

# Thinking with Black Ecologies in Early Childhood Education

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Résumé de l'article

We are three Black women working in childhood and youth education research and practice in Tkaronto, Canada. In this paper we bring together our personal, research, and pedagogical inquiries into Black ecologies. We focus on foregrounding how Black ecologies can bring possibilities to (re)story Black nature relations and respond to socio-ecological injustice. Our intention is to encourage early childhood educators to think, in situated ways, with both the potential and challenges of this work. We do this by intentionally foregrounding propositions, grounded in stories and questions for inquiry, that educators can think with in their own contexts.



## Thinking with Black Ecologies in Early Childhood Education

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*We are three Black women working in childhood and youth education research and practice in Tkaronto, Canada. In this paper we bring together our personal, research, and pedagogical inquiries into Black ecologies. We focus on foregrounding how Black ecologies can bring possibilities to (re)story Black nature relations and respond to socio-ecological injustice. Our intention is to encourage early childhood educators to think, in situated ways, with both the potential and challenges of this work. We do this by intentionally foregrounding propositions, grounded in stories and questions for inquiry, that educators can think with in their own contexts.*

**Key words:** Black ecologies, place, storytelling, environmental education

### Opening orientations

In this paper, we draw from our ongoing work on possibilities for pedagogical and curricular engagements with Black ecologies in early childhood education. We begin with the premise that early childhood education is a key site at which to make more livable worlds. Put another way, we insist, as others have done, that early childhood education is not a neutral, innocent place that is outside of the inheritances of socio-ecological injustice, and there is an urgency in current times for early childhood education, at multiple scales, to respond (see for example recent work from Lees & Bang, 2022; Vintimilla et al., 2023). The multiple scales of responses to unjustly distributed socio-ecological precarity that we think are needed range from the everyday experiences of children, to each centre's pedagogical commitments, to policy and accompanying educational framework

articulations (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2021). In this paper we invite you, the reader, to think together with us primarily about the first interruption—the everyday pedagogical and curricular experiences of children, including but not limited to outdoor experiences. Our particular focus is on possibilities for responding in affirmative ways to racist colonial erasures and deficit constructions of Black place relations. As we illustrate throughout the paper, this is situated (rather than universalized) work that is intentionally meant to prompt early childhood educators to consider what might be possible, including attending to what could be challenging, in doing this work in their own particular contexts.

We offer some partial propositions for such engagements—not as a recipe to follow but as situated ethical orientations for knowledge making in relation to Black ecologies. This also means that we purposefully pose multiple questions for the reader. Building on previous work, we begin with some conceptual framing of Black geographies and

ecologies, including their pertinence to early childhood education (Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023). We then offer propositions for attunement to Black geographies and ecologies in early childhood education. Each provocation is accompanied by diffractive storytelling to illustrate how it might be activated.

This storytelling is intended to highlight that Black ecologies hold multiple possibilities for early childhood pedagogies that are anticolonial, affirm Black childhoods, and are place based in ways that center repair, relationality/kinship, and reciprocity. We intentionally use the language and methodology of diffractive storytelling rather than reflection. While we suggest that engaging Black ecologies requires educator introspection, reflection doesn't fully capture the inherent relationality and situatedness of this introspective work, such as in thinking and being in responsive relation with particular past-present-future histories, places, people, practices, and more. In other words, Black ecologies are inherently relational. Diffraction, as many early childhood scholars and educators (see for example, Peers, 2023; Reynolds, 2023) have discussed, has the potential to hold relational complexity in signalling attunement to difference, enacting interferences (rather than [re]producing reflective sameness) and the nonlinearity of knowledge making across space and time (Haraway, 2018).

In stating that we use storytelling to illustrate how Black ecologies might be put to work in early childhood education, we signal that stories are one of multiple modes of relational inquiry with Black ecologies. Our illustrative storytelling also includes insights from our research with a group of Black Canadian parents on their ecological practices with and educational desires for their young children. We also use storytelling to underline that engaging with Black ecologies in early childhood education involves bringing together the real and the imagined—as inventive practices that are also anticolonial and antiracist.

## Introducing Black geographies: (re)Storying Black place relations

In this section we offer a brief overview of Black geographies in early childhood education. We begin with Black geographies due to a close (inter)connectedness with Black ecologies, and to assist entry into the question *What do Black ecologies have to do with early childhood education?* Black geographies attend to Blackness as always becoming through situated processes where questions of space and place are key (Hawthorne & Lewis, 2023). Black geographies bring an attunement to Black place relations as sites of oppressive and liberatory structures, knowledges, and practices. In this way, “geographies of exclusion” and the relational “situated knowledges of Black communities” are both of interest in Black geographies (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p. 4).

Brought to early childhood education contexts, this can mean then, that Black geographies offer a lens with which to center place and space in relation to Black communities (including Black children) in affirmative ways while also recognizing the spatialized effects of anti-Blackness. Geographer Katherine McKittrick (2014) illustrates the work and close attention that is often needed to uncover Canadian geographies of exclusion. She says:

I was born outside of Toronto, Ontario, and grew up in small Ontario towns—on Georgian Bay and near the Grand River and in and around the borders of the Niagara Escarpment. It wasn't until I moved to Toronto that I came to read these places as black. This is to say that while most of the areas and regions I grew up in were predominantly demographically white ... when I began to study black diaspora cultures I realized that these very locations were also inflected with all sorts of meaningful racialized archives. (p. 233)

McKittrick's narrative teaches us how engaging Black geographies is an invitation to actively and creatively (re)story Black places and Black relations in ways that **attend with curiosity** to personal experiences, real and imagined presence, erasure, resistance, and **subversion**. Early childhood education already holds the potential for the kinds of **transmodal storytelling** that Black geographies invites, where relational Black place (re)storying

alongside children might include fictional storytelling, visual arts, poetry, music, and creative movement. We invite early childhood educators to ask questions that center place, specificity, and emotion. We focus on these three areas because they invite curiosity about the *where* of Black relations, including those relations that are not so readily visible. In highlighting specificity and emotions, our intention is to spark curiosity that moves away from a disembodied “elsewhere” mapping of Black places and instead fosters affective and situated engagements.

- **Place:** What place and/or memory of a place does the invitation to think with Black geographies bring forward for me?
- **Specificity:** What might it look like to think with Black geographies in the particular places and spaces of early childhood education in which I work?
- **Emotions:** What emotions does the proposition to collectively (re)story Black place relations in early childhood education evoke for me?

### Introducing Black ecologies: (re)Storying Black nature relations

Black geographies and Black ecologies share a concern with storied Black relations to place and space. Black ecologies bring a specific focus on Black people’s relations with nature, including environmental concerns such as disproportionate impacts and resistance to the effects of climate change and environmental racism (Moulton & Salo, 2022). This means that Black ecologies include Black **resistance** to extractive more-than-human relations and to colonial human/more-than-human divides in particular places. Alex Moulton and Inge Salo (2022) use the term “**insurgent** spatial knowledge and practices” (p. 160, emphasis added), which speaks to **disruptive** ways of knowing, being, and doing in response to the unjustly distributed impacts of ecological precarity and to long histories of Black land dispossession. These **rebellious** knowledges and practices also provide insights on possibilities for more livable futures (Roane & Hosbey, 2019). Both within and beyond the focus on Black place relations, **rebellion** and **insurgency** are important provocations for enacting liberatory early childhood pedagogies. We also suggest that they might be generative orientations for noticing and affirmatively responding to what is already (subversively) present in children’s place-making practices.

Alongside this close attention to the interconnectedness of social and ecological justice for Black life, Black ecologies, like Black geographies, bring attention to **relational Black life** that is not confined to the effects of anti-Blackness. This for instance means that Black ecologies affirmatively attend to the ways that Black relations with the more-than-human world encompass **the real, the desired, and the imaginary**. This inclusion of the imaginary means that, as with Black geographies, creativity is a key expression of Black ecologies. This includes an attunement to how movement, stories, sound, and poetry (and more) are expressions of “**Black cultures of fugitivity, improvisation, struggle, and place-making**” in relation to multispecies relations (Moulton & Salo, 2022, p. 157, emphasis added).

Black ecologies, then, are an important interruption to narratives that define Black people’s multispecies relations predominantly through absence, loss, and destruction. We want to emphasize here that this is not an attempt to cover over or romanticize past-present anti-Black colonial histories of intentional separation from lands and water. We return to the inspiring work of Black geographies scholar Katherine McKittrick (2021) to help us think through the necessity and complexity of (re)storying relational Black life without a reliance on repetitions of anti-Blackness. She says:

Even when we are theorizing resistance, violence is often the starting point. It is as though blackness can only ever be a site of violation. Like many scholars, I have been trying to think about how to work

through racism and racial violence without repeating and profiting from what Saidiya Hartman calls “scenes of subjection.” (p. 8)

These repetitions of anti-Black subjection are also relevant to early childhood education. For instance, Fikile has written about the need to counter constructions of Black and other racially marginalized childhoods in environmental education that figure them as “at risk” and “out of touch with nature” and thus construct nature experiences as a developmental and/or behavioural “fixative.” It is both racist and colonial to position nature as a pure and separate space that is for some children for “free play” and discovery and for others it is corrective (Nxumalo, 2021; Nxumalo & ross, 2019). Both of these formations are opposite to **relationality** and **reciprocity**—key elements of anticolonial environmental education guided by Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous ecologies. Black ecologies ask that educators create educational places and spaces where **relational Black childhoods are affirmed** such that Black children’s interests and curiosities about places and their more-than-human inhabitants are **nurtured and taken seriously**.

Danielle Purifoy’s (2023) poem “Forests Are Black Futures” published in the zine *Black Ecologies* beautifully illustrates insurgent knowledges and relational practices that hold the memory of anti-Black histories yet are not singularly defined by the effects of these histories:

When the environmentalists said we don’t care  
about the forest, what they meant is that they  
didn’t want us to remember. They stole our  
witnesses and our bones buried beneath  
them. They turned sacred grounds into their  
playgrounds, museums of conquest and  
species surveillance.  
But the erasure was not total. My daddy knew  
Michigan forests because his daddy knew  
Alabama forests. The medicines still find their way  
from the underbrush to the hands of Black  
douglas, healers, foragers following what their  
great grandma told them to do when they had  
cramps or congestion or when they didn’t sleep  
good. My great grandma cut the bark off the  
sassafras tree for tea. My mom will find an herbal  
remedy for almost anything. (p. 12)

Here we invite readers to pause and contemplate (perhaps in discussion with others) what the preceding invitations towards thinking with Black ecologies provoke. Some questions and orientations that you might pause-with include:

- **Erasure and marginalization:** How do my practices, even inadvertently, erase or marginalize Black children’s ecologies?
- **Affirmative (re)storying:** How might I pay attention to and (re)story Black children’s ecological relationships in affirmative ways?
- **Multiple temporalities:** What are past, present, and future Black ecologies that I might engage through “real” and “imaginary” modalities in the particular places and spaces in which I work with young children? What specific examples come up?



- **Creative expression:** Black geographies and Black ecologies both bring forward creative expression as a central way through which emplaced Black relations are materialized. What emerges for you in thinking about existing and emergent art, music, oral histories, storytelling, fiction as possibilities for early childhood education curriculum making in relation to Black ecologies and Black geographies?

### Insurgent Black ecologies in a Canadian city

The previous discussion of Black ecologies underlines an orientation towards *presence* that actively resists discourses of erasure and absence. Taking presence seriously means that in our recent research within the context of urban spaces and places in what is currently Canada, we began with an ethical commitment towards making visible the Black ecologies that are always already present in multiple situated forms in the city places and spaces that Black people inhabit. In this research we engaged in focus group conversations with a small group of Black parents living in Toronto with children from junior kindergarten to grade 3. Our interest is in **presencing relations** with Toronto lands and waters, perspectives on climate change and its effects on Black communities, and desires for young children's environmental and climate change education. We are interested in **collectively inquiring** into the question: What are some of the ecological relationships to places in the city that Black families have and what are some of the ways they would like to see these relationships included in curriculum and pedagogy?

Working with a conceptual framework grounded in Black ecologies meant that our dialogues were structured to intentionally invite stories with potential for **disrupting erasures and deficit framings** of Black Canadian ecological relationships and knowledges. For example, for one focus group, participants were invited to share photos (personal or publicly found) of local outdoor places in greater Toronto that they spend time in with their children. In discussing these photos, they shared beautiful relational stories (see Figure 1), stories situated in familiar places like what is currently called Lake Ontario as well as stories of small patio spaces in high-rises as ways to experience the outdoors in the city. Toronto land and water stories also merged with stories of affective relationships and connections with other places some participants had emigrated from to Canada. Some of these stories were pedagogical encounters that told of intentional learning provocations with their children, including a story of teaching children about Toronto as Indigenous lands. These pedagogical encounters were narrated alongside both an appreciation of some aspects of school curriculum and a **critical analysis of absences** related to environmental and climate justice and the specificities of Black Canadian land-histories and environmental racisms.



*“This is my favorite part ... we would just stare out, talk about life, school, ask my daughter questions about what she loves about nature, play games like ask what do you see? Can you find something that’s living? Find something in nature. She really likes it”*

Figure 1. (re)Storying waterway relations.

The **families’ educational desires** for early childhood and elementary learning for their children included engagement with the effects of extraction on nature, advocacy/activism for the environment, and food justice for their communities. They spoke of desires for curriculum connecting Indigenous knowledges and environmental education, which they expressed was not a presence in their younger children’s curriculum. They also noted the separation of environmental science and justice. For instance, there was a sense that in the early years, environmental learning was dominated by Western science and it was not until the upper grades that there was engagement (yet still limited) with environmental and climate justice issues, such as in social studies classes. So, families—though they did not use that word—were speaking of the necessity of **interdisciplinarity** in environmental and climate change education in early childhood and beyond. Their stories showed that they were also living Black ecologies as interdisciplinary pedagogies that bound **embodied encounters** with lands and waters together with **storying anticolonial relations**, science, food justice, and more. These everyday pedagogical practices of interdisciplinary Black ecologies resonate with the observation that “black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 4).

In underlining the interdisciplinary, creative, and insurgent commitments of Black ecologies, we invite readers to pause here and think with Black land and water stories in relation to these commitments:

- **Interdisciplinarity:** What might it look like to foreground interdisciplinary approaches in activating Black ecologies in my pedagogical practices with young children?
- **Black relational presence:** What is opened up pedagogically in thinking with Black relational presence as central to environmental education? Here again, presence gestures to past, present, and desired liberatory future presence.
- **(Re)turns to creative expression:** What feels generative and challenging to me in engaging aesthetics and creativity in working pedagogically with Black ecologies?

## Black ecologies require anticolonial engagements with place

Our discussions thus far have gestured to the need to work with Black ecologies as part of anticolonial engagements with “nature” and nature relations. While meanings and activations of anticolonial Black ecologies can be taken up in myriad ways, here we want to focus on inviting educators to grapple with what it might look like to work with Black ecologies in ways that **affirm Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous livingness** yet avoid the pitfalls of anthropocentrism and neoliberal multicultural approaches (see Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023, for more on the imperative of moving away from [neo]colonial multicultural approaches in early childhood education). This is difficult work, and as we stated before, what we offer here is not a recipe to follow but instead stories and questions to provoke thought and situated pedagogical action. Nicole stories some of the ways she has come to think of Black ecologies as a part of anticolonial engagements with place:

I recently had the opportunity to cofacilitate a youth participatory action research project that worked with Black and Indigenous youth to co-inquire into their relations with lands and waters. As part of the project, we collectively engaged in several visits to Taddle Creek in Tkaronto, where we spent time attuning to our more-than-human relations through active listening to sounds that filled the air around us and collectively learning-in-action with the settler colonial past-present histories of the making of underground waterways in the city. While engaged in these land-water encounters, I couldn't help but think about the fact that as a young Black student throughout my years of early childhood to high school education, I never had opportunities like this to be engaged in visiting with waters and to engage in acts of collective care and practices of being-with. Throughout the project, the youth insisted we return to Taddle Creek, and in listening and valuing their relations with these waters, we adjusted our program. It was clear to me that the Black and Indigenous young people were also teaching us, including about what critical land education can entail in urban places and spaces. They altered my theories of change.

As you sit with Nicole's offering and the invitation to tether Black ecologies to an anticolonial orientation to place, you might think alongside these wonderings:

- **Disrupting colonial erasures:** In my own context, what might an anticolonial orientation to place look like with and in the particular lands and waters I encounter or would like to encounter with children? In other words, what are some possibilities for disrupting erasures and deficit constructions of Black and Indigenous people's land relations?
- **Practices of noticing:** What practices of noticing might be needed in working with children to deromanticize nature (such as by becoming critically curious about what normatively counts as the “right” nature experiences and why) while resisting deficit constructions of Black children's relations with the natural world and resisting erasures of Indigenous and Black-Indigenous peoples' ongoing relations with particular lands and waters?
- **Centering relationality:** What comes up for me (or us as a collective of educators working collaboratively) in thinking about viewing young Black, Indigenous, and Black-Indigenous children's land-based curriculum making in relational ways rather than from a human-centered developmental lens?
- **Thinking with urban natures:** Black ecologies attend to nature as always present, including in urban places and spaces like Tkaronto; what are the possibilities for attunement to urban natures in dialogue with Black ecologies in my context?



## Black ecologies attend to more-than-human relationalities

Danielle Purifoy's (2023) poem excerpt, shared earlier in this paper, illustrates the ways in which the more-than-human world is an active participant in Black ecologies: "The medicines still find their way from the underbrush" (p. 12). We see this as another example of Black ecologies in education as a form of **imagining liberatory futures**. These liberatory imaginaries can be engaged in early childhood education contexts by inviting children to encounter the more-than-human world as storytellers in real and imagined Black ecological stories. In previous writing Fikile has illustrated this approach through the story of Hogan's Alley in what is now Vancouver, Canada, as a Black place story that can be engaged through imaginaries of the **stories that the land and its more-than-human participants would tell** of this Black fugitive place (Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023). Importantly, we see attending to more-than-human storying in Black ecologies as offering possibilities to shift away from neoliberal multiculturalism. Many reasons necessitate this shift. Here we want to simply state that neoliberal multiculturalism's anthropocentrism, fixed identity logics, and allegiance to the colonial nation-state are incommensurable with liberatory Black relations with the more-than-human. As Correnda notes, this has been an important part of her ongoing work designing outdoor educational experiences:

When I had an opportunity to redesign an outdoor education program at a school in Tkaronto for grades 1–3, it was important for me to think with Black and Indigenous knowledges. Black and Indigenous knowledges created shifts away from popular versions of romantic outdoor education. It allowed the program to step away from multiculturalism and ask more interesting questions that attuned specifically to children's relations with Indigenous Tkaronto lands, waters, plants, and animals. Thinking with Black knowledges has taken many forms, including my own unlearning of the erasures of Black Canadian land relationships and seeking out Black Canadian histories. I also had to make space to notice and reframe my own complex relationships with the natural world. It has been challenging to do this work in the absence of a community of Black educators to share stories and approaches.

Thinking alongside Correnda's offering and the provocation to attend to the liveliness of the more-than-human underlines that this is important disruptive work that may require some intentional unlearning. This work also requires encounters with the more-than-human beyond romantic natures. Taken together, this brief discussion of centering more-than-human relationalities in early childhood pedagogies inspired by Black ecologies invites inquiry that might include attention to the following:

- **Storytelling relationalities:** How might particular Black places and/or Black place relations be experienced through stories, storytelling, and story creation that attend to more-than-human relationalities in particular places?
- **Attuning to more-than-human presences:** What comes up for you in thinking about collectively designing (such as with children, educators, pedagogists, families, and communities) pedagogies that pay attention to the ways in which the more-than-human actively stories specific Black places?

## Closing returns: Black ecologies (re)story Black nature relations

We close by returning to where we began in discussing Black ecologies. We are interested in what emerges for you, the reader, in coming back to Black ecologies' invitation to engage in pedagogical work that actively seeks out, imagines, and (re)stories Black people's relations with nature in affirmative ways. This (re)storying is attuned to the inseparability of environmental precarity from colonialism and anti-Blackness. At the same time, in actively witnessing Black **relational presence**, Black ecologies in early childhood education center kinship, relationality, and reciprocity. What might emerge from becoming curious, alongside children, about how situated Black ecologies

emerge in visual art, photography, poetry, music, song, dance, and more as a site of curriculum making that attends to past, present, and imagined future ecological relations and Black place-making practices? What places and/or memories/stories of a place does the invitation to (re)story Black environmental relations bring forward? What might you do next to put this proposition to work in a particular place in your work with young children? What kinds of wonderings does the proposition to (re)story Black ecological relational knowledges evoke for you? Finally, we come to this work with an ethics of ongoing, situated, and affirming curiosity rather than one of finding singular, universal, depoliticized answers. It is our hope that you will enter into or continue your encounters with Black ecologies with this same ethos.

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