Lessons from the greenhouse: Engaging with multispecies co-existence and non-innocent care

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There is a school in an urban Finnish suburb in which the atrium courtyard of the building has been built into a big greenhouse complete with glass roofs and technology. When one, after having crossed the familiar institutional space of the secondary school entrance hall, opens the door of the greenhouse, another world overwhelms. A different air and a different atmosphere: humid, light, filled with fertile smells of blooming and degrading plants. Also lively cries and rustles, because this place is the home of tens of different animals.

In this presentation we explore human-animal encounters taking place in a greenhouse in a school. In so doing, we weave together the notion of care as an ethically and materially complex issue (de la Bellacasa) and Donna Haraway’s thought of ‘staying with the trouble’. In a Harawayan fashion, the research presented aims at attending to layers and versions of messy multispecies co-existence without simple dualistic solutions. The following questions propel the inquiry: What is the greenhouse? What are the assemblages that take place in and make up the greenhouse? Of what kind are the relations of care between the human children and their nonhuman companions?

The events discussed in the paper include shared moments between the participating nonhuman animals and the students responsible for their care, and the ‘animal club’ run in the greenhouse by secondary school students for primary school pupils. The examination will, however, reach beyond the greenhouse, involving the partly shared histories of the families living in the unprivileged suburban area, and the rescue animals that inhabit the greenhouse.

Methodologically, we use Haraway’s ‘bag lady storytelling’ to experiment with versions of human-non-human alliance in non-reductive ways and to think about education and social justice as more-than-human. The multispecies assemblages at stake are not innocent, rather, they provoke ongoing trouble with questions such as the justifications and consequences of including nonhumans in research, and economical and technological dependencies. Mapping multispecies co-existence requires entering the ‘unsecure terrains of more-than-human epistemologies’ (Pedersen & Pini), which is and should not be easy.

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