill was considered an important part of the relationship to and awareness of the ~~natural~~ world for all participants in this study. By skill we do not simply mean technical skills of the body related to a specific outdoor activity, but rather following Ingold (2000), we refer to skill as “the capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being, indissolubly mind and body” (p. 5). Skill in this sense includes reading the landscape from learning about its natural~cultural history, its flora and fauna, reading the river and the flow of the water, through an embodied experience of place(s). When reflecting on the role of skill, Lindsey wrote:

I found that as my skills and knowledge of the outdoors grew, so did my respect and appreciation for the natural world. By gaining more skills I was able to feel more comfortable within the natural world until I felt like I was a part of it rather than just travelling through it for personal gain. (Lindsey)

Lindsey’s journal entry reveals a variety of ideas and possible perspectives. One could argue that Lindsey’s initial outlook was people centred and that her view of the ~~natural~~ world was based on the ~~natural~~ world being there for her personal gain and

enjoyment. However, by looking at the quote from a relational materialist perspective, we can see that from learning more about place(s), she started to see the **natural** world differently. Lindsey also expresses how skill enabled her to become more comfortable within the **natural** world to the point where she felt like she was a part of it, as opposed to merely a visitor passing through it. Another example of the role skill plays in the participants' relation to and awareness of the **natural** world was expressed by Sonya:

I believe that outdoor skill plays a significant role and it increases your awareness of the natural world. For those who have little or no experience in the outdoors, many fail to understand the direct relationship and impact that the natural world has upon you. It gives you a better understanding of the challenges that can be faced in the natural world and how outdoor skill can change and improve your outlook on nature. (Sonya)

Sonya was used to spending time in the outdoors and her reflection is many layered. Similar to her fellow participants in this study, she believes that outdoor skill plays a significant role in her relationship to the **natural** world. Sonya wrote that outdoor skill changed her awareness of the **natural** world. Having greater knowledge and experience in the outdoors enabled her to reposition herself in relation to the **natural** world. Being able to read the land and relate to place in a more reciprocal and responsive way, enabled her to better understand the impact the **natural** world had upon her. Another aspect that was expressed by Sonya is how outdoor skill may help to better understand the challenges the **natural** world is facing and the human relationships within that process. In this third quote regarding skill, Lisa expressed how skill played an important role in her relationship to the **natural** world. Lisa wrote:

Outdoor skill is an important part of my relationship to and awareness of the natural world. It strengthens my relationship because I feel more attached to something when I understand it. When I know how something works, what it can be used for, what it needs to flourish, etc. I feel more connected to it. By knowing these things, I am also much more aware of the natural world. For example, by knowing that a prairie crocus is hearty in its environment, but fragile if dug up and attempted to be transplanted, I am appreciative of those that still grow around Alberta, because there aren't many still around my own house. I will also be careful not to trample or destroy

it because it has lasted so long already in this habitat and I have no right to ruin that. (Lisa)

By understanding how "something works," in this case the native prairie crocus, Lisa changed her awareness of the world around her. While gathered around a prairie crocus during the course, Lisa learned that the prairie crocus, also known as "windflower," grows on unbroken prairie where it is well suited to dry prairie soil and it is well adapted to fire; it also grows on the dry south-facing slopes of the Rockies. First Nations people called the crocus "Ears of the Earth," as these furry ears of the prairie thrust up to listen for the first faint rustle of summer (Brown, 1970). The prairie crocus affected Lisa differently after she had gained more knowledge about it and from seeing it grow in a different habitat. Seen from a relational materialist perspective, Lisa and the prairie crocus have no agency of their own, even though they are both active in the process of becoming-other. Rather, echoing Deleuze's (1990) words, all bodies in the event are to be understood as causes in relation to each other; what is understood as "agency" in this line of thinking "is a quality that emerges *in-between* the different bodies involved in mutual engagements and relations" (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 530), in the event of Lisa "becoming-crocus."

### Place

In exploring the topic of place, the participants were asked to reflect upon whether they had felt "in-place" or "out-of-place" in one way or another during the journey. This question can have several meanings. Therefore, it was interesting to notice the variation in how the participants responded to the question. We began each day with the group gathering in a circle to share a thought-for-the-day. In one of those morning circles, the idea of guardianship was introduced by one of the members of the leadership team. The idea of seeing ourselves as caretakers and guardians of place(s) prompted Sandra to reconsider her role in relation to the **natural** world. Sandra picked up on this and wrote:

I guess when I think about if I feel "in"- or "out-of-place," I have to evaluate what I believe my role is in relationship to the natural world. It really struck me the notion that we are guardians of the places we go and have been. We were meant to be caretakers of our world and so I believe if we travel and enjoy nature in a respectful and caring manner, then we are in place. At least that is when I feel "in-place" with nature. I guess I feel "out-of-place" when I see the devastation to the natural world humans have brought

such as pollution, unnecessary waste and defacing landscape so dramatically that it greatly hinders the natural world. (Sandra)

We found it noteworthy that Sandra used the word “our” world and not “the” world. From a relational materialist perspective, Sandra’s choice of words may be understood as relating to place(s) with deeper care and empathy, as well as an expression of a shared responsibility for the impact we as humans have on our world. As researchers, we acknowledge the duality inherent in this prompt. However, following a relational materialist thinking we see “in” and/or “out” as occurring simultaneously as well as not at all.

One reflection in relation to the body and an embodied sense of feeling in-place was one by Anna, who wrote about how she “felt in place when river and canoe felt like one unit.” Anna’s thought suggests a sense of unity between the body, canoe, and river, which was expressed by several of the participants. Viewed from a relational materialist perspective, Anna felt in-place when the experience of matter and object, here in the form of water and canoe, involved not two separate entities, but one entangled unit. Anna’s sense of unity between bodies (human and nonhuman) and matter involves an embodied sense of unity between herself and her paddling partner having already been established. In other words, Anna’s experience of a sense of unity between river and canoe begins with a sense of unity between the human bodies in the canoe. Such a unity of bodies with/in the canoe includes a simultaneous movement of body weight to respond to the rhythm of the waves and the different speed of the water.

Following Deleuze’s (1990) thinking, the river and Anna can be understood as bodies and matter of forces of different speed and intensities, “involved in an active and ongoing relation” (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 530). From a relational materialist point of view, the paddle and canoe work as an extension of the body creating a link between the human body and the water. Through the commonplace journey approach and from seeing the participants becoming immersed with/in the river, we suggest that Anna may have already moved beyond becoming one with her paddling partner, thus allowing her to focus her attention and awareness on what is outside of or beyond her own human body. Such a reading would suggest that skill plays a key role in Anna being in-place with the river and canoe, with matter, and objects beyond the human body in the event of Anna “becoming-with” the river, and the river “becoming-with” Anna (Deleuze, 1990).

The five-day canoe journey started high up in the Brazeau River valley in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies. Surrounded by huge canyons and steep banks

the river cut its way through the land and ran crystal clear. As we were coming towards the end of our journey on the Brazeau River, we reached the reservoir formed by the Brazeau Dam. Here, the landscape changed dramatically as the flow of the river was interrupted by a human-made hydropower plant. The water changed from crystal clear to dark brown and the low spring water in the reservoir exposed long muddy plains. Regarding feeling in-“or” out-of-place, Jenny wrote, “I felt out of place at the Brazeau reservoir as the water changed to a brownish colour and stopped moving.” From a relational materialist point of view, the river, as a different body involved in a mutual engagement with Jenny, had changed in character. The river, to which Jenny had established a relationship, was no longer there. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “Every becoming is a block of coexistence” (p. 340). This coexistence was disrupted as she entered the human-made landscape of the reservoir, in the event of Jenny “becoming-river.”

### **Journey**

Journey was the third guiding topic of the analysis and the empirical materials included students’ journal entries focusing on issues related to changes in activities, hearing stories, and significant places along the journey. In the quote below, Jens writes about how change in activities affected his relationship to the ~~natural~~ world:

Variation in activity was interesting to contemplate, as it provoked an equal variation in my relationship to the natural world. The week of skill development was a very positive experience, but my focus was on my personal skills, understanding the currents and enjoying sports. On the Brazeau however, this relationship changed. I now found myself inspired by huge canyons, the winding river, and soaring bald eagles. On the hiking trip, the emphasis was placed even further on nature itself, and not as much on my personal skills. In many ways, hiking is experiencing nature in a much simpler form than in a canoe. I found in the smaller groups, or alone, I was more in sync with nature, whereas in larger groups, I was more concerned with my interactions with the people. (Jens)

This journal entry was written at the end of the journey, providing Jens the opportunity to think back on how his relationship to the ~~natural~~ world had varied through experiencing the land while canoeing and while backpacking. Jens’ quote expresses some of the multiple relations this journey has enabled, including relating to self, others (human–nonhuman),

and to the ~~natural~~ world. The change in activity from personal development of paddling skills to canoeing on the Brazeau River and further onto experiencing the land by foot, allowed Jens to deepen his relationship with the ~~natural~~ world. From a relational materialist perspective, we see that as Jens shifted his focus of attention to something other than himself or his personal skills, his relationship to the ~~natural~~ world changed. Several of the participants expressed that while backpacking in their smaller groups, or when having solo time, they experienced the ~~natural~~ world becoming even more present. For example, Sandra wrote:

Significant places for me included times where I simply stopped and listened. It was so awesome to focus on what was happening around me in nature that is always happening, but I often turn a blind eye to. The birds singing, the winds rustling, the water gurgling and the grass rustling were only a few of the many observations I made as I sat. (Sandra)

In a relational materialist analysis of this quote, we see that Sandra does not only refer to place as a specific geographical location, but also in terms of a particular moment in time. By altering her temporal flow, by slowing down to stop and listen, she allowed for different intensities to emerge. All of a sudden, something happens. Things that are always happening around her, but she normally does not take notice of.

Throughout the journey, different place stories were shared. Hearing the story of Chief Smallboy was something that nearly all the participants wrote about in their journals. Chief Smallboy dedicated his whole life trying to reconnect his Cree people to the land in order to pass on the legacy of their forefathers. Sadly, after Chief Smallboy passed away, there was no one to carry on that tradition. This was obvious for all of us to see as we passed through the camp on our way towards the portage trail. Karen wrote:

The Chief Smallboy story was one story that influenced me. To hear about someone who was so connected to the land and who fought so hard to protect it was really inspiring. It made me take a second look around and helped me appreciate the land for all it is worth. I attempted to see the land as if through Chief Smallboy's eyes. (Karen)

In a relational materialist analysis of this quote, we see that in the event of Karen becoming-Smallboy, her personal outlook on the land took on a different meaning, as she tried to envision the land through the eyes of someone else, someone who was so deeply

connected to it. Another example of how place stories affected the participants in different ways was seen in the following quote by Lindsey:

Hearing the stories behind some of the native plants such as Wolf Lichen and Labrador Tea made me feel more connected to the natural world. I think this was because as I learned more and heard their stories they became something more meaningful. I found the same thing happened with stories such as the story of Chief Smallboy and stories of hearing wolves howling in the morning. I find that the more I was told both about the place and the animals and plants that reside in it, the more aware I was of the area I was travelling through and the closer to it I felt. (Lindsey)

In this quote, Lindsey expressed how hearing place stories helped her respond to place more deeply. The more she learned about native plants and animals and heard their stories, the closer to them she felt. From a relational materialist perspective, we see that what emerged in-between Lindsey and a native plant or animal such as the Wolf Lichen or the wolf, was enabled by hearing their stories and from an embodied experience of place(s).

The final example from the participants' journals was written towards the end of our journey. Every day we had been seeing animal prints; fresh wolf prints along the riverbank on the Brazeau, and torn-up ground along the backpacking route from bears looking for food. Each night backpacks with food and other strong-scented items such as toothpaste and deodorant were hung 4 metres above the ground to keep them away from the bears. The constant awareness and presence of bears affected how we lived and travelled during the journey. This included the daily routine of hanging our food and making loud noises while backpacking — especially when walking into a headwind through dense vegetation — and always carrying a bear spray. We noticed how the constant presence of bears affected our behaviour and became more and more embodied in all of us as the days went by. Kim wrote:

In the outdoors it's not always easy to stick to plans. Mother Nature makes our plans for us. We have to go with what is given to us. You must learn to read the land and the sky and the waters, which dramatically increases the relationship to the land. Seeing my footprints next to another animals prints, I feel as if we are walking the same path and feel a closeness. (Kim)

This journal entry illustrated how Kim had come to relate to place in a responsive way through living in and with the land during this month-long journey. From learning how to read the land, the sky, and the waters, Kim had established a closer relationship to place(s). From a relational materialist analysis of this quote, we see that what is happening in-between Kim seeing her own footprints next to the prints of a different body, entangles her in a closeness with place from sharing and walking the same path, in the event of Kim “becoming-bear.”

## **Discussion and implications for practice**

Our analysis of the empirical materials using a relational materialist approach as outlined by Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010), challenges the anthropocentric conceptualisation of a human-centred world where human beings are seen as being apart from and having power over the ~~natural~~ world. Engaging in a relational materialist approach has enabled us as researchers to move beyond the dominant subject/object, human/nonhuman, discourse/matter, and nature/culture dichotomies that are present in Western thought today. However, engaging in a relational materialist approach and making the ontological and empirical turns required in order to do research differently was challenging. St. Pierre (2016) argues that in order to think the posthuman and to invent posthuman research practices, it is a challenge for qualitative research to move away from conventional research methodologies in order to find new concepts and appropriate conceptual practices. In this article, even though working with/in a relational materialist approach, we acknowledge that we still use a rather conventional framework to report the research; this reflects our own process of becoming-other.

The focus for our analysis was guided by the research question: What modes of relating to place may emerge from a decentring of humans in favour of mutual and relational engagements with matter and human–nonhuman encounters? By viewing all other nonhuman forces and matter itself as mutually performative agents, rather than passive and immutable, our analysis presents an alternative way of becoming responsive to place(s). The relational materialist approach enabled us to understand how the participants in this study immersed and opened themselves to encounters and intra-actions with the more-than-human (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Findings from this study suggest that a decentring of humans in favour of mutual and relational engagements with matter and the more-than-human, in combination with outdoor skill development and place stories that involve reading the land and learning from its natural–cultural history, opens new possibilities for embodied relations to

place(s). Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), this line of reasoning resonates with a relational materialist approach (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010), which questions and challenges the taken-for-granted human-centred worldview and resulting dualisms.

In addition, these findings point to three possible implications for outdoor educators. The first implication is related to outdoor skill. The students in this study were more able to enhance their responsiveness to place once they had developed outdoor travel and living skills to a point where staying warm, dry, and safe were more-or-less straightforward. For example, if they spent all their time on the river worried about flipping their canoe, they would be less likely to have the energy or the ability to observe the canyons, to notice the logged out clearcuts, or the bald eagles soaring above. Findings from this study support previous research where participants provided examples of how the intense focus on the difficulty of the activity also made them feel removed from the ~~natural~~ world (Wattchow, 2007, 2008). Drawing upon our empirical findings, we suggest that outdoor skill development be expanded to include reading the land by learning from its natural and cultural history, its flora and fauna, and reading the river and the flow of the water, through an embodied experience of place(s).

The second implication is the significance of place stories. This study supports other findings indicating that sharing place stories has the potential to provide significant effects regarding relations to place(s) (Asfeldt, Urberg, & Henderson, 2009; Brookes, 2002; Henderson, 2010; Higgins and Wattchow, 2013; Stewart, 2008). Through embodied experience of place(s), and journeys such as this, participants are provided the opportunity of creating their own place stories. Each journal entry presented in the analysis is an example of such a story. However, Stewart (2008) suggests that when reading the land and learning from its place stories, we need to ask ourselves “whose place, whose history?” we are including when constructing our own place stories. Similarly, Gough (2015) highlights how “different storytelling practices incorporate particular selections of narrative strategies and conventions” (p. 236).

The third implication is related to journey. The taken-for-granted assumption evoked by Baker (2005) about the environment playing an integral role in outdoor and environmental education simply because it is the setting for many outdoor programmes, needs to be reconsidered. As researchers and outdoor educators, we agree with Baker (2005) and recommend questioning the philosophical and educational underpinnings of outdoor and environmental practices. This includes asking ourselves, as educators, whether we want our students to become actively

engaged in the landscape rather than simply passing through it. Gough (2008) suggests that there is nothing profoundly pedagogical inherent in place(s) and argues against Gruenewald's (2003) notion that places are educative in themselves. Rather, informed by Deleuze and Guattari, one of Gough's (2008) key points is that place(s) "becoming pedagogical through cultural practices that enable or encourage us to attend to their multifarious qualities" (p. 71).

Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) suggest that a turn to relational materialism can be understood as a more ethical research practice in that it actively engages "with what has previously been considered as minor, that is non-human matter and artefacts" (p. 540). Furthermore, they suggest that this ontological turn offers opportunities for educational research, for example, that it might "increase our attentiveness to children's strong relations to the things, artefacts and spaces in pre-schools and schools that are often overlooked in favour of the social or interpersonal relations" (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 540). However, Quinn (2013) argues that although posthuman perspectives may help to reveal the vibrancy and power of this learning, they are less helpful in exposing the ways in which this learning is shaped by social inequalities.

As we engage in exploring experiences in practice, thinking with Deleuze prompts values that are multiple and future-oriented, as we do not yet know what a body can do (Buchanan, 1997). Lenz Taguchi (2011) suggests that this "means looking for future possibilities and potentialities in what might become" (p. 48). In this article, we suggest that a decentring of humans in favour of mutual and relational engagements with matter and the more-than-human opens new possibilities for embodied relations to place(s), in becoming-crocus, becoming-river, and becoming-bear.

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## Notes

1. Following both Sellers and Gogh (2010) and Stewart (2015), we adopt the practice of "sous rature." From a relational materialist/posthumanist perspective, there are no distinctions between natural or unnatural environments, as we are always already belonging and participating in a more-than-human-world. Hence, the word natural is "under erasure" to signify that the given word is inadequate yet necessary. However, in

the prompts asked to the students, natural is not under erasure as we did not want to influence the students in how they responded.

2. We have chosen to use the term "empirical materials" rather than "data" throughout the paper. We recognise that some authors we reference (i.e., Barad, 1995, 2007; Haraway, 1997; and Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) use the term data. However, we agree with Denzin (2013) who argues for not using the term data since it brings into play a positivist ontology and epistemology based on a politics of evidence. Instead, Denzin proposes the use of empirical materials.

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