Ecuadorean child-plastic common worlds: An 'ethics of vulnerability’

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Young children around the world inherit a waste crisis. In the global south, this waste crisis is even more acute than in the north. For instance, the explosive growth of waste is a challenge in countries such as Ecuador, where precarious solid waste management practices have polluted soil, water and air in zones with high biodiversity. Feminist environmental scholars link the persistence of waste problems to practices that ontologically consider waste as static and inert. Yet, like all matter, waste materials transform, and are transforming, both independently from and interdependently with humans (Hird, 2012). Moreover, our lives are inextricably entangled with the materials we produce, use, discard, and then try to manage.

In early childhood studies, the most common response to the waste crisis has been teaching children to embrace environmental stewardship based on education, surveillance, sanction and censure. Yet, leading environmental researchers argue that a sustainable waste future requires approaches that challenge ineffective, even detrimental, waste management strategies. Although the Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle, recover, remediate, repair) attract high levels of attention and compliance, they are ineffective because they take waste “out of sight and out of mind” and perpetuate consumerism (Hird, 2013). In other words, the Rs are making the waste crisis worse.

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic research with young children in Cuenca, Ecuador. I explore children’s entangled lives with plastics in a country where waste facilities are inadequate for its own trash’s needs. Through supporting children to comprehend how our lives are deeply entangled with waste and to learn to reacclimatize to the challenges and opportunities waste poses, I engage with a new kind of relational ethics that decentres humans’ actions and attends instead to human-material relations what Hird (2013) calls an “ethics of environmental vulnerability.”

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References


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